

Bradley's Regress

Abstract. Ever since F. H. Bradley first formulated his (in)famous regress argument philosophers have been hard at work trying to refute it. The argument fails, it has been suggested, either because its conclusion just does not follow from its premises, or it fails because one or more of its premises should be given up. In this paper, the Bradleyan argument as well as some of the many and varied reactions it has received is scrutinized.

Some propositions are hard to doubt. This is true of the proposition *that there is unity in complexity* and it is, if possible, even truer if that proposition is more cautiously couched in modal terms:

(U): There can be unity in complexity

That we have ample *prima facie* reasons to believe (U) is easily seen. Reality as a whole, it seems, is one thing made up from many things. Any one of the things that make up reality as a whole, moreover, seems likewise constituted; the chair I'm now sitting on appears to be one thing consisting of its four legs, its seat, and its back. Its legs, seat, and back, in turn, appear to be ones made up from many distinct concrete parts. And on reflection, these concrete complex items appear to be complex wholes also in another sense; reality as a whole, that is, just as the chair I am now sitting on, as well as its legs, seat, and back, appear to be ones somehow made up not just from their many concrete parts, but from their many *abstract* "parts" as well; they appear to be, not just mereologically, but also "ontologically" complex.¹ That these are not just any complexes, but complexes with a special sort of *unity* is also something that we have strong reason to believe. For it appears as if things true of the parts of these complexes, whether concrete or abstract, considered collectively, do not have to be true of the whole they happen to be the constituents of (and *vice versa*).

In philosophy, and perhaps especially in metaphysics, the goal of investigation is more often than not to provide a substantial philosophical account of – to metaphysically explain or ground – propositions of this obvious kind. But according to F. H. Bradley, every attempt to metaphysically explain (U) fails; no substantial, contradiction-free, non-regressive account of how there can be unity in complexity can be formulated. (U), however obviously true it may appear, is nevertheless false. This is an unfortunate result to say the least. Not surprisingly, therefore, few have been willing to accept it. In this paper I critically investigate the argument that led Bradley to his startling conclusion, as well as most of the many and varied reactions it has received.

Bradley's Argument

The possible existence of complex wholes is discussed by Bradley, first in *Appearance and Reality* and later, perhaps even more lucidly, in his unfinished essay "Relations", posthumously published in

¹ An "ontologically complex" entity, it is here assumed, is an entity belonging to one category, with "parts" belonging to one or more categories distinct from (and presumably more fundamental than) the category of that of which they are "parts" (an example that is also the example used throughout this text: *Fa* (belonging to the category: state of affairs) constituted by *F*-ness (universal) and *a* ((bare) particular)).

Collected Essays.² Bradley's example is that of a lump of sugar. The lump of sugar, we say, *is* white, hard, and sweet. But what does that mean? Bradley considers what he takes to be all the available options. First, 'is' must mean either the identity of the lump with each of its qualities taken one by one, or somehow with all of its qualities taken collectively. But if it is identical with its qualities taken one by one, there is contradiction; if the lump is identical to whiteness, it cannot also be identical to sweetness (or to hardness), for those qualities, we are here assuming, are all distinct. Nor, says Bradley, can it be identical with *just* its qualities taken collectively; as in that case nothing accounts for the presence of sugar as opposed to the mere collection of whiteness, hardness, and sweetness. The secret of the thing, Bradley speculates, must therefore lie somehow in the way the qualities of the lump stand to one another. More precisely, 'is' must mean the (numerical) identity of the lump of sugar with its *qualities related*. But this answer, he points out, will soon give rise to new (and no less problematic) questions. If to say of the lump of sugar that it is white, hard, and sweet, means that it is identical with whiteness, hardness, and sweetness related, then what does it mean to say of those same qualities, that each *is* related to the other? It clearly makes no sense if what we mean by this is that e.g. whiteness is *identical* with 'in relation to hardness'. Rather, the 'is' involved here would seem at most to amount to an attributive 'is' equivalent to 'has,' as in whiteness *has* (the property of) being related to hardness and sweetness. But, Bradley points out, this does not help much. For, he argues, to say of whiteness that it has the property of being related to hardness is either to say something false, or it is to say something which in no way furthers our understanding (Cf. 1930 [1893]: 17).³ Whiteness, first of all, *is not* intrinsically such that it is in relation with hardness. And, although it may be true of whiteness *and* hardness that *they* are such that they are related to each other, this truth is idle from an explanatory perspective. The question is what it means to say of whiteness and hardness that they are related. To then answer that *it means that they are such that they are related* is not to take that question seriously, or so Bradley argues. For there to be substantial explanation, Bradley continues, we must therefore turn to consider what he thinks is the last option; to say of whiteness, hardness, and sweetness that they are related means that *there is a relation* which appears with and holds between them, but which is neither attributed of, nor is it identical with, them. The problem with this suggestion is that it lands us in vicious infinite regress. If relations exist independently of that which they relate, then the "qualities and their relation fall entirely apart, and then we have said nothing"; to say something, we must come up with a new relation between the old one and its terms which, once there, is not of much use: "It either itself demands a new relation, and so on without end, or it leaves us where we were, entangled in difficulties" (ibid: 21). But now we are out of options, and so the *reductio* can be brought to its destructive end: (U) is (indeed, must be) false. Unity in complexity does not really exist; reality is one, undivided, indivisible whole and complexity belongs to appearances only (ibid: Ch. XIV).

