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Bradley's Regress and a Problem in Action Theory

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There is a problem which often arises during the course of various discussions in action theory and related fields about how exactly we are to characterise the relation which obtains between an agent and her (token) actions. An agent is a particular individual; it is often assumed that any token action of hers must be another.[1] But what is the relation between these two particulars, when the agent is the agent of the action in question? Obviously, one asymmetric relation between them is this: the agent, S, *is the agent of* the action, A. But is there a *further* relation between agent and action *in virtue of which* it is correct to say that A is S's action? The idea that agency must be reducible to something assumed to be more basic, such as causation, has sometimes tempted philosophers to think so – and there are also fairly common locutions which can make it seem as though S's being the agent of an action, A might hold in virtue of another, perhaps more basic relationship – 'execution' or 'performance', or simply 'doing', for example. But as I shall try to show below, it is not at all easy to make any of these ideas work.

In order to have a handy label for the problem which attaches to this search for a relation to undergird propositions of the form 'S is the agent of A', I am going to call it the 'agent-action problem'. The problem has rarely been acknowledged as a *general* difficulty – although it gives rise to various sub-problems, which have been often enough remarked upon.[2] Moreover, even when the sub-problems are observed, they are sometimes noted merely as passing curiosities which perhaps constitute nothing more than minor linguistic inconveniences to the philosopher of action. In a way, then, neither the sub-problems nor the fundamental problem which in my view underlies the sub-problems has really received any serious, sustained scrutiny of a properly wide-ranging sort. In this paper, I want to suggest, however, that it deserves such scrutiny – and that a failure properly to get to grips with the general form of the problem is indicative of philosophy of action's failure to get a decent ontological understanding of its own subject matter. This failure, I believe, is connected to some of the puzzles in which philosophers find themselves embroiled, with respect to such issues as whether agents are causes of their actions[3]; whether the agent 'disappears' in a problematic way from certain pictures of what action involves[4]; and which physical events, precisely, compose or constitute our actions.[5] I want to argue that once we understand the true source of the agent-action problem, it can be seen that the problem is related in certain interesting ways to the philosophical difficulty which has come to be known as 'Bradley's Regress'. The range of options for responding to it can, I think, therefore be usefully illuminated by reflecting on those that have been floated for dealing with that regress. Precisely parallel solutions to the two issues, I shall argue, are not necessarily available – because there are important differences between the two problems,

differences relating to the fact that Bradley's Regress generates only a possibly tolerable infinity of *universals*, whereas parallel moves in the agent-action case generate more problematic-looking infinities of *particulars*. Nevertheless, some of the insights yielded by thinking about the source of Bradley's Regress seem highly relevant also to the agent-action case, and towards the end of the paper, I will make some suggestions about where the most hopeful resources for solving the agent-action problem may lie.

In the first section of the paper, I shall try to explain what the agent-action problem is, and why the difficulty cannot simply be regarded as a passing curiosity. In the second, I shall introduce Bradley's Regress and give some reasons for thinking that the agent-action problem is a version of an interestingly similar difficulty. Then, in the final section of the paper, I shall briefly outline three approaches that have been adopted to Bradley's Regress and consider what their analogues might be in the action case, arguing in favour of a version of the third solution. I shall also offer some brief reflections concerning possible lessons for philosophy of action.

1 | THE AGENT-ACTION PROBLEM

What is the agent-action problem? The issue is that none of the ways in which we might initially be tempted to talk about the relation we bear to our own actions really seems to pass philosophical muster. Looking to natural language for guidance, a natural first recourse might be the generic verb 'do'. Actions, it is often supposed, are things we *do* – and so they are things, one might think, to which we stand in the relation of *doing* – the relation that one might think could be expressed by the open sentence 'S does/did A'. We certainly make frequent reference to people doing things and speak of the things we have done – and it might seem natural to suppose that these things that we do must be our actions. But as Hornsby forcefully argued in her (1980), these things we say that we do certainly cannot be *token* actions. For the purposes of talking about individual actions in English, philosophers usually have recourse to so-called 'perfect nominals' – expressions of the form 'my raising of my arm'; 'Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon'; 'Oswald's shooting of Kennedy'. These are derived from what I shall sweepingly (and unsatisfactorily) call 'action sentences',[6] (which, for present purposes, I shall take to be basic sentences of the form SUBJ + VERB ± OBJ – sentences such as 'I raised my arm', 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', 'Oswald shot Kennedy') by means of a recipe which we might describe roughly thus: nominalise the verb using a gerundive construction, convert the subject term into an appropriate possessive adjective; and insert an appropriate preposition (usually 'of') to connect with the object of the sentence, if there is one.[7] By means of this recipe we can derive nominal expressions like those above, expressions of the sort which seem to refer to particular actions. But these sorts of expressions cannot be substituted for 'A' in the 'S does/did A' schema. kinds I did not do my raising of my arm; Caesar did not do his crossing of the Rubicon; and Oswald did not do his shooting of Kennedy. These expressions are clearly ungrammatical. As Hornsby notes, we ought to think of 'do', where we use it in such contexts as 'What did you do?'; 'She did something', etc. as a *schematic* verb.[8] What it stands in for, schematically, though, is never an act-token, but rather what one might call an 'act-*type*' – what philosophers often call an *act*, for the purposes of disambiguation. 'Raise one's arm', 'cross the Rubicon', 'cross a river, 'shoot someone', 'shoot Kennedy' are all acts, on this understanding of the word 'act'. Hornsby has argued that it is these latter things, the acts and not the individual actions, which are the things we do.[9] Some of the things I have done this morning, for instance, are the following: make my bed, eat my breakfast, catch the train. But I have not done my making of my bed, my eating of my breakfast and my catching of the train. If one ever offers any kind of singular term, rather than a whole proposition, as an answer to the question 'What did you do?', one would give an infinitival construction – 'shut the gate'; 'poison the chalice'; 'light the fire'. Or consider the following example: 'What Caesar was going to do before he died was alter his will'. (Wiggins, 1985: 285). Here it is obvious that what Caesar was going to do (the *thing* he was going to do) simply cannot be an individual action because the expression 'What Caesar was going to do' is not robbed of a reference by the fact that Caesar's assassination prevented any such individual will-rewriting action from occurring. There is still something that Caesar was going to do, even if he never did it. And if he had done it, that same something would

have become a thing that Caesar had done. But that means that if we take grammatical structure seriously, the things people do have to be *types* of thing; they cannot be individual actions.

