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## Bradley's regress: relations, exemplification, unity

### 1. Preliminaries

In his long *Wirkungsgeschichte* F.H. Bradley's regress argument has been put to many different uses. Not only that, but several different interpretations have been advanced as to what Bradley "really" wanted to say with his argument. Such interpretations differ with regard to the final thesis supposedly argued for by Bradley, and also with regard to the real subject matter of the regress. For a long time, the main part of the debate concerning the regress argument focused on the nature of relations, i.e., whether they are to be conceived of as internal (as Bradley is often believed to claim) or as external. In this perspective, the regress was seen as an argument purporting to show that external relations are somehow contradictory, and that therefore only internal relations are admissible. To be sure, there are some reasonable textual bases for this interpretation. Yet its success was chiefly due to the fact that Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore chose the nature of relations as one of the main battle grounds for their polemic against idealism in general and Bradley in particular. In this way, they set the course of the debate on Bradley's regress for several decades<sup>1</sup>.

In more recent times, a different interpretative focus has emerged, according to which the real subject matter of the regress argument is the issue of the "unity" or "connectedness", either of facts, or of states of affairs, or of propositions, or more in general of "complexes". Bradley's regress has thus gradually become one of the standard arguments that must be reckoned with when dealing with this sort of ontological questions: it suffices here to mention, in no particular order, the works of Gustav Bergmann, David M. Armstrong, Kenneth R. Olson, Donald W. Mertz, William F. Vallicella, Francesco Orilia, and many others<sup>2</sup>. In all these debates the regress argument is usually assumed in a rather stereotyped formulation, which is more or less the following:

(A) No mere aggregate (enumeration, list, etc.) of constituents amounts to the fact (state of affairs, complex, etc.) somehow "made up" of those constituents; in other words, given  $a$  and  $F$ , the fact  $Fa$  is not therefore automatically given; what is lacking is of course the "unity" or "connectedness" of the constituents themselves into a fact;

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<sup>1</sup> Among Russell and Moore's contributions to the debate cf. Russell 1900 and Moore 1920. A significant episode of this story was the symposium at the joint session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association in 1935, devoted to "Internal relations", whose participants were Gilbert Ryle and A.J. Ayer (Ryle – Ayer 1935).

<sup>2</sup> As samples of this attitude with respect to Bradley's regress, cf. Bergmann 1960, Olson, 1987, Mertz 1996 (chapter VIII), Armstrong 1997 (pp. 114-115), Vallicella 2000, Vallicella 2002, Orilia 2006. An ample critical survey of this literature can be found in Cimmino 2009 (chapter I). On the issue of the unity of complexes, with obvious references to Bradley, cf. also Davidson 2005 and Gaskin 2008.

(B) Adding to the list a further constituent that is to be responsible for the unity will not do, since what we get is just another (longer) list, for which exactly the same problem of unity occurs.

It is clear that Bradley's regress literally corresponds to part (B) of this formulation, but it is also clear that it gets its overall significance by a joint consideration of both parts (we may refer to the complete argument as (A-B); part (A) is presumably regarded as simply unexpressed or only dimly expressed by Bradley himself. In any case these debates among ontologists usually show little interest for the historical Bradley, an attitude which is of course fully legitimate. Yet, the importance of the problem of unity, for Bradley as well as for Russell, has been recently emphasized also from a strictly historical point of view, dating at least from the works of Peter Hylton<sup>3</sup>.

The question of the unity of complexes has very often been viewed as revolving around the notion of *exemplification*, is so far as exemplification is supposed to be the "connection" that brings about the unity of complexes such as facts: exemplification connects a universal (property or relation) and one or more particulars into one fact. In this context, Bradley's regress has been used to support widely differing conclusions, since agreeing on the subject matter of the argument does not imply agreeing on its claims. Bergmann, for instance, used it to hold that, in order to account for facts, a special category of entities must be admitted, the *nexus*, in addition to (ordinary) relations: exemplification is for him one of such nexus. But the regress could also be used to argue against exemplification: since relations are clearly useless in accounting for the unity of facts, their "duplication" by means of nexus is equally doomed to failure. For some philosophers (Bergmann and Armstrong, for example) the regress argument is perfectly consistent with the existence of universals; others, like Wilfrid Sellars, pushed the negative argument against exemplification a step further, and used the regress as a weapon against universals and in favour of nominalism<sup>4</sup>.