Several reasons exist for why one may want to separate a discussion of the "Bradleyan" argument from a discussion of the argument as explicitly formulated by Bradley. Bradley's argument, first of all, is formulated in a context where idealism is taken for granted, a fact that may, wrongly, lead one to think that it has no relevance if one's setting is e.g. realist. Historically well-entrenched

² More precisely, in *Appearance and Reality* (1930 [1893]: esp. 16-29) and in *Collected Essays* (1969: esp. 628-676). According to Gaskin (2008: 314), variants of the same argument can be found long before Bradley. Among Bradley's Bradleyan predecessors, he argues, we find, e.g.: Plato, Abelard, Avicenna, Scotus, Ockham, Buridan, Gregory of Rimini, Suarez, and Leibniz. Bradley's argument has been much discussed in the literature. More recent contributions include e.g., [author's reference suppressed]; Allard (2005); Cameron (2008); Mander (1994); Schnieder (2004); Stock (1998); Vallicella (2005); Wieland & Betti (2008).

³ For more discussion of this (slightly cryptic) part of Bradley's argument cf. also, Baxter (1996). At some places, Bradley hints at, but does not really elaborate, another argument – which is actually also a regress argument – for the same point: the problem with saying, of whiteness, that it has the property of being related to hardness and sweetness, is now that this forces us to impute complexity *in* the quality; "each [quality] has a double character, as both supporting and as being made by the relation" (1930[1893]: 26). But this makes the quality into a complex unity, which means that precisely the same questions we once asked about the lump of sugar can now be asked about the qualities of which it is made up (Cf. also. Bradley, 1969: 637). But, then, if we continue to answer these new questions in the same way, an infinite regress will develop *inside* each quality of the lump.

prejudices as to the nature and value of Bradley's argument likewise risk unnecessarily clouding our judgment. As convincingly argued by S. Candlish (2007), Bradley's views have throughout their history been demonstrably misrepresented and even ridiculed.⁴ To put the discussion in Bradleyan rather than in Bradley's terms means not having to waste time seeking out and then exorcizing every false "truth" of this kind. There is, moreover, some reason to think that Bradley's is not the best version of his own argument. In particular, Bradley arguably overstates – and thereby in a sense undermines – his case, by stubbornly insisting that difference and distinction require identity, thereby ruling out extreme pluralism already in his assumptions. This risks making Bradley's argument question-begging or, at least, it risks seriously, and unnecessarily, weakening it. Separating the Bradleyan from Bradley's argument offers us a natural way to improve the original without thereby distorting it.

Now, an argument removed from its original setting must be given a new home. In this paper, the context in which the argument is set is broadly speaking realist, and it is a setting where truths are somehow made true by what exists (in what sense will be further specified below). This choice of setting is easily justified. It is a setting which is sufficiently different from Bradley's own to warrant the claim that his argument (and the problem it addresses) is one with wide application. It is a setting, moreover, in which most contemporary analytic metaphysics takes place. This should make the argument's relevance to the contemporary debate evident.

The Bradleyan Argument

First, let's narrow down the focus of our discussion. As we have seen, the proposition threatened by the Bradleyan argument is (U). But (U) can, in turn, be subdivided into two distinct propositions:⁵

(U'): There can be contingent unity in complexity

(U''): There can be necessary unity in complexity

The difference between (U') and (U'') is a difference in what is possibly true of the constituents of the complex whole. If (U') is true, and there can be contingently unified complex wholes, then the existence of the constituents of such wholes does not entail the existence of the whole they happen to be the constituents of (in other words: the constituents of the complex whole might exist "disunified"⁶). If (U'') is true, and there can be necessarily unified complex wholes, then there can be complex wholes such that, given the existence of their constituents, the existence of the complex whole is by necessity guaranteed. (U') and (U'') are perfectly compatible in the sense that the world could contain both contingently and necessarily unified complex wholes (although, obviously, no complex whole could be both contingently and necessarily unified). In this paper, the focus will be solely on the Bradleyan challenge put to (U') as this is arguably the proposition most clearly threatened by the Bradleyan argument.⁷

Suppose (U') is true and suppose, for ease of presentation, that what exists if a complex whole does is something like the state of affairs *Fa*, (at least) constituted by a property (F-

⁴ Cf. e.g. Russell (1926[1914]:48-9). The most prominent misapprehensions are listed in Candlish (2007: 5-6).

