

Why Bradley's regress is harmless

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“As I now see it, universals are to be thought of as a special sort of part of the particulars that instantiate them.”
(Armstrong 2005: 274)

Abstract

Whenever something has a property, that property is exemplified. Before Frege, it seemed obvious to many that this makes a property stand in some kind of relation to the particular. Frege did away with the logical reasons to hold such a view, while Strawson and Armstrong criticised its metaphysical motivations. Bradley is often interpreted as having provided a knock-down objection. In my talk, I plead for a return to our pre-Fregean innocence.

Our best reason, I argue, to believe in properties is an application of the truthmaker requirement, rightly understood. It is because qualitative identity has to be grounded in something that exists that we should believe in the existence of properties. Properties, so understood, are what unifies reality. To do this, they need to be exemplified. It is the exemplification relation – holding between a property F and a particular a iff Fa – that solves the so-called “problem of unity” and combines properties and particulars into states of affairs.

Not all friends of properties are prepared to go all that way. Armstrong's main reason to forsake a realist exemplification relation for Strawsonian obscurantist ‘non-relational tieness’ is Bradley's regress: if exemplification were a relation, it would have to be exemplified to relate a property and a particular; but then this further (instance of the) exemplification relation would have to be exemplified, etc. I will argue that, for intrinsic properties, the regress is harmless for the same reasons that the truth-regress from “ p ” to “it is true that p ” and then to “it is true that it is true that p ” is, and that exemplification of intrinsic properties is all we need.

Truthmaking: explanation by things

Some recent controversy has concerned the question whether, and if so in what sense, truthmaking is explanatory. Enemies and false friends of truthmaking have argued that weaker truthmaking principles than maximalism (the thesis that every truth has a truthmaker) may satisfy our demands for explanation.

It is a mistake to think that truthmaker theory needs to be motivated by recourse to the thesis that for every true sentence there must be some explanation of why it is true. Opponents of truthmaker theory are right in saying that explanations not citing truthmakers may do this job:

- (1) Sam is a dog.
- (2) “Sam is a dog” is true.
- (3) “Sam is a dog” is made true by Sam.
- (3) because (2), (2) because (1), hence (3) because (1).

Opponents of truthmaker theory forget, however, about two other ways in which truthmaker theory is explanatory. It is an explanatory theory of *truth* and it is *itself* a species of the explanation relation.

Truthmaker theory is an explanatory theory of truth (not: truths), claiming that truth is a derelativisation of a metaphysically prior cross-categorical relation of truthmaking. This explanatory rôle of truthmaker theory provides a strong argument for truthmaker maximalism. Non-maximalist truthmaker theorists are committed to the claim that there are two ways for something to be true, and face the difficult task to explain why these are two ways for something to be *true*.

It is a mistake to think that the explanations of truths offered by truthmaker theory are claims to the effect that they have such-and-such truthmakers. Consider:

- (1) Sam is a dog because “Sam is a dog” is made true by Sam.
- (2) “Sam is a dog” is true because it is made true by Sam.
- (3) “Sam is a dog” is true because of Sam.

As opponents of truthmaker theory have pointed out, both (1) and (2) are false. (3), however, is true and provides an explanation of why “Sam is a dog” is true. The truthmaking relation is an explanation by things. Not every explanation stays “within the realm of reason” – some really do reach out to the world.

The truthmaking argument for properties

The “problem of universals” properties are called upon to solve is the problem of explaining unity across diversity:

The problem of universals is the problem of how numerically different particulars can nevertheless be identical in nature, all be of the same ‘type’. (Armstrong 1978: 41)

The basic argument for the existence of properties is that we have to assume their existence if we want to solve the problem of universals:

- (i) It is a Moorean fact that different particulars are ‘identical in nature’.
- (ii) By the truthmaker principle, this ‘identity of nature’ has to be grounded in reality.
- (iii) Properties are what grounds such ‘identity in nature’ (Armstrong 1978: 41).