In any case, I am not interested here in the supposed claims of the regress argument: by the way, none of those just mentioned could be Bradley's genuine claims, if for no other reason than notions such as universal, particular, exemplification, etc. do not make a clear sense in Bradley's philosophy, or at least in that context they have a meaning which is very different from that which is common in contemporary ontological debates. As to the question of exemplification, if by this notion we mean a connection between a universal and one or more particulars, then Bradley's regress certainly does not specifically concern exemplification, for the same reasons as before. Rather, it concerns exemplification just as a special case, a particular way to account for unity in a specified ontological framework. In this sense, if it is true at all that the real subject matter of the regress argument is that of unity or connectedness, its problem may be said to be that of exemplification only as a sort of synecdoche, in which a special case (exemplification) is made to represent the whole (the unity of facts or complexes in general). Therefore in what follows it will usually be spoken of the issue of unity rather than of the issue of exemplification, even if the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hylton 1984, Hylton 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sellars 1962, Sellars 1980.

latter has come to monopolize much of the discussion in some philosophical quarters. However, what possibly applies to unity in general, will apply to exemplification in particular.

The aim of the remaining part of the article is to inquire whether the “unity interpretation” of the regress argument – such as has been summarized in (A) and (B) above – can be supported by textual evidences. While on the one hand the general historical importance of the issue of unity for Bradley has been established beyond any doubt (some further evidence will be provided in the next section), and while the “unity interpretation” has become something of a *lieu commun* in contemporary ontology, it seems to me that some links are wanting between the Bradley’s regress of contemporary ontologists and the Bradley’s regress of Bradley. In other words, I would like to cover the middle ground between the argument formulated in (A) and (B) and the passages in which Bradley explicitly put forth the regress. Given that the kind of argument of (A) and (B) is certainly present to Bradley, it remains to be confirmed that it was exactly the argument he had in mind when formulating the regress. It is my contention that it is, and that the unity interpretation is on the whole correct, but if we read Bradley’s texts that is not immediately obvious, and some exegetical work is required to get to this conclusion.

## 2. Regress and unity

The regress argument does not stand very prominent in Bradley’s work, at least in comparison with its renown. Only a couple of clear and explicit formulations can be found, in *The Principles of Logic* and in *Appearance and Reality*, with the addition of some more or less relevant variations<sup>5</sup>. The most famous formulation of the argument, the one that is almost invariably referred to – if a formulation is referred to at all in the discussion on the regress –, occurs rather close to the beginning of *Appearance and Reality*, more exactly in chapter II:

(1) 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. Something, however, seems to be said of this relation *C*, and said, again, of *A* and *B*. And this something is not to be the ascription of one to the other. If so, it would appear to be another relation, *D*, in which *C*, on one side, and, on the other side, *A* and *B*, stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process. The new relation *D* can be predicated in no way of *C*, or of *A* and *B*; and hence we must have recourse to a fresh relation, *E*, which comes between *D* and whatever we had before. But this must lead to another, *F*; and so on, indefinitely. Thus the problem is not solved by taking relations as independently real. For, if so, the qualities and their relation fall entirely apart, and then we have said nothing. Or we have to make a new relation between the old relation and the terms; which, when it is made, does not help us. It either itself demands a new relation, and so on without end, or it leaves us where we were, entangled in difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bradley 1893, pp. 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Bradley 1893, pp. 17-18.

At first sight, this passage only corresponds to part (B) of the unity interpretation of the argument; part (A) should therefore be provided by the reader's sagacity. Moreover, the argument is formulated strictly in terms of relations, and of relations regarded as "more or less independent", that is to say, of "external" relations. Thus the scope of the argument, at least if taken literally, seems to be rather limited: the interpretation that it mainly concerns (external) relations, and that it must be addressed on those terms, presents itself as the most natural. The other explicit formulation of the regress does not provide significantly new elements:

(2) When we ask "What is the *composition* of Mind", we break up that state, which comes to us as a whole, into units of feeling. But since it is clear that these units by themselves are not all the "composition", we are forced to recognize the existence of relations. But this does not stagger us. We push on with the conceptions we have brought to the work, and which of course can not be false, and we say, Oh yes, we have here some more units, naturally not quite the same as the others, and – *voilà tout*. But when a sceptical reader, whose mind has been warped by a different education, attempts to form an idea of what is meant, he is somewhat at a loss. If units have to exist together, they must stand in relation to one another; and, if these relations are also units, it would seem that the second class must also stand in relation to the first. If A and B are feelings, and if C their relation is another feeling, you must either suppose that component parts can exist without standing in relation with one another, or else that there is a *fresh* relation between C and AB. Let this be *D*, and once more we are launched on the infinite process of finding a relation between D and C-AB; and so on for ever.<sup>7</sup>

With respect to text (1), only one suggestion seems here new, and it brings the argument somewhat nearer to (A-B): it is the hint at the "component parts" that "can exist without standing in relation with one another", which reminds the idea of a mere aggregate, list, etc., which can remain an aggregate or a list without ever becoming a fact (a genuine complex). But on the whole, the emphasis is still on relations and, what is worse, the whole discussion seems to be embedded in a psychological context, having to do with mind, feelings, etc. If one thinks of the importance that is usually attributed to the regress for the overall philosophy of Bradley, it may also seem strange that the regress argument is apparently introduced in such a subordinated position, almost as a minor aside within a long treatise on logic.

Yet text (2) comes after a passage in which Bradley deals in very general terms with the issue of analysis:

(3) It is a very common and most ruinous superstition to suppose that analysis is no alteration, and that, whenever we distinguish, we have at once to do with divisible existence. It is an immense assumption to conclude, when a fact comes to us as a whole, that some parts of it may exist without any sort of regard for the rest [...] It is wholly unjustifiable to take up a complex, to do any work we please upon it by analysis, and then simply predicate as an adjective of the given these results of our

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<sup>7</sup> Bradley 1883, p. 96.

abstraction. These products were never there as such, and in saying, as we do, that as such they are there, we falsify the fact.<sup>8</sup>

The general sense of the regress argument now appears more evident: it is part of a wider attack on the notion of analysis, i.e., the idea that a whole (a complex) can be reduced without residue to its constituent parts. Of course, the problem of analysis is just the specular image of the problem of unity, and Bradley's holistic solution, according to which unities must ultimately be assumed as irreducible, makes analysis ultimately impossible. The regress is part of an argument (made up by steps (A) and (B)) aiming at showing that, if we adopt the premisses that makes analysis possible, unity cannot be accounted for in any way. All that was at the centre of Bradley's exchanges of views with Russell, which had the opposite preoccupation: he wanted to secure the legitimacy of analysis, and therefore had to struggle with the problem of unity, of which he was well aware.

The exchange of views on this topic is widely documented. In a famous passage of *The Principles of Mathematics* Russell perfectly sums up the whole problem:

Consider for example the proposition "A differs from B". The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only A, difference, B. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates A and B, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B. It may be said that we ought, in the analysis, to mention the relations which difference has to A and B [...] These relations consist in the fact that A is referent and B relatum with respect to difference. But "A, referent, difference, relatum, B" is still merely a list of terms, not a proposition. A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition.<sup>9</sup>

If we prescind from Russell's own peculiar terminology and the ontological framework based on the notions of term and proposition, the passage is an accurate reformulation of the argument (A-B). It almost comes as a suspicion that many contemporary philosophers, when speaking of Bradley's regress, have in mind Russell's formulation, rather than Bradley's. In any case Bradley did not miss Russell's difficulties with unity, and in *Appearance, Error, and Contradiction* he pointed them out, holding that if propositions cannot really be analysed into terms and relations, then terms and relations are not all there is, contrary to what Russell's atomism seems to suggest:

On the one side I am led to think that [Russell] defends a strict pluralism, for which nothing is admissible beyond simple terms and external relations. On the other side Mr. Russell seems to assert emphatically, and to use throughout, ideas that such a pluralism must repudiate. He throughout stands upon unities which are complex and which cannot be analysed into terms and relations. These two positions to my mind are irreconcilable.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bradley 1883, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Russell 1903, pp. 49-50.

<sup>10</sup> Bradley 1910, p. 179.