⁵ My chair is an excellent example of a *contingently* unified complex whole. A possible example of a *necessarily* unified complex whole is a proposition (or, more precisely, a Russellian proposition, to use the example most discussed by Gaskin (2008)).

⁶ Whether or not the existence of the "parts" even of a contingently unified complex whole must entail the existence of *some* whole of which they are parts is still an open question that need not be settled here. For a discussion, cf. e.g., [author's reference suppressed].

⁷ Some would go as far as to say that *no* Bradleyan problem arises for (U''). To solve the problem for (U') by replacing it with (U'') (as arguably proposed by Armstrong at one point (2005; 2006), and criticized by [author reference suppressed]) is however not recommended. Especially not if Gaskin (2008: esp. Ch. 6) is right, and a variant of the Bradleyan argument can be formulated against (U'') after all.

ness), and a particular (a).⁸ Remember that ours is a context in which what exists makes a difference to truth. Here this – admittedly rather weak – assumption should (among other things) be taken to entail:⁹

(D_{truth}): If $\langle P \rangle$ and $\langle Q \rangle$ have different truth-conditions, then what reality must be like for $\langle P \rangle$ to be true is different from what it must be like for $\langle Q \rangle$ to be true.

Now consider the atomic proposition $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$. Suppose that what exists when this proposition is (contingently) true is the (contingently) unified complex whole Fa . As Fa 's unity is contingent, its constituents have an existence that is independent of the existence of the complex whole they happen to be the constituents of, which means that the following two situations A and B are both possible:

A: a and F-ness exist; $\langle a$ and F-ness exist \rangle is true; $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true
 B: a and F-ness exist; $\langle a$ and F-ness exist \rangle is true; $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is false

Now, given (D_{truth}), what exists when $\langle a$ and F-ness exist \rangle is true but $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is false, must be different from what exists when that proposition is true and $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true. Clearly, for $\langle a$ and F-ness exist \rangle to be true, it is enough if a and F-ness exist. But then, even if the truth of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ certainly appears to require the existence of both F-ness and a , F-ness and a cannot, at least not on their own, ground the truth of that proposition. What more do we need?

Assume, next, that the difference between situation A and situation B cannot be brute. That is, assume that we are not allowed to answer our what-question by saying that A is different from B because in A, a is F whereas in B it's not – end of story.¹⁰ This assumption constitutes a definite strengthening of our original assumption (D_{truth}) as it entails that, not only must every difference in truth be accounted for in terms of a difference in what there is; at least some of these differences in what there is must, in turn, be given a difference-maker:¹¹

(D_{maker}): If P and Q are different, something must make this difference.

Now, given that we accept (U'), (D_{truth}) and (D_{maker}), *something* must make the difference between the mere aggregate of F-ness and a , and those same entities unified. And what could this something be besides *the unifier* of F-ness and a ? But to say that in A, but not in B, a unifier (u) exists is nevertheless not an option. The reason why not is that, since a and F-ness are only contingently unified, whatever we add to A to make the difference between this situation and situation B, it cannot be something on which a and F-ness depend for their existence. But this means that, just as A and B are both possible, so are situations C and D:

C: a , F-ness, unifier exist; $\langle a$, F-ness, unifier exist \rangle is true; $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true
 D: a , F-ness, unifier exist; $\langle a$, F-ness, unifier exist \rangle is true; $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is false

⁸ This assumption is solely made to ease presentation and so should not be taken to pre-judge the issue of which kinds of complex unities, if any, there are.

⁹ Some terminology: 'D' stands for *difference*; anything between '<' and '>' is a proposition (or, the truthbearer of your choice).

¹⁰ But why rule out what seems to be a perfectly acceptable possibility? The short, but clearly unsatisfactory, answer is this: because unless this possibility is ruled out, the regress cannot get going. This should hardly convince anyone interested in defending (U'), however. Quite the contrary! A longer, and hopefully more convincing, answer is given in the section labeled "Give up (D_{maker})" below.

¹¹ If to accept (D_{truth}) is to accept a very weak kind of "truthmaker theory"; to accept also (D_{maker}) is to accept a rather more substantial one. For more on truthmaker theory cf. e.g. Mulligan, Simons & Smith (1984); Armstrong (2004); Beebe & Dodd (2005).

Again, something must make the difference. Using the same logic which led us from A and B to C and D we could add yet another unifier, in this case to situation C. But, just as before, we must say that this new unifier exists independently of that which it supposedly unifies, which means that new problematic pairs of situations can be produced. At no point can Fa be distinguished from the mere aggregate of its constituents which means that at no point can we account for what exists when the complex whole Fa does. But then, says both Bradley and the “Bradleyan”, the possible existence of Fa just as, in general, the truth of (U’), is contradicted.