Moreover, because 'do' is a *schematic* verb in such contexts, it is not even true that we bear the doing relation to these *acts*, let alone that we stand in that relation to our token actions. For example 'I do raise my arm' is ungrammatical (unless the 'do' is read as an auxiliary, intended merely to give emphasis to the verb 'raise' on the habitual reading generally indicated by the present tense in English, e.g. 'I *do* raise my arm when I have a question to ask!'). 'Do' rather *stands in for* these other verb-phrases, replacing them when we want to speak in a general way about acting (e.g. 'I did lots of things this morning – I made my bed, cleaned the bathroom and prepared lunch'). Here, 'did lots of things' is generic and 'made my bed', 'cleaned the bathroom' and 'made lunch' offer some of the specifications of the relevant 'things done'. So even here, 'do' is not itself a relation which the agent bears to anything. It does not relate agent to act-type any more than it relates agent to act-token. It does not represent a relation, in fact, at all.

Another common recourse of the philosopher looking to speak about the relation between agents and actions is the multi-purpose philosophical workhorse, 'perform'. Actions, it is said, are things we perform. Unlike 'do', 'perform' can indeed represent a relation – as it does in such sentences as these: 'The choir performed Handel's Messiah'; 'I performed the Fosbury Flop'; 'Georgie performed the Heimlich manoeuvre'. But here, the second of the relata in each two-place relation ('Handel's Messiah', 'the Fosbury Flop', and so on) are not particular actions, but rather such things as pieces of music, or *types* of athletic or other kinds of feat. Moreover, the sentences which express these relations are themselves action sentences, and hence can produce the perfect nominals by means of the recipe according to which singular terms for individual actions are generally delivered; these particular sentences, for instance, deliver 'the choir's performing/performance of the Messiah'; 'my performing of the Fosbury Flop' and 'her performing of the Heimlich Manoeuvre', once our recipe for forming purportedly referring expressions for individual actions is applied to the original sentences. But then, if all individual actions are performed by their agents, as is being suggested by our current proposal, these performings will have themselves to be things to which agents stand in a performance relation. The performings will have to be performed. And now, what are we to say in general about agents' performings of the performings of works, or feats, which constitute their individual actions? Are these performings of performings themselves actions? If they are, then surely we are off on a regress – since, being actions, they will themselves have to be things which are performed – and we now have performings of performings of performings to acknowledge. But if they are not, we need a principled account of why they are not – a principled account of why a sentence of the form "S performed X", where 'X' names some kind of feat/accomplishment/musical work, etc., is not precisely the type of sentence – personal subject, active verb in perfective aspect, etc. – that should yield reference to an individual action when nominalised according to our recipe. And it is not easy to see what the answer would be, short, that is, of admitting that actions ought *not* in fact to be regarded as things to which we stand in the relation of performance, which puts paid to the hopes of this particular strategy to elucidate the relation between agents and actions.

It might be pointed out that one can also use the indefinite article in connection with the verb 'perform' – for example, one can perform such things as 'a cartwheel' or 'a three-point turn'. And a sentence such as 'I performed a cartwheel' might look at first grammatically similar to 'I ate a cake' and therefore amenable to similar logical treatment of the ∃x(aRx) kind. But when I perform a cartwheel, it is evident that the cartwheel I perform doesn't exist independently of my performing it, in the way that the cake exists, independently of (and prior to) my eating it. My performing the cartwheel *just is* the cartwheel I perform; my three-point turn *just is* my performing of it. Once again, no genuine relation between performer and gymnastic or vehicular manoeuvre is in the offing here. To adapt a phrase used by John Hyman, in connection with the very similar, but non-action-involving constructions 'live a (good) life' and 'die a peaceful death', the construction 'perform an F' is here "a syntactic expedient" and "… the verb does not express a genuine relation. On the contrary, it refers to one of the very things that it appears, syntactically, to relate" (2015: 56). 'Perform', then, does not look like a hopeful candidate to be the relation which holds between agents and their actions – 'perform an action', like 'die a death', is merely a syntactic variant on the simple

use of an active verb (such as 'cartwheeled', for example) and the verb 'perform' in this kind of context in fact refers not to a relation borne by the agent to her action, but rather simply indicates the act itself.[10]

A third possibility which has been widely canvassed – and which indeed now constitutes a distinctive position on the libertarian side of the free will debate - is that actions are *caused* by their agents; that the relation between agents and their actions is causation. But this view has been subjected to fairly devastating criticism also, perhaps the most famous critique coming from Davidson (1971: 52), in the shape of a dilemma. If agents cause their actions, then we must answer the question *how* they do so – whether by acting, or not. If we say the former, then clearly a regress looms, one which looks rather similar to the regress we ran into in connection with the verb 'perform', above – we must cause our causings of our actions, and cause our causings of our causings of them, and so on. If we say the latter, though, we are left with the arguably quite unintelligible suggestion that agents cause their actions by some means other than the means in terms of which we always understand the intentional production of results by agents – viz., action itself. How on earth might an agent intentionally cause an action in such a way that her intentionally causing that action did not itself amount to an action?

So: we appear to have arrived at the following situation: we do not 'do' our actions, because the verb 'do' does not express a relation at all, once the contexts which initially suggested it are properly examined; and neither is 'perform', in at least some of its uses. 'Perform' *can* be a relation – but we cannot allow either that we perform particular actions or that we cause them, without generating dilemmas, one horn of which is an unappealing regress, and the other of which appears to be a baffling and unjustified refusal to embark on it. Perhaps there are other alternatives to the verbs 'do', 'perform' and 'cause' – but I suspect that, if there are, they are likely merely to be near-synonyms of one or other of the three we have so far canvassed. And so the question arises: if none of these natural-language verbs will do, what *is* the relation between an agent and her action? What is the 'R' such that a subject, S R-s A' when she acts, and when A is her action? And if for some reason we are unable to return a sensible answer to this question, if there is no such 'R', how is that inability to be diagnosed? Why does nothing seem to work? In the next section, I want briefly to outline the issue which has come to be known as 'Bradley's Regress', after F.H. Bradley (Bradley, 1897: Chs. II and III) before going on to suggest that this regress will cast light on the source of our current difficulty.