At first, Russell replied in a letter:

Yes, I am a strict pluralist, but I do not consider pluralism incompatible with the existence of complex entities. I consider that in every case where two simples have a relation, there is a complex entity consisting of the two simples so related.<sup>11</sup>

A public response followed quickly, in which Russell remarked that the whole dispute rests upon the sense in which unities can or cannot be analysed:

I do not admit that, in any strict sense, unities are incapable of analysis; on the contrary, I hold that they are the only objects that can be analyzed. What I admit is that no *enumeration* of their constituents will reconstitute them, since any such enumeration gives us a plurality, not a unity.<sup>12</sup>

Both answers seem merely to state the problem, rather than solving it, and Bradley did not give up:

Is there anything, I ask, in a unity beside its “constituents”, *i.e.* the terms and the relation, and, if there is anything more, in what does this “more” consist? [...] What is the difference between a relation which relates in fact and one which does not so relate?<sup>13</sup>

The public exchange stopped here, but in a private letter to Bradley Russell had to admit: “With regard to unities, I have nothing short to say. The subject is difficult (in any philosophy, I should say), and I do not pretend to have solved all problems”<sup>14</sup>.

We can come up at this point with a couple of temporary conclusions: (i) The importance of the general issue of unity for Bradley has been confirmed; (ii) It has been shown that one of Bradley’s explicit formulations of the regress argument (text (2)) is set in the context of the general issue of unity. It remains to be seen whether in Bradley’s own presentation of the regress we can really find – in a more or less straightforward form – the whole of argument (A-B). To that end, we have to turn back to text (1), the standard reference for the regress argument.

### 3. Bradley’s formulation

At first sight, the situation is not very promising. As has already been remarked, in text (1) the regress is formulated in terms of relations, and a strong emphasis is put on the fact that relations are conceived of as “independent”, *i.e.*, as external. One could reasonably conclude that the regress has to do exclusively, or at least primarily, with the nature of relations, and more specifically that it argues against a view that conceives of them as “external”. This – as pointed out at the beginning of the article – has been a widespread interpretation of the argument and, in a sense, it is not completely wrong: with the regress argument

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<sup>11</sup> Russell 1992, p. 350.

<sup>12</sup> Russell 1910, p. 373.

<sup>13</sup> Bradley 1911, p. 74.

<sup>14</sup> Russell 1992, p. 352.



Bradley certainly wanted, *among other things*, to make some claims concerning (external) relations<sup>15</sup>. But if this were the only import of the argument, then its significance for the general issue of unity would be limited indeed: in fact, it would have no relevance at all for any form of unity that did not explicitly relied on external relations, and in that case it would not be difficult to get rid of it.

Even if one looks at text (1) with the background of the whole chapter II of *Appearance and Reality*, to which it belongs, the situation apparently does not change significantly. First of all, the regress (paragraph 5 of the chapter) makes its appearance at the end of a long chain of reasoning (paragraphs 2-5), and seems to constitute a rather special argument, for a special case<sup>16</sup>, so that its role in Bradley's general strategy gives the impression of being minor and subsidiary. In an important paper specifically devoted to the chain of reasoning of paragraphs 2-5, Donald Baxter actually describes the regress passage as the "tying up of a loose end": "For reasons I don't yet understand this tying up of a loose end is the most famous part of Bradley's discussion, the part with his notorious regress"<sup>17</sup>.

Second, the paragraphs immediately preceding the regress argument contain a very tangled and sometimes obscure chain of reasoning, whose connection with the regress is not at all clear, and which may appear rather weak and confused. As to the uncertain connection with the regress, it is noteworthy that in his classic book on Bradley, Richard Wollheim completely separates the analysis of the arguments of the first part (paragraphs 2-4) and that of the regress (paragraph 5): the former are discussed under the general heading of "predication as identity"<sup>18</sup>, the latter is embedded into the topic of internal vs. external relations<sup>19</sup>. As to the supposed weakness and confusion of the chain of reasoning preceding the regress argument, it is usually maintained that Bradley's main aim is that of accounting for the notion of predication (i.e., the attribution of a property to a thing), and that the fundamental presupposition of Bradley's analysis is the identification of the "is" of predication with the "is" of identity (cf. Wollheim above). All that has indirect consequences for the interpretation of the regress as well. On the one hand, once more the regress argument turns up as isolated with respect to the preceding paragraphs: the latter are supposed to deal with the case of properties, the former with that of relations. On the other hand, the whole discussion on predication as identity may appear as the result of mere muddle-headedness: since Bradley confuses predication with identity, it is no surprise that he comes out with such bizarre conclusions! And this supposedly blatant confusion casts its shadow also on the regress, which ends up being a strange appendix to a strange argument.