A Catalogue of Solutions

To be successful, the Bradleyan as well as Bradley’s original argument depends on our accepting a number of rather substantial assumptions. Many of the reactions this argument has received have, not surprisingly, been reactions aimed at proving that at least one of these assumptions is unacceptable. Others have more boldly ventured to show that the argument itself, even given that we accept its explicit as well as implicit premises, is nevertheless invalid. Below (Figure 1) I try to summarize the different reactions the argument has received. In the remainder of this paper I critically investigate what I take to be the most interesting alternatives.

Insert Figure 1 here

Don’t Give Up Just Yet

To give up on (U’) is certainly an option. In this case, it means embracing either monism or extreme pluralism; if there is no unity in complexity, then either there is no complexity whatsoever, or there is nothing but complexity. Whether or not either of these options can be consistently spelled out does not matter here. What matters is that if either view is adopted, important, well-entrenched beliefs (including, but not limited to, our belief in (U’)) will have to be given up. In philosophy, no truth (or, as it may turn out, no “truth”) should be immune to revision. A reasonable rule of thumb is however that extraditing our most treasured beliefs should wait until every possible (and more conservative) alternative has been ruled out. In light of this, to give up is the fallback position. As such it will not be further discussed here.

But perhaps one could give up on rationally accounting for (U’) yet insist that the proposition is nevertheless true. This may actually be what Bradley himself proposes. As noted by Candlish, although Bradley’s complex unities are given the status of mere appearance, appearances nevertheless “in some sense exist, and therefore belong to reality” (2009: 16). Bradley is using the term ‘appearance’ in an ontological sense, as referring to what lacks full individuality. To him, therefore, appearances contribute to reality just like the different segments of a painting contribute to the whole work of art. Reality as a whole is in this like a “pre-conceptual state of immediate experience”, a state which exists so-to-speak before we impose our conceptual distinctions on it. The distinctions are there, in harmony; it is just the act of making distinctions that leads to trouble (Cf. Bradley, 1969: 631-5). Now, clearly, and as Bradley himself was very well aware, to hold that some truths – such as (U’) – should be believed in spite of the fact that they cannot be explained or even consistently expressed, must by any traditional standard be considered irrational. As I believe that rational is always preferable to irrational, and as I also believe, and intend to show, that a rational

solution to the Bradleyan problem *can* be formulated, Bradley's own suggestion will not be further discussed here.¹²

Suggestion One: The Argument is Invalid

Suppose therefore that we are rational. Then something must be wrong with the Bradleyan argument. The first suggestion that we will consider is that the argument fails because its conclusion just does not follow from its premises. In the literature you find two explanations of this alleged state of affairs: the conclusion does not follow because the introduction of a unifier (in A) does not generate an infinite regress or, although it does, the regress in question is not vicious and so cannot be used to threaten (U').

To see how one might come to think that no regress follows from the introduction of a unifier, consider imagery like the following, proposed by R. Grossmann (1983: 169).¹³

...think of non-relational entities as wooden boards; of relations, as glue. Then it is true that no two wooden boards can be fastened to each other without there being some glue between them. But the glue itself needs no further glue in order to stick to the boards. Relations are the glue of the world. As such, they need not be glued to what they hold together.

That relations, in this sense, function as glue is something most of us pre-philosophically believe. This is a belief well worth taking seriously (and we will make a serious attempt at doing so in the final section of this text). As it stands, however, the imagery proposed by Grossmann, however suggestive, does not take us any closer to a solution to the Bradleyan problem. For, as pointed out by Vallicella (2002: 207):

In terms of the glue-metaphor, it is clear that there is no need for superglue/.../to cement the glue/.../to the boards. But the existence of two boards and some glue does not entail the existence of two-boards-glued-together.

And even if there is some way to get around that problem, the suggestion arguably nevertheless fails. For, if what we mean when we say that relations are the glue of the world is that they could not exist without relating *something*, then adding a unifier to A is still compatible with the falsity of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$.¹⁴ And if what we mean is instead that they could not exist without relating something *specific* (e.g., u could not exist without unifying F-ness and a) then, it seems, the *contingent* truth of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ as well as the *contingent* unity of F-ness and a is contradicted, as situation B is then ruled out as impossible.¹⁵

Suppose, therefore, that a regress *is* generated given the introduction of a unifier in A. Even so, it only follows that (U') is false if this regress is vicious. The view that it is not comes in two versions.