2 | BRADLEY'S REGRESS

So far, we have been asking the question what the relation is between an agent and her action. I want now to turn for a moment to a rather similar question that has received much more in the way of explicit philosophical attention, namely, what is the relation between a thing and its properties? Some possible answers might include the homely and everyday 'having' or 'possessing' – things *have* their properties; the more technical-sounding 'instantiating' or 'exemplifying', much beloved of philosophers; or the metaphysically-laden 'supporting' (as in the scholastic doctrine that 'substance supports accidents'). But whichever of these answers we return, we will face Bradley's Regress.

What is Bradley's Regress? Bradley himself does not, in my view, offer the most perspicuous representation of the regress which bears his name; nor, if others better informed than I am on such matters are to be believed, does he offer the first. Gaskin (1995: 161) claims that Abelard discusses the same problem – and some believe that a version of the regress is noted by Plato. I do not therefore feel bound to approach the topic of his regress via Bradley's own exposition. Instead, I intend to borrow the more lucid words of Ross Cameron, who offers the following digest:

> "Suppose *a* is F. Suppose, for *reductio*, that it follows that a relation of instantiation holds between *a* and F, symbolised as R*a*F. But now, it seems, R holds between *a* and F, and there is just as much reason to think that a relation of instantiation must bind R, *a* and F as there was to think that a relation of instantiation must bind *a* and F. So a relation holds between R, *a* and F. We are off on a regress to infinity."
>
> (Cameron, 2008: 1)

For example, suppose that this apple is red. Suppose, for reduction, that in order for this to be the case, a *relation* must hold between the apple and the property of redness. Perhaps, we might suggest, it is the relation of instantiation – the apple instantiates redness, and this is what the sentence tells us. But now, it seems, if the initial instinct to supply a relation in order to explicate predication was correct, we have to supply another. We have to say that the apple and the instantiation relation and redness stand in a *further* relation if they are to be related together in such a way as to render it true that the apple instantiates redness. Since this will now be a three-place relation, as opposed to the original instantiation relation between the apple and redness, which was merely a two-place relation, perhaps we ought to give it a different name: we could call it the instantiation$_2$ relation. But now, it seems, we are going to need another relation to relate the apple, and instantiation$_1$, and instantiation$_2$, and redness together ... and so on. The crucial point is that once we accept the principle that the understanding of simple predication demands that we postulate a *relation* between subject and property, it is unclear how we are to resist applying the same principle once again, with respect to the sentence which claims that the relation holds ('the apple instantiates redness', say); and then again and again, as we proceed up the hierarchy of relations. There will be no end to the number of relations we shall be forced to posit to reconnect all the separate elements of our proposition.

One can of course construct an argument of precisely this form for predications which are of the form SUBJ + VERB (± OBJ) rather than of the form SUBJ + COPULA + ADJ – and that is to say (amongst other things) for predications which are examples of what I have been calling 'action sentences'. Thus, for example, suppose we begin with the sentence 'Brutus stabbed Caesar'. Then we can formulate a regress as follows:

> "Suppose Brutus stabbed Caesar. Suppose, for reduction, that it follows that Brutus and Caesar participate in the stabbing relation (Sbc). But now, it seems, if there was a need to posit a relation of participation in the first place, we are going to need now to posit a further relation, this time a three place relation, to hold between Brutus, and the stabbing relation, and Caesar – a relation that we might call participation$_2$. And now, clearly, we are off on a regress again."

Bradley's Regress is therefore quite general. It applies to sentences which do not contain explicitly an 'is' of predication, as well as to those which do not; and to those which contain relational predicates, as well as to those which contain only monadic ones. It is a problem, indeed, which infects any predication, whatever the aspect or the –adicity of the predicate concerned. And the essence of the difficulty is that it appears that one cannot say that predicates stand for properties or relations which in turn bear relations to their possessors, without incurring an obligation to accept an infinite series of such relations. I shall turn in a moment to the question how one ought to respond to the existence of this regress. For now, though, I want to pose the question how the regress bears on the question of the relation between agents and their actions.

One might think that although Bradley's Regress can be applied straightforwardly to many of the kinds of sentences which have been called 'action sentences' (as just shown above with the example of 'Brutus stabbed Caesar') it is not obvious that the regress bears directly on the problem I have been calling the agent-action problem at all. For the regress just generated develops in response to a relational answer to the question what the relation is between the subject (and object) of a sentence and the *property* or *relation* which its predicative portion purports to stand for. The issue it raises is therefore an issue about the relation between a thing, on the one hand, and some kind of *universal* (either a property or a relation) on the other, not an issue about the relation between those subjects and any *particular* entities, such as token actions). This is perfectly true. But my claim is that nevertheless, close parallels are discernible between the thinking that leads to Bradley's Regress, and that which leads to our problems about the relation between agent and action. The main parallel is that in both cases, the attempt to explicate what we take to be the metaphysical commitments of an ordinary sentence by introducing (i) some form of reification in connection with its predicative component and (ii) a relation-word ('instantiates', on the one hand, or 'performs' or 'causes' on the other) to reconnect the subject of the sentence with the new entity which our reification has introduced, quickly lands us in regressive territory. We cannot say anything about the relation between the subject of a simple

predicative sentence and the property ascribed by that sentence without inviting regress; likewise, we cannot say anything about the relation between the subject of an action sentence and either (i) the property/relation ascribed by its predicate to that subject *or* (ii) the token action whose existence might be supposed to be entailed by that action predication without inviting regress. This seems to me to constitute a striking parallel, worthy of further investigation.