A different perspective can be obtained if a stricter continuity is recognized between paragraphs 2-4 and 5 of chapter II of *Appearance and Reality*, so that a

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<sup>15</sup> The issue of Bradley's conception of relations is complex, and it cannot be dealt with here. For some rectifications of the traditional view of Bradley as a champion of internal relations cf. Candlish 2007. For Bradley's mature views on the matter cf. Bradley 1935.

<sup>16</sup> It is introduced by the words: "But let us attempt another exit from this bewildering circle" (Bradley 1893, p. 17).

<sup>17</sup> Baxter 1996, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Wollheim 1969, pp. 71-87.

<sup>19</sup> Wollheim 1969, pp. 102-120.

single argument in two steps ensues, which – as we shall see – is very close to argument (A-B) of the unity interpretation. Let us look at the text.

The discussion is introduced as dealing with the relationship between “substantive” and “adjective” (as the title of the chapter suggests), or between a thing and its quality. In paragraph 2 the famous example of the lump of sugar is put forward:

We may take the familiar instance of a lump of sugar. This is a thing, and it has properties, adjectives which qualify it. It is, for example, white, and hard, and sweet. The sugar, we say, *is* all that; but what the *is* can really mean seems doubtful. A thing is not any one of its qualities, if you take that quality by itself; if ‘sweet’ were the same as ‘simply sweet’, the thing would clearly be not sweet. And, again, in so far as sugar is sweet it is not white or hard; for these properties are all distinct. Nor, again, can the thing be all its properties, if you take them each severally. Sugar is obviously no mere whiteness, mere hardness, and mere sweetness; for its reality lies somehow in its unity.<sup>20</sup>

It seems indeed that the starting question concerns the nature of the “is” of predication in sentences such as “This lump of sugar is sweet”. But if one pays attention to the flow of the argument, then one can see that it insensibly turns into a different question, concerning the inner constitution of the lump of sugar itself. That appears as more evident if we read the following paragraph. Here Bradley, after having abruptly abandoned what seemed his initial hypothesis, i.e., that things and their qualities must be analysed according to the scheme substance/attribute, moves to the bundle view:

But it is our emphasis, perhaps, on the aspect of unity which has caused this confusion. 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. The qualities are, and are in relation. But here, as before, when we leave phrases we wander among puzzles, ‘Sweet’, ‘white’, and ‘hard’ seem now the subjects about which we are saying something.<sup>21</sup>

Bradley is not concerned with the question of predication anymore, at least in its original form; rather he is concerned with the correct ontological analysis of a thing such as the lump of sugar. In other words, the “is” he is interested in is not the one that occurs in sentences such as “The lump of sugar is sweet”, but the one that occurs in sentences such as “The lump of sugar is the plurality of its different adjectives”, which is clearly the “is” of identity. In his detailed examination of these passages, Baxter has persuasively shown that the “is” Bradley is arguing about is always that of identity<sup>22</sup>. My contention is that this is not due to confusion, or to a more or less implicit and more or less mistaken identification of the two meanings. Rather, Bradley has really been interested in the “is” of identity from the beginning, appearances notwithstanding<sup>23</sup>. More than that, he

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<sup>20</sup> Bradley 1893, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> Bradley 1893, pp. 16-17.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Baxter 1996.

<sup>23</sup> It is to be noted that the shift from the attribution of a quality to a thing to the consideration of the thing itself as a complex of which the quality is part is remarkably natural in Bradley’s

was not even interested in the nature of identity in itself, but in the correct analysis of things, i.e., complexes. His point is, of course, that no unity, i.e., no unified complex, can be satisfactorily accounted for if we start from its constituents.