First version: The argument is invalid because the regress is benign

Possibly the most common attitude¹⁶ to take towards the Bradleyan argument among those who oppose it is to hold that the regress which supposedly puts the final nail in (U')'s coffin is in fact

¹² For more critique of the Bradleyan solution, cf. e.g. Gaskin (2008: 316). For a defense, cf. Hylton (1990: 59).

¹³ Alexander (1979); Blanshard (1984); Bergmann (1967); Broad (1933), and; Strawson (1959) seem to have had similar intuitions. Cf. also Johnston (2007: 233); Swoyer & Orilia (2011: sect. 7.7).

¹⁴ Although it now requires the truth of some such proposition.

¹⁵ This contention will be challenged in the final section of this text.

¹⁶ At least if we count also those who reject the viciousness of the regress for the rather unpersuasive reason that if the regress is vicious, (U') is false (cf. Davidson (2005: 106) for a critique).

benign and hence something we, as well as (U'), can learn to live with.¹⁷ Surprisingly few arguments for this claim can be found in the literature, but there are exceptions. The main reason for thinking that the regress is benign is provided below by Armstrong (1997: 118-119):¹⁸

...even if a 'relation' is conceded, the regress is harmless. The thing to notice is that, while the step from constituents to states of affairs is a contingent one, all the further steps in the suggested regress follow necessarily. This point seems not to have been widely noticed. But once noticed, may it not be argued that the sole truthmaker required for each step in the regress *after the first* (the introduction of the fundamental tie) is nothing more than the original state of affairs? Many truths if you like, but only the one truthmaker.

To understand what is argued here we should start by examining *another* regress, generally assumed to be unproblematic. Suppose, therefore, that you want to account for the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, and that the account you offer is one which points to the existence of p , a worldly object, state of affairs, or what have you. Then the fact that, if $\langle p \rangle$ is true (because of the existence of p), then, necessarily \langle it is true that $p \rangle$ is true, \langle it is true that it is true that $p \rangle$ is true, etc. *ad infinitum*, does not rob your original account of its explanatory power. Rather, this regress follows *given* the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, which means that it cannot be used to threaten it. The Bradleyan regress, it is now argued, is like this truth-regress. What we want to account for is the truth of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$, and we do so by pointing to the worldly complex whole Fa . Granted, if $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true (because of the existence of Fa), then, necessarily, so is $\langle a \text{ and } F\text{-ness are unified} \rangle$, $\langle a, F\text{-ness, and a unifier are unified} \rangle$, $\langle a, F\text{-ness, a unifier, and a 2nd order unifier are unified} \rangle$ etc. *ad infinitum*. But, again, this is a regress which follows *given* the truth of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$, and, assuming that the truth-making relation is transitive, the propositions it contains are all made true by whatever makes true $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$, namely Fa . But if this is so, then the regress cannot be used to threaten the truth of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ or, for that matter, the existence of that which makes $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ true.

But this is beside the point. Obviously, a regress which follows *given* the existence of Fa assumes and so cannot threaten Fa 's possible existence. But the possible existence of Fa is precisely what is put into question. The Bradleyan asks: *How* can F-ness and a (sometimes) form a unity? *What* makes the difference between a situation in which they do form a unity and a situation in which they don't? And, Armstrong tells us, the answer to *that* question is this: F-ness and a can form a (contingent) unity because a unifier (a "fundamental tie") is added to F-ness and a in the regress's first step. To him, and other proponents of this particular solution, it is the regress which is generated once we have successfully tied F-ness to a in its first step which is benign. The Bradleyan argument is however designed to prove that nothing *can* successfully tie F-ness to a without vicious infinite regress. As formulated, therefore, the suggestion simply does not address relevant issue, and so fails to stand up to the Bradleyan challenge.¹⁹

Second version: The argument is invalid because the regress is positively beneficial

¹⁷ Proponents of this view include e.g., Loux (1998:40-41); (sometimes but not always) Armstrong (1989; 1997). The distinction between vicious and benign regresses is discussed by e.g., Day (1987); Gratton (2010); Nolan (2001); Passmore (1961); Sanford (1984); [author reference suppressed].

¹⁸ Note that the views expressed in this quote may not adequately represent *Armstrong's* view (or views) on the matter. For, Armstrong – in spite of his talk here of adding a fundamental tie in the regress's first step – seems rather to think that the difference between Fa and F-ness + a is brute. I will return to, and discuss, his views thus understood in the section labeled "Give up (D_{maker})" below.

¹⁹ Another reason for holding that the regress is benign was formulated by McTaggart (1921: 89). McTaggart argued that the regress is benign because the infinity to which it commits us is *actual* (which, he believed, meant that in the end *nothing* goes unrelated). But, again, this misses the mark. In Vallicella's words (2002: 209-10): "If we are thinking in terms of merely potential infinity, then we can put Bradley's point by saying that *adding* another constituent will not secure unity. But if we are thinking in terms of actual infinity, and all the constituents have already been *added*, then we can put Bradley's point by saying that there is a difference between an actually infinite set of constituents, and those same constituents actually unified."