It must be conceded that there are important differences between the two kinds of regress – the one involving universals and the one involving particulars. One difference is that at every stage of the agent-action regress, the tie that binds agent to action is the same one – that is, the tie represented by the verbs 'perform' or 'cause'. In the pure Bradleian regress, on the other hand, we get a new relation at every stage, because at each stage, a new argument-place is generated, ensuring a hierarchical structure, with new relations constantly appearing as we proceed along the regressive pathway. All the additional complexity which is involved in Bradley's regress is packed instead, in the case of the action regress, into the proliferation of definite descriptions of the relevant actions – where we have not just action A, but Jess's performing of action A, and then Jess's performing of her performing of action A, and so on. But despite the fact that the regresses generated in these two cases are formally different, it seems clear that they are two versions of what is ultimately the same problem – the difficulty one always meets in trying to reify (in order to speak about) the connections between the elements of propositions. As soon as one introduces names for the items referred to or otherwise introduced by (e.g. quantified over by) the predicative parts of sentences, whether those are properties and relations, on the one hand, or particular actions, on the other, one loses what has sometimes been called the unity of the proposition, and what one is left with seems to be a mere list of names – which require to be reconnected by means of some further glue – and naturally, we find ourselves reaching for finite verbs in order to provide it. But the trouble is that these verbs can then always be nominalised in their turn, so that the predicate or relation they express can become an object of reference. The process thus described can be repeated to infinity.

What do I mean, exactly, when I say that the problems arise in the course of our making 'an attempt to explicate what we take to be the metaphysical commitments of an ordinary sentence'? The thought that the metaphysical commitments of ordinary sentences *need* explicating in the first place is usually motivated by the widespread intuition that 'truth depends on being',[11] which often pushes us, in a philosophical context, to feel we cannot rest content with the mere fact that a particular predication is true; we feel as metaphysicians that we must explain what entities in the world serve to *make it true*. In the case of Bradley's Regress, for example, we might start (in the most simple monadic case) with a simple predicative sentence such as 'This ball is blue', say. Then, in trying to understand how truth might possibly depend on being, in the case of such a sentence, we might nominalise the predicative part, so that we have something to refer to – and say that what the sentence says is that the ball *has the property of* blueness, or *instantiates* blueness, or some such thing. This initial move is what now invites the regress. For our new sentence (e.g. 'the ball has the property of blueness') is *itself* a predication – and if the metaphysical commitments of predications can always be cashed out by means of predicate-nominalisation, we end up with 'the ball has the property of having the property of blueness'. And this sentence is in turn a predication .... and so on. We are off on the regress to infinity that Bradley observed.

In the case of action, a similar situation arises when we try to think about what might make an action sentence true, but the situation is more complicated here because there is more controversy about what the relevant ontological commitments should be taken to be.[12] One view would be that the ontological resources must at least include (though they may also outrun) the very *same* resources as required for the standard adjectival Bradley cases (such as 'This ball is blue') – that what a sentence such as e.g. 'Jess turned on the light' does is ascribe a *property* to Jess – a property that she is said by the sentence to possess at least one particular time - the property of turning on the light. Something like this is, I think, basically Kim's view about how to understand action sentences: for him, events (including actions) are exemplifications by a substance of a property at a time[13] - and what an action sentence says is that such an exemplification exists. A second kind of view might be that we should think of 'Jess turned on the light' as instead being a *relational* sentence – one which says that Jess bore the 'turning on' relation to the light at some past

time. But those very many philosophers who believe in the existence of individual, token actions may want to insist that even if there is nothing strictly wrong with either of the above construals, they need further analysis and that if, for example, Jess bore the 'turning on' relation to the light, that is because there was at some point in the past a particular _action_ of a certain kind.[14] Just as it is often assumed in philosophy of mind that where someone 'believes that p' that must be in virtue of the presence of a 'token belief-state', or some such entity, so it is likewise assumed in philosophy of action that particular actions are required for the understanding of the ontological grounding of action sentences. There is in my view somewhat more to be said for the second of these assumptions than the first (Steward 1997). But even the latter assumption needs to be treated with extreme caution.

Once we are at this point in the dialectic and have embraced the idea that we should embrace the category of _particular_ actions, we will want to be able to refer to the action which is the preferred truthmaker(s) for our original sentence, and we might effect a kind of nominalisation in order to be able to do so. We might talk, for example, of 'Jess's turning on of the light' and say that in order for the sentence to be true, Jess has to have performed or caused this action. But this claim now generates a regress, just as the move to nominalisation of the predicate did in the Bradley case. For the new sentences we have now produced by this means (e.g. 'Jess performed her turning on of the light') are _themselves_ action sentences, and so if the metaphysical commitments of action predications always require to be cashed out by means of the kind of nominalisation which yields referring expressions for actions, we end up with 'Jess performed her performing of her turning on of the light' – and we are off on a regress that is surely very similar to the regress to which Bradley drew our attention. Indeed, it is rather striking that the three verbs for talking about the relation between agents and their actions which have mostly recommended themselves in that case have analogues in the parallel choices that exist about how to speak of the relations between things and their properties. The homely and everyday 'do' is a little like the homely and everyday 'have', an everyday verb which we attempt to put here to very generic use; I _do_ actions, I _have_ properties. The quasi-technical 'perform' is, I suggest, rather like such philosophers' technical verbs as 'instantiate' and 'exemplify' – a term that is not altogether without its ordinary uses, but which is employed by philosophers in a rather non-ordinary way, for specifically philosophical purposes. And then, finally, the more metaphysical sounding 'cause' can be compared to the relation of 'support', as invoked in the doctrine that a substance 'supports' its accidents, in that it is an attempt to give a metaphysical account of what the relationship is, as it were – a more robust account which purports to provide more information about what exactly the relation in question must be like. But whether or not the similarities in the linguistic resources we draw upon in each case to connect subject and nominalised verb strike one as suggestive, there is a clear parallel between the agent-action problem and the difficulties posed by Bradley's regress. In both cases, if the initial move to introduce (i) reification and (ii) a relation between subject and reified entity, has a sensible motivation in the first place, then it looks as though the same move will demand to be repeated on the very same motivational grounds as we began with – generating either an infinite hierarchy of instantiation relations or performings of performings and causings of causings, _ad infinitum_.