But let us come back to Bradley's arguments. After a somewhat tangled examination of different alternative analyses, we read:

We seem unable to clear ourselves of the old dilemma, If you predicate what is different, you ascribe to the subject what it is *not*; and if you predicate what is *not* different, you say nothing at all.<sup>24</sup>

Once more, where Bradley seems to speak of predication, he is really speaking of identity: the "old dilemma" thus appears more to the point. Following a suggestion by Baxter, it is easy to see Bradley as putting forth an alternative: when we consider a thing that is a complex (such as the lump of sugar) we can identify it with (i) one of its quality; (ii) (all of) its qualities "severally" taken (i.e., with its qualities "as many"); (iii) its qualities in some "one-making relation"<sup>25</sup> (i.e., the qualities somehow united into a complex). To put it in a way that is closer to the contemporary ontological parlance, when analysing facts, we can identify them with (i) one of their constituents; (ii) (all of) their constituents separately considered (i.e., the mere aggregate, list, etc. of their constituents); (iii) their constituents already united into a fact. Now, it is clear that solution (i) is unacceptable (by the way, it could presumably be prompted only by a confusion between predication and identity). But (ii) is also clearly wrong: a mere list of constituents does not amount to a fact. (iii), on the other hand, is correct, but at the price of saying something obvious, i.e., that a fact is a fact, that some qualities related together are some qualities related together, etc. In this way, with Bradley's words, "you say nothing at all": or, as Bradley says a few lines later, "If you mean that *A* and *B* in such a relation are so related, you appear to mean nothing [...] the predicate [...] is idle"<sup>26</sup>.

We have thus reconstructed part (A) of the (A-B) argument; and now the regress passage (text (1)) occurs. Since all the three alternatives just examined fail, one could think of adding some further constituents to those already mentioned. Such further constituents are introduced with the overt purpose of accounting for the unity (connectedness) of the other constituents: they are specifically devised for that task. In other words, the relating (or connecting) function is not "absorbed" in the related constituents ("let us abstain from making the relation an attribute of the related", as Bradley says), but is somehow "abstracted" and "reified" into a distinct constituent ("let us make it more or less independent"). But of course this will not do, since the same difficulty arises as before (only this time with a somewhat longer list of constituents). And that is of course the step (B) of the argument. What is at stake in paragraph 5 (text (1)) is not the special case of relational facts vs. that of predicative facts. Rather it is the

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philosophy, according to which the ultimate form of any judgment 'S is P' is 'The Reality is such that S-P'. What constitutes the subject can be legitimately moved to the predicate position, so that a question concerning the relationship between a thing (S) and one of its quality (P) may easily turn into a question concerning the constitution of the thing itself (S-P).

<sup>24</sup> Bradley 1893, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Baxter, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Bradley 183, p. 17.

case in which the connecting function has been attributed to distinct constituents (you can call them “relations”, and you can call such facts “relational” if you want) vs. the case in which no special constituents for this role have been singled out: step (B) after step (A).

#### *4. Another look at the same question*

In a recent book on the philosophy of Bradley, Luigi Cimmino holds that two main interpretations of the regress argument are available: there is a “naive” and a “sophisticated” interpretation<sup>27</sup>. According to the naive interpretation, the argument purports to show that when we have complexes made up of distinct elements, the elements responsible for the unity of the complexes need in their turn further elements in order to be “connected” to the elements they are supposed to connect. Cimmino comments that this version of the argument seems to be rather weak. It is not difficult to dispense with it by observing that it simply disregards the obvious fact that relations “relate” by their very nature: the elements introduced to account for unity cannot be put on the same level as the other elements to be connected. Historically that has been a rather common reply to Bradley’s regress. According to the sophisticated interpretation, the argument purports to show that no mere enumeration of constituents can by itself amount to a fact, since all the constituents may well be there, without the fact being there (and that even if among the constituents there are some whose explicit function is that of “connecting” the other constituents).

As it is not difficult to see, Cimmino’s naive interpretation more or less corresponds to the interpretation that regards Bradley’s regress as an argument having to do exclusively or primarily with the nature of relations; whereas the sophisticated interpretation obviously corresponds to the “unity interpretation” of this article. In conclusion, what I would like to suggest is that the naive interpretation comes out as the most natural if one looks at the regress passages – (1) and (2) – in isolation; but as soon as one tries to consider them in their context, and to link text (1) with the arguments present in the paragraphs that precede it, then the unity interpretation (i.e., the “sophisticated” one), though not immediately obvious, appears as the most pregnant.

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Cimmino 2009, chapter I.

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