According to a more radical suggestion, one which arguably addresses some of the concerns just raised, the Bradleyan regress is not only benign and hence something we can learn to tolerate; it is *positively beneficial* and so is something we, or (U') for that matter, could not live without.²⁰ That the infinite regress as so far described viciously contradicts the truth of (U') is not thereby disputed. What is disputed is that the regress as so far described *is* the Bradleyan regress.

To see how one might come to think that it is not, note that our attempt to separate situations A and B by saying that in A, but not in B, there is unity, can be spelled out in two deceptively similar ways:

In A, but not in B, a *unifier* exists
 In A, but not in B, *a* and F-ness *are unified*

According to proponents of the present view it is the latter, and not the former, description which accurately captures what distinguishes A from B; descriptively and, importantly, ontologically. In A, but not in B, *the state of affairs that a and F-ness are unified* exists.

But as we have just learnt, if we accept the Bradleyan challenge, it is not enough simply to posit the existence of *Fa*; the existence of *Fa* must be ontologically grounded, and grounded in a way that distinguishes it from the existence of (just) F-ness and *a*. This is where the regress does its magic. What *makes* the difference between A and B, on this suggestion, is the presence, in A, of the state of affairs *Fa*, and what *makes Fa*, and not just F-ness and *a*, exist in A, is the fact that *a* and F-ness are unified ($U^1(Fa)$). Now, the existence of this fact must be likewise accounted for; what makes ($U^1(Fa)$) exist, we are now told, is the fact that *a*, F-ness, and a unifier are unified ($U^2(U^1(Fa))$) and this state of affairs, in turn, has its existence grounded in the existence of the even more complex state of affairs ($U^3(U^2(U^1(Fa)))$), etc. *ad infinitum*. Admittedly, as soon as one explanatory need has been satisfied, another is (thereby) immediately created. But, according to the proponents of this view, this regress is unproblematic; nowhere in the resulting infinity of states of affairs will we find one which does not have its existence grounded in, and hence metaphysically explained by, what comes next in the regress.²¹

For this suggestion to work, we must be willing to give up a methodological principle that is generally viewed as unassailable: *that explanation must ground out*. For, on the present suggestion, the existence of *Fa* is metaphysically explained by the existence of ($U^1(Fa)$), which is metaphysically explained by the existence of ($U^2(U^1(Fa))$), which is metaphysically explained by... etc. *ad infinitum*. That explanation must ground out is a principle that seems to be deeply entrenched in, and hence plays an important role for, our way of reasoning. To have to give it up therefore counts against this proposal.²² More seriously, however, even supposing that all explanations need not ground out, and that, therefore, *Fa* can be distinguished from F-ness + *a* with reference to the explanatory regress that accompanies it, it is still unclear if what we have here is really a solution to the Bradleyan problem. For, on the present account, what *makes* the difference between *Fa* and F-ness + *a*, possibly exists only given the possible existence of *Fa*. After all, you do not get *Fa* by introducing the regress into an F-ness and *a* world; rather, in order to get the regress you have to already be in an *Fa* world.²³

Suggestion Two: Give Up Assumption(s)

²⁰ Proponents of this view include Gaskin (2008); Orilia (2006, 2009).

²¹ This is because this regress has a different structure from what it has so far been assumed to have; rather than consisting of an infinity of (disunited) would-be constituents of *Fa*, it consists of an infinity of (unified) states of affairs, starting with *Fa*.

²² This does not mean that the suggestion is automatically disqualified, however. What is the nature of metaphysical explanations is far from settled (For (sometimes conflicting) views on this matter cf. e.g., Betti (2010); Correia (2008); Schnieder (2010); and Wieland & Weber (2010)). Whether all explanations must ground out, is likewise a debatable matter (Cf. Cameron (2008) and Schaffer (2010), for some (again conflicting) views on the matter).

²³ Cf. [author's references suppressed].

Suppose that the Bradleyan argument is valid and that we still want to contest its conclusion. Then the problem must lie somewhere in the premises. Now, given what has so far been said, the main option is clearly to give up (D_{maker}). As I will argue, however, giving up (D_{maker}) comes at a price at least some of us are unwilling to pay. Another option, I suggest, is therefore that we give up one or several of the assumptions on which we have so far been silent. In the final section of this text, the option of giving up two such hidden assumptions is therefore explored and defended.