In the following, and final section of the paper, I want to turn to consider some of the responses people have made to Bradley's Regress, and to consider whether any promises us a satisfying answer to the agent-action problem.

3 | RESPONSES TO BRADLEY'S REGRESS

What should we think of Bradley's Regress? In this final section of the paper, I shall survey three prominent responses to the regress and consider what there is to be said for their analogues in the agent-action case. One interesting thing, it seems to me, is that one response that seems to me potentially appealing in the case of the Bradley regress looks much less appealing as a response to the agent-action problem; it may be, therefore, that although the two issues are related, the differences between them demand different solutions.

3.1 | Bradley's own response: the counsel of despair!

Bradley himself, it seems, was not optimistic about solving the problem to which he had drawn attention. He describes the regress as vicious and seems to regard it as a *reductio* of the idea that reality can truly be described in terms of objects having properties at all. Here is what he says:

> "The conclusion to which I am brought is that a relational way of thought - any one that moves by the machinery of terms and relations – must give appearance and not truth" (Bradley 1897: 33).

Bradley believed his regress to have shown that our everyday conception of the world as containing a plurality of distinct things, having various different properties, contained hidden contradictions, and hence must be mistaken. Ultimately, Bradley was to adopt the monistic view that there are in reality no separate things – that reality is one – a conclusion he seems to have derived at least in part from the thought that as soon as one separates reality into object and property (and hence recognises at least two kinds of entity, particular and universal – or alternatively, multiple universals, on something more like a bundle theory of particulars), the regress looms.

Clearly, we could apply this solution to the agent-action problem, denying that there are any agents or any actions, and insisting that reality is, at some deep level, an undifferentiated unity – but that seems like a position of last resort to which we should only retreat if we are sure there is no better and more conservative solution. For the time being, then, I shall move on from Bradley' own suggestion as to how to respond to his regress and look at some of the other possibilities that have been raised.

3.2 | The regress is not vicious – The Toleration View

Some of those who have considered Bradley's Regress have asked whether the regress might not be one of those tolerable regresses that need not cause us any anxiety. After all, there are many regresses which we do not consider to be vicious. Consider, for example the regress which consists in the fact that from 'p' and its entailment of 'p is true', we can generate a regress "p is true' is true'," "p is true' is true' is true", etc. What is the problem with that? There does not seem to be one. On what I shall call the Toleration View, then, we would simply accept that e.g. the apple instantiates redness; and accept that this implies that the apple and the instantiation relation and redness stand in the instantiation$_2$ relation; and that this implies that the apple and the instantiation relation and the instantiation$_2$ relation and redness stand in the instantiation$_3$ relation .... etc.; but we would deny that this constitutes any kind of problem. This response is considered (though not eventually endorsed) by Cameron:

> "We have an infinite number of instantiation relations. ... what is supposed to be the problem? There is no metaphysical bar to their being infinitely many entities in general, so why should infinitely many instantiation relations create a problem?" (Cameron 2008: 2).

Cameron's own suggestion as to why we might feel this is an unsuitable response seems to me a good one. His suggestion is that the instantiation relation holding between a and F is offered by some philosophers as an *explanation* of why a is F – which means that the holding of this relation between thing and property, two potentially metaphysically independent entities, is in some sense supposed to be ontologically *prior* to the mere fact that a is F. But if this is what we intend, then Bradley's Regress does indeed start to look problematic – because each such metaphysical explanation is going to have to depend on another, *ad infinitum*. As Cameron himself puts it, "there is a problem if metaphysical explanation never 'grounds out' at some fundamental level. While you can have a fundamental level and infinitely many things dependent on that level you cannot have dependence all the way down" (2008: 3).

One might of course reply that one need *not* think of the instantiation relation holding between a and F as any kind of explanation of why a is F – any more than one would think that 'p is true' is true' is an explanation of why p is true. Rather, we might think of it merely an alternative way of saying *that* a is F, one entailed by the original claim. Might this be a way of arguing that the regress is harmless? Something like this is, I think, a position which is considered to be acceptable by Armstrong in his review of the possibilities for responding to the Bradleian regress in his (1997). His own preferred solution is I think a version of the third kind of response I shall consider – a response which suggests that the fundamental tie which binds things to the properties they instantiate and the relations they participate in is not itself any kind of relation. But he considers the possible objection to this view that the predicative "is" just *is* sufficiently relation-like to generate the regress – and responds as follows:

> "The proper response to this … is to say that, *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 … 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?" (Armstrong 1997: 118-19).

Armstrong's suggestion, then, in effect, is to reverse the order of explanation which on Cameron's view leads us into difficulty. The more complex propositions generated by the regress do not in any sense ground or explain the less complex ones – rather, it is the other way around. So the regress is no more troubling than the truth regress – both may happily be accepted and neither presents any kind of problem.

I am inclined to think that this is indeed part of the correct response to Bradley's Regress. Nominalism, conceived of as the refusal to admit altogether the existence of any universals, is one natural recourse for the philosopher troubled by Bradley's Regress; if there are no properties and relations, then evidently, there are no properties and relations needing to be somehow related to the objects which possess/are related by them. But it is hard to accept outright that there are no properties or relations. We seem to talk about them; they seem to be required to do all kinds of work in the philosophy of science, causation and explanation; second-order quantifications appear to quantify over them. By a wide variety of differing ontological criteria, therefore, they appear to be in good standing. What the current response advantageously permits is a relatively gentle form of realism about such things. We can allow (contra the nominalist) that the property of F-ness exists, and that the relation of instantiation exists, and so on; and therefore we face no special difficulties about accounting for our sometimes seeming to speak perfectly intelligibly of such things. But at the same time, we insist that we are not allowing these entities to exist *in order to provide 'truthmakers'* for our original sentence. The lesson of the regress, as we saw above, is that if this is our aim, the same reasoning which led to the postulation of the original property or relation will then generate the need for further truthmakers *ad infinitum*, which is as much as to say that we cannot satisfy the aim at all, for the reason Cameron gives. But this need not be our motivation for allowing, in principle, the existence of at least some properties and relations. We are merely supposing that to say, for example, that 'a' and 'F' stand in the 'instantiation' relation is really just an alternative way of saying that 'a is F', not a metaphysical explicator of the fact that 'a is F'. But the alternative may be important, for all that. There are many Fs such that F-ness seems to be a real thing, worth talking about and identifying, worth investigating and making the topic of an enquiry – which is as much as to say that we should not deny that properties can be the subject of their own predicates. The same is true of many relations. In particular, the same seems to be true of the 'falls under' relation which things bear to the concepts they instantiate – for as Gaskin points out, it seems that as philosophers, we need to meet "the specifically *philosophical* need to be able to talk about instantiation (i.e. predicative being as such, not being F for any particular replacement for 'F')" (Gaskin, 1995, p.175). If this commits us to a regress of instantiation relations of increasingly higher order, perhaps the answer is that we should just accept that this is so, and rest easy with the regress thereby generated, a stance made possible by not insisting that the introduction of names for properties and relations is not intended to constitute any kind of explanation of what makes it the case that 'a is F', for any given 'a' and 'F'.

Will the same answer do for the agent-action case? Might we say that an ontology of particular actions is all well and good, provided we don't suppose that they are truthmakers for sentences of the form 'S ø-d', but merely means of speaking in alternative ways about the states of affairs that we express by means of sentences of the form 'S ø-ed'? Unfortunately, I think it will not do. The reason has to do with something I noted above – and that is that if we begin with a sentence which purports to express a relation between an agent and a particular action, the resulting regress takes a different form than in the Bradleian case, in that the regress is now of particulars, rather than of universals. The difficulty with this is easiest to see if we are thinking of actions as particular events of the sort which might, for example, be identified with events with purely physical descriptions (for example, neurological ones, containing no essential mention of the agent). Each time we perform an action, the agent-action regress would entail that we perform/cause an infinity of actions – each of which is a distinct particular. And if each of these particulars is supposed to be identifiable with a distinct brain event, say, then the regress would have surely unacceptable (and false) empirical implications; it cannot be that every time we perform an action, an infinite number of distinct brain events occurs. There is a sense in which the Bradleian regress of universals is cheap – the regress might seem tolerable because universals are just abstracta, and the rules about when one may and may not accept an abstract entity into one's ontology often simply follow the pure logic of pure arguments. If, therefore, there is a pure argument which appears to indicate that we should countenance an infinity of relations of instantiation, each of higher –adicity than the next, there may be those who simply say: so be it. Infinities of alleged concreta, however are generally much less appealing. It is much harder to accept that we ought to tolerate them simply as the logical consequence of the entailment relations imposed by the recognition of a regress.

However, even if we are *not* thinking of actions as the sorts of things that might be identified with brain events or physical motions, it remains unclear that we avoid the difficulty involved in thinking of actions as things which bear relations to their agents. Suppose, in particular, that we were to withdraw the assumption that actions can be identified without mentioning their agents – and instead regarded them as entities of the kind Hyman calls 'dependent particulars' (Hyman, 2015, pp.61ff)[15] – that is to say, as entities dependent absolutely for their identity on the agent of the action, who must therefore be mentioned in any specification of the action. It is not clear that we should be any less worried about the existence of separate dependent particulars which are, for example, S's performings of performings, or her causings of causings of actions. It just seems nakedly false to suppose that every time we act, we generate an infinite series of such relations, whether or not we are treating actions as independently specifiable events. The view that there is an infinity of particular actions on every occasion on which I act is undeniably ugly. If there is another way out of the agent-action problem, we should take it.

3.3 | Prevent the Regress at its First Step

The idea that we must somehow or other prevent Bradley's Regress from arising in the first place is perhaps the most popular form of solution to the puzzle it raises – although there is a good deal of variation amongst the particular versions of this suggestion that have been made. There is not space here, unfortunately, for an exhaustive consideration of the merits and demerits of the range of possibilities that have thus far been canvassed – but I shall mention briefly some of the main contenders, before making some general remarks on which of these solutions seems most promising for those troubled by the agent-action problem.

As noted above, nominalism is an obvious response to Bradley's Regress – but it is not clear that nominalism, if conceived merely as the denial that there are universals, will help us with the agent-action problem. For as remarked earlier, the agent-action problem generates an infinity not of universals, but rather of particular actions – and the nominalist will need different reasons to object to *those*. Perhaps those to whom a sparse ontology is appealing will not want to countenance particular events, any more than they want to countenance universals – but in a sense, that is beside the point – which is simply that nominalism alone is not going to solve the agent-action problem, provided we want to hang onto an ontology of particular actions.

An alternative idea is Wittgenstein's (1922) claim that logical form is ineffable and can only be shown, never said, but many have found that claim mystical and obscure. At the very least, it seems to need further explication and defence. Frege's doctrine of the essential unsaturatedness of concepts is perhaps a more promising avenue to explore – a doctrine designed to obviate the need for anything to connect the referents of object and concept terms:

> "In the sentence 'Two is a prime' we find a relation designated: that of subsumption ... This ... creates the impression that the relation of subsumption is a third element supervenient upon the object and the concept. This is not the case: the unsaturatedness of the concept brings it about that the object, in effecting the saturation, engages immediately with the concept, without the need of any special cement." (Frege 1979: 178).

But Frege's solution (it seems to be generally agreed) is not an adequate solution, because it requires denying that concepts (if they really *are* concepts, and hence unsaturated) can ever be the subjects of complete thoughts. A concept would have to be *essentially* unsaturated – which implies that we cannot speak about the concept 'horse', for example – that it cannot be the subject term in a sentence. "For 'the concept "horse"' could not be a concept term". And yet it seems we have no difficulty at all speaking about concepts. I am doing it now, for example. It is doubtful, therefore, that this solution can really deliver what we need in the way of a solution to the regress.