Give Up (D_{maker})

As we have seen, one assumption that is very much involved in the production of the Bradleyan conclusion is (D_{maker}). It is because we accept this assumption that we are not allowed to account for the difference between situation A and B by saying that in A there is something which is different from what there is in B, but this difference is brute and so not something we can or need to explain in terms of something else. Clearly, (D_{maker}) cannot be universally true. At least, it cannot be universally true if (more-than-one-category) ontology is possible; categorical differences (or, at least, differences between the 'ultimate' or 'fundamental' categories) are, after all, precisely the sort of differences we count as brute and not explicable in terms of something else. Why, then, could we not count the difference between Fa and the mere aggregate of F-ness + a as a categorical difference in this sense?

As far as I can see, there are at least two reasons why we could – or at least should – not, both of which spring from the fact that in the case at hand, what is supposed to be brutally different is nevertheless also supposed to be intimately related. Consider Fa . If Fa is different from the aggregate consisting of F-ness + a , but this difference is brute, then, first option, this is because both situation A and situation B contain F-ness and a , yet in A, but not in B, F-ness and a are (plurally) identical with Fa . This option comes at what most would consider the unacceptable cost of having to give up the necessity of identity, and should therefore be considered as a last resort only.²⁴ Or, second option, it is because although both situation A and situation B contain F-ness and a , situation A contains also a third entity, Fa , *distinct* from the aggregate consisting of F-ness and a . The problem with this suggestion is that now, it seems, the truth of (U') is preserved only vacuously. For, given this option, it looks as if there can be unity in complexity – that is, what are many, can sometimes merge into one – because sometimes something *entirely distinct* from the many exists. Armstrong, who, at least as I interpret him, (at times) defends the view that Fa and the aggregate consisting of F-ness and a are both distinct and brutally different, does not agree however. According to him, even if Fa and the aggregate consisting of F-ness + a are both distinct and different, the existence of Fa nevertheless intimately involves the existence of F-ness and a . For, what exists when Fa does is F-ness and a *in a non-mereological mode of composition* (Armstrong, 1997: 118).

On Armstrong's suggestion, then, the difference between the aggregate consisting of F-ness and a and Fa consists in the way in which F-ness and a make up their aggregate, on the one hand, and Fa , on the other (it consists, in other words, in their "mode of composition"). But then, arguably, it is the mode of composition which makes the difference between what exists in A and B, and so this difference is not brute after all. Fa either is or it is not one of reality's basic building-blocks. If it is, it cannot also be F-ness and a in a certain mode of composition. To hold that there is a brute difference, and then to go on to explain what this difference consists in, is like having one's cake and eat it too; an attractive but empty possibility.²⁵

²⁴ This cost might feel less upsetting if many-one identity is somehow clearly distinguished from one-one identity. To see if it could be would however involve making decision about a whole host of interesting and complicated issues that space does not permit me to consider here. Discussions arguably relevant to this issue are conducted in e.g. Baxter (1988); Cameron (2007); and Markosian (1998). As the debate in the literature is currently a very lively one, references could of course be multiplied.

²⁵ A similar point is made by Dodd (1999: 151-152): "[If the difference between the non-mereologically composed complex whole Fa and the mereological whole F-ness + a is brute] the familiar question remains unanswered: how can something with just a particular and a universal as constituents be a unity? How is it possible for a and F to be 'brought together' to

Give up (E)

As we have seen, thinking of the unifier of Fa as some kind of glue, arguably fails. For, either “gluing” is optional, in which case there can be the glue, F-ness, and a , but no Fa , which means that a vicious infinite regress can be generated. Or “gluing” is mandatory, in which case situation B is impossible and the *contingent* unity of F-ness and a (and, hence (U')) is contradicted. But, of course, this follows only if these are the only options. But note that these are the only options because we have so far (implicitly) made the following assumptions:

- (E₁) If F-ness and a are *contingently* unified by u , then u could exist and not unify F-ness and a .
- (E₂) If u *necessarily* unifies F-ness and a , F-ness and a could not exist disunified.

If (E₁) and (E₂) are rejected, however, then if u unifies F-ness and a , u could not exist and not unify F-ness and a , even though F-ness and a could exist disunified. To see how rejecting (E₁) and (E₂) could help us with the Bradleyan problem we need, first, to introduce a distinction between what we may call the “primary” and the “secondary” constituents of the unified complex whole. The “primary” constituents of Fa , it is now argued, are F-ness and a ; these are the constituents of Fa which, given that Fa is only contingently unified, could exist *disunified* (as in situation B). The “secondary” constituent is u . If (E₁) and (E₂) are rejected, u , unlike the primary constituents of Fa , could not exist in situation B. This does not contradict the *contingent* unity of Fa , however, since, it is argued, this has nothing to do with what is possibly true of u ; rather, it has everything to do with what is possibly true of F-ness and a . Giving up (E₁) and (E₂), in other words, amounts to saying of the primary and secondary constituents of a complex whole, that they can depend for their existence on each other not only *symmetrically* but also *asymmetrically*: In Fa , F-ness and a do not depend for their existence on the existence of u , but u depends for its existence on the existence of F-ness and a .²⁶