A more hopeful suggestion, to my mind, has been made by David Wiggins (1984), and developed in an interesting way by Richard Gaskin (1995). The idea is that, *pace* Frege, we should postulate as an element in every assertoric proposition something corresponding to the *copula* (i.e. to the 'is' of a sentence such as 'The apple is red', or to the conversion of a verb from infinitive to finite form 'as e.g. in 'Brutus *stabbed* Caesar' where the verb appears modified in order to construct the complete sentence ('Brutus stab Caesar' is not acceptable). And this element is then denied any determinate referential content of its own. In 'This apple is red', for example, we would allow that 'this apple' refers to a particular apple, and also that 'red' refers to the property of redness. But in addition to these, according to Wiggins and Gaskin, there is a third element, in the sentence, the copula, which has no reference of its own and whose referent cannot therefore be required to be fixed to the other two elements by means of some 'special cement'. It is the copula, as it were, rather than the concept term, which is essentially unsaturated, merely consisting of a space to be filled by a concept term to produce an unsaturated predicative phrase ('... is red') which may then combine with an object term to deliver a whole proposition. This solution gets us out of the problem of the concept 'horse', by permitting that *parts* of the predicative elements of sentences may indeed refer to properties and relations, which are therefore available to be mentioned in further sentences of which they become the subjects, giving us what we need to make sense of second-order quantification. But an essentially unsaturated part – the copula – always remains. Wiggins and Gaskin have different views about whether or not the copula itself may be permitted to have reference – Wiggins suggests not, Gaskin rather that we may allow that it refers to the instantiation relation and that we can then accept Bradley's Regress as the harmless (and non-vicious) consequence of its role as the carrier of unsaturatedness. For present purposes, it would take me too far away from my present concerns with action to attempt to adjudicate between these two variants of the position. Rather, I shall move directly to the question whether the Wiggins-Gaskin suggestion that every sentence should be regarded as containing some ineradicable element, which is the ultimate source of its capacity to *say* something, can help us see what to say about the agent-action problem.

How does the copula show up in an action sentence? Beginning with an action sentence of the form 'S ø-ed', the Wiggins-Gaskin suggestion would imply that there are basically two referential elements in this sentence: 'S', which refers to an individual agent; and 'ø-ing' which refers to an act-type. Those who think that action sentences involve commitment to *particular* actions go further and insist that we should think of action sentences as committed, in addition (and perhaps in virtue of the combined implications of the tense and aspect of the sentence) to the existence of a particular event (or events). A sentence of the form 'S ø-ed' will then imply that the instantiation of

the act-type ø-ing goes by way of the existence of at least one *particular* ø-ing, an action, of which S is the agent, or which is 'by' S.[16] But given Wiggins' claim about the hidden element in every assertoric sentence, this 'by' is now bound to contain a strictly syncategoromatic element. Together with what remains of the finite verb content in the nominalised form 'ø-ing', as it occurs in 'S's ø-ing', it bears the weight assigned by Wiggins to the copula – that of connecting the referential elements of the nominal expression together by means of a special tie. It is a tie which is special in that it cannot itself be (fully)[17] represented as a relation – but here it connects not subject and property but agent and action. And if we think of agenthood or the by-relation as *itself* a relation, we make the very same mistake that we would make if we thought of the predicational tie imported by the copula as fully relational – the mistake that leads to Bradley's Regress. The lesson of the regress is that we need a way to recognise that there is an ineradicable element in every meaningful sentence that resists reification and merely expresses the connection between subject and predicate that the sentence shows. But in an action sentence, at least if we regard such sentences as involving existential commitment to particular actions, this ineradicable element shows up in the relations which are borne to those particular actions by such things as their agents. And so we cannot simply use a regular verb like 'performs' or 'causes' to say what the relation is between Jess, say, and Jess's turning on of the light. For those verbs themselves would then appear to demand the same treatment – and so the syncategorematic element gets mistakenly repeated once again, delivering actions performed by agents, the performings of which are in their turn actions done by those same agents, and so on *ad infinitum*.

I believe, then, that we are able to see in the Wiggins/Gaskin account of the regress a way to explain why the agent-action problem arises. It arises because the relationship between agent and action is not, in general, to be represented as a relation at all – what signifies its presence to us linguistically is not a referential sentential element, but what one might loosely call 'logical form' – generally speaking, an active, finite verb with a given tense and aspect, connected to the right kind of subject (and perhaps object) term, which, being present, tells us that an action is/was in the offing. There *are* of course relations involved in many actions – but they are relations like eating, stabbing, throwing, etc. relations between agents and particulars which are properly independent of those agents. There is also the perfectly good static, and as I should think of it, *logical* relation 'S is the agent of A'. But there is not, in addition to such relations as these, a relation which can be expressed by a contenful *verb* between, for example, me and my eating of an apple, a verb which could tell us something about that in virtue of which I am the agent of my apple-eating. There couldn't be, because there can be nothing to undergird the relations which are part of logical form.

What of the consequences for philosophy of action of the connections we have uncovered between certain perplexities we find ourselves in with respect to our understand of the relation of agent and action, on the one hand and Bradley's Regress, on the other? One consequence seems to be that an idea once mooted by Jennifer Hornsby may be the right thing to say about how an agent relates to her action – namely, that we can do no better than saying that the agent's action is *hers*.

> If 'actions' stands for a class of events, then there seems to be no better way to say how an agent relates to her action than to say that it is hers. The relation between agent and action is signalled by the genitive in phrases for actions – 'her speaking', 'a's opening the door'. We find here a sort of ownership, but it does not seem to be authorship …
>
> … our responsibility [for the events in those series we initiate] consists in the action being ours, and not in it having been caused, or done, by us. (Hornsby 1993: 178).

The 'ownership' of which Hornsby speaks here, importantly, is not the relation that can be expressed by the verb 'owns' – the ownership relation which I can bear to such things as my car or my shoes, say. It bears only a loose and analogical relation to ownership in that robust sense. It is more like the sense of ownership which pertains to the way in which such things as my gait or my character may be 'mine'. I do not *own* my gait or my character – that is not the sense in which they are mine. They are *logically*, not contingently mine.[18] What best explains the fact that

there is no better way to say how an agent relates to an action than to say that it is mine in this non-relational sense, is that – as shown by the fact that we cannot relate them to ourselves by any of the expedients we have considered here – like gaits and characters, actions are deeply *dependent* entities, things that cannot so much as be singled out except by way of the agent whose actions they are. To accept this view, we might have to accept others that follow from it – for example, we certainly have to give up on agent causation, as standardly construed (agents do not cause their actions), and might also have to give up on the idea that actions might be redescribable in other terms (e.g. purely physical terms) – any more than a person's gait or character may be thus re-describable – since they do not have the kind of independence as entities that might make that suggestion coherent. But perhaps this is the way also to solve the problem of the disappearing agent. Agents will not disappear from any story of action which properly assimilates the fact that actions are essentially, logically 'by' agents, essentially, logically *theirs* – not independent things which merely stand in relations to those agents whose actions they are. The recognition that actions are not self-standing events and that we speak of them only in order to describe the various ways in which *agents* make their marks upon the world may thus help us in an area of philosophy where help is badly needed.

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ENDNOTES

[1] For the purposes of this paper, I shall accept this assumption. Given certain caveats, I believe it is acceptable, though the caveats are quite substantial - see Steward (2012b) and (2016) – and some of them will crop up in later discussion. By far the most common version of the assumption (though not my own) takes it for granted that actions are particular events.

[2] The most prominent of these sub-problems in the contemporary literature on philosophy of action is the difficulty of making sense of the suggestion that the relevant relation between agent and action is *causation*. This is claimed to be the case by at least *some* of those endorsing the doctrine known as 'agent causationism' ((e.g. Chisholm (1966, 1976); Taylor (1966); Clarke (1993)). Others who have sometimes been called 'agent causationists' (e.g. Bishop (1983); O'Connor (1995, 2000); Alvarez and Hyman (1998); and Steward (2012a)) do not accept the view that agents cause their actions, in some cases at least partly because of their appreciation of the difficulty to be discussed below.

[3] See note 2 above for relevant references.

[4] The particular kind of 'disappearing agent' worry I have in mind is well-expressed here by Thomas Nagel:
"Something peculiar happens when we view action from an objective or external standpoint. Some of its most important features seem to vanish under the objective gaze. Actions seem no longer assignable to individual agents as sources, but become instead components of the flux of events in the world of which the agent is a part" (Nagel 1986: 110). David Velleman also expresses the view that what he calls "the standard story of human action" – one which represents the story of human action as a matter of states and events causing bodily movements some part of which process (perhaps the whole process, perhaps only the bodily movement in which the process culminates) – "fails to cast the agent in his proper role" (Velleman 1992: 461).

[5] For scepticism about the question whether it is possible, even in principle, to identify actions with determinate sets of physical events see especially Hornsby (1981, 1986, 1993), all reprinted in Hornsby (1997).

[6] It is notoriously difficult to say which the action sentences are. Semantics as well as syntax must figure: 'I slept the whole night' is not an action sentence, for instance – but to say how we know it is not, we have to involve knowledge that we have only by means of our understanding of what sleeping involves. Aspect is also relevant. 'I was walking along the Pennine Way yesterday' yields, when nominalised, 'my walking along the Pennine Way yesterday' – but this seems much better characterised as involving commitment to a *process of activity* rather than to an individual action (Hornsby (2012)). But I shall permit myself for the purposes of this paper the oversimplifying assumption that we know which sentences are the action sentences.

[7] Perfect nominals contrast with imperfect ones in which the 'of' is omitted to deliver e.g. 'my raising my arm'; 'Caesar's crossing the Rubicon' and 'Oswald's shooting Kennedy'. Many have argued that these latter expressions are nominals best construed as referring to propositions rather than to individual events. Evidence for the claim is provided by the need for adverbial (rather than adjectival) modification so far as imperfect nominals are concerned – e.g. 'Caesar's finally crossing the Rubicon' but 'Caesar's final crossing *of* the Rubicon'. As Vendler (1967, ch. 5) notes, this indicates that these

nominalisations still have a verb 'alive and kicking' inside them. For an excellent discussion of event nominals and names, see Bennett (1988). For further discussion, see also Steward (1997), Chapter 3.

8 Hornsby (1980): 3.

9 Hornsby (1980): 3–4; see also her (1993): 142.

10 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the relevance of the Hyman passage.

11 So-called 'truthmaker theory' develops this intuition in a variety of different ways; see Armstrong (2004) and Beebee and Dodd (2005) for good discussions. There are many controversies *within* truthmaker theory that I cannot hope to deal with here, however.

12 Though it should probably be noted here that there is controversy *also* about the ontology required for the understanding of simple adjectival predications ('This ball is blue' and the like) - e.g. whether an understanding in terms of tropes would be preferable to one in terms of universals. See e.g. Williams (1953) and Campbell (1990) for classic developments of this idea. For simplicity, and because I am more concerned for present purposes with the agent-action regress, I ignore that complication here.

13 See Kim 1966; 1969 and 1976 for the development of this view of events. See Steward (1997) Ch. 1 for an argument that Kim's events are not really events, but facts – and hence that his position is in fact very close to that of those who suppose that facts or states of affairs are the truthmakers for true sentences.

14 Davidson's well-known insistence that action sentences should be analysed in such a way as to reveal an additional argument place for an event is a version of this idea, though rooted in semantic rather than straightforwardly metaphysical thinking. See his (1967).

15 Thanks to an anonymous referee for alerting me to the usefulness of Hyman's discussion of 'dependent particulars'.

16 Note that this 'by' relation is not the same relation which often goes by that name in philosophy of action – the 'by' which is used in saying that a person has done one thing *by* doing another.

17 On Wiggins' view, it cannot be represented as a relation at all; on Gaskin's it can be partially thus represented, but Bradley's Regress is the consequence of the fact that no representation can ever *fully* capture its content.

18 Unless, of course, 'my gait' or 'my character' is taken to refer to something multiply instantiable, something that could conceivably be shared by someone else.

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