If we give up (E₁) and (E₂) the Bradleyan problem can be solved. For, on this suggestion, in A, but not in B, u – the sought-after difference-maker – exists, yet u does not generate a vicious infinite regress because u , unlike F-ness and a , could not exist in situation B. This is a very promising suggestion. Like any other suggestion, however, it does come at a cost. In this case, the cost is primarily an ontological one. More precisely, to solve the Bradleyan problem by giving up (E₁) and (E₂) (minimally) means having to accept the existence of at least some tropes. For, if whatever unifies Fa must, if it exists, unify Fa , this unifier cannot be universal but must be particular.

Now, u can be either monadic or relational, and in the literature you find both accounts of the nature of u defended. If u is a relation (a view I have defended in e.g. [author’s references suppressed])²⁷, then what exists in A is a , F-ness, and (relation-trope) u . At least on the surface, there is hardly any difference if u is instead understood as a monadic property (a view defended by E. J. Lowe (2009)). For then, likewise, what exists when Fa does is a , F-ness and (in this case, monadic trope) u . So which characterization should we prefer? According to Lowe, monadic tropes are good candidates for u , because monadic tropes “plausibly depend for their very existence and identity upon the objects which possess or ‘bear’ them” (ibid: 167). Now, if monadic tropes are, in this sense, bearer-specific, Fa cannot be constituted by just a monadic f -trope and a , as this would

form a unified entity which exists just in case a is F? /.../ We are left with no idea of how a and F are combined to form a genuinely unified state of affairs. Given this state of play, Armstrong’s invention of states of affairs amounts to philosophical wish-fulfillment.”

²⁶ According to Vallicella (2002: 12), this makes u into an inconsistent sort of entity. And, although his objection rests on a simple misunderstanding (Cf. [author’s reference suppressed]), it should nevertheless remind the proponent of this view of the pedagogical challenge she faces when she sets out to explain what it means to say of something, u , that it has an identity – a nature – which is partly decided by entities external to u itself.

²⁷ A radical version of this approach (one which admits *only* relata-specific trope-relations (no non-relational relata)) has been defended by Mertz (1996).

rule out situation B. Instead, Fa must be constituted by a , a bearer-specific monadic f-trope (i.e., u), and F-ness. Again, this F-ness cannot be a bearer-specific monadic trope, or situation B would be ruled out. Instead, F-ness must be a universal. If u is a monadic trope, therefore, what exists when Fa does is a , the particular; a monadic (and bearer-specific) f-ness trope (u); and F-ness, the universal. And although u depends for its existence on the existence of (universal) F-ness and a ; (universal) F-ness and a do not depend for their collective existence on u . Problem solved.

There are two reasons why I think one should prefer to understand u instead as a relation-trope. First, although Lowe seems to think that it is natural to understand monadic tropes as bearer-specific (or “non-transferable”), it is not universally agreed among the trope-theorists that this is how monadic tropes ought to be characterized.²⁸ If u is a relation-trope, the trope-theorist has the option of letting her monadic tropes be transferable; if u is a monadic trope, she is forced to conceive of them as non-transferable. Or, she is not logically forced to do so; a distinction could be introduced between those monadic tropes that are bearer-specific, and those that are not. It is however difficult to see how such a distinction could be drawn in a non-*ad hoc* way. Now, even if u is a relation-trope, u is bearer specific. This means that also on this proposal, a distinction must be made among the tropes (at least if we think, as I do, that monadic tropes are *not* bearer-specific). However, if u is a relation, this distinction can now be drawn along the same lines as that between relations and properties. But this makes sense; relations *are* different from properties precisely in the sense that they, unlike properties in general, are there basically to hold things together. This is the intuition behind the glue-metaphor. To treat u as a relation-trope gives us a natural way to respect that intuition. Second, and relatedly, if u is a relation, whether F-ness is a universal or a trope is an open question. Not so, as we have seen, if u is a monadic trope. Therefore, although to give up (E_1) and (E_2) must come at an ontological cost, this cost – in terms of ontological commitments – is considerably lower if u is understood as a trope-relation rather than as a monadic trope.

In this paper I have investigated some of the most common responses to the Bradleyan argument. This argument, I have tried to demonstrate, should be taken very seriously. It’s conclusion can be resisted, but no matter which solution you opt for, there will be a price to pay. Weighing cost against costs is not an exact science. I have, however, tried to convince you that our cheapest option is one which accounts for the possible existence of contingently unified complex wholes in terms of that involve accepting the existence of trope-relations.

²⁸ Cf. e.g. Ehring (2011) for a recent discussion. I defend the view that tropes are transferable in [author reference suppressed].

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