Hence, we have to accept properties, i.e. objective resemblance. This still leaves open (at least) three possibilities:

- (i) Accept universals, properties wholly present in all their exemplifications. The resemblance of a and b is then analysed as their exemplifying one and the same universal.
- (ii) Accept tropes, properties numerically different in different exemplifications but of the same ‘type’ iff they resemble perfectly. Resemblance is analysed as perfect resemblance of the corresponding tropes.
- (iii) Accept objective resemblance (or naturalness of sets of possibilities) as primitive.

On closer examination, we see that the third option does not satisfy the truthmaker requirement: resemblance nominalism is committed to the claim that a and b are both F *because* they resemble. This gets the direction of explanation wrong.

Bradley’s regress and the problem of unity

A regress threatens friends of tropes and universals alike, making it seem mysterious how such qualitative entities could ever be bound to their particulars by a relation of exemplification that is itself qualitative. If exemplification were a relation between, say, a particular a and a property F , and hence a universal, a further relation would be needed to connect a , F and the exemplification relation (Armstrong 1978: 20, 41, 54, 70). An ontologically and explanatorily vicious regress would follow.

Essentially the same worry can be raised with respect to the constitution of relational facts (Vallicella 2002: 12): what is the ontological ground of the difference between a relational fact aRb with extrinsic R and the set, sum or list of its constituents? Again, this difference does not seem accounted for – ontologically or explanatorily – by further constituents of the fact.

On its ontological reading, I take the regress to be a sound argument against tropes. There cannot be tropes, because there would have to be infinitely many of them to connect any of them to their bearers – at any level, we would have a distinct and different additional trope, itself in need of being connected to do the binding. Even if we accept, however, that the ontological regress is an argument for universals, multiply exemplified at any stage of the regress, we still face a difficult explanatory task: what explains the difference between those instantiations of the exemplification relation that make for the unity between a and F and those that do not? What is the difference between a relation that does in fact relate and one that does not?¹ We cannot just say that it is “the business of a relation [...] to relate” (Alexander 1920: 249) – we have to understand that business.

¹Once we construe them as universals, this can only mean: what is the ontological ground of the relating in some cases (exemplifications) of relations? Note that cases or exemplifications of a property are not tropes.

What reason is given to say that aRb is not the sum of its constituents? It is an application of what I call the “sufficiency argument”:

“[That the fact and the sum are different] is well-nigh self-evident...For if the constituents exist, the set and the sum both ‘automatically’ exist; but the constituents can exist without the fact existing.” (Vallicella 2002: 12)

The sufficiency argument relies on the following “principle of necessarily sufficient reason”:

(Nec) An explanation, even of a contingent fact, must necessitate what it explains.

If we accept explanation by things, as truthmaker theorists do, **(Nec)** becomes truthmaker necessitarianism: the view that truthmakers necessitate the truth of what they make true. An argument for the existence of states of affairs is then the consequence: Because the truthmaker for the contingently true predication “ Fa ” must necessitate its truth, it cannot be F or a alone, nor their fusion, for all three of them could exist without “ Fa ”s being true. Hence it is the state of affairs a ’s being F , which, by necessity, exists if and only if a is F :

Why do we need to recognize states of affairs? [...] If a is F , then it is entailed that a exists and that the universal F exists. However, a could exist, and F could exist, and yet it fail to be the case that a is F (F is instantiated, but instantiated elsewhere only). a ’s being F involves something more than a and F . It is no good simply adding the fundamental tie or nexus of instantiation to the sum of a and F . The existence of a , of instantiation, and of F does not amount to a ’s being F . The something more must be a ’s being F – and this is a state of affairs. (Armstrong 1989: 88)

If it is said that the truthmaker for a truth could have failed to make the truth true, then we will surely think that the alleged truthmaker was insufficient by itself and requires to be supplemented in some way. A contingently sufficient truthmaker will be true only in circumstances that obtain in this world. But then these circumstances, whatever they are, must be added to give the full truthmaker. (Armstrong 1997: 116)

States of affairs, however, are parts (or rather symptoms) of the problem, not parts of its solution. We just have explanatory circularity in lieu of an explanatory regress: The difference between the ‘mere sum’ and the fact is explained by something, i.e. a state of affairs, that is ‘non-mereologically composed’ out of its constituents. But until we understand the difference between mereological and non-mereological composition, we do not understand the difference between the sum and the fact.

It is tempting, but mistaken, to blame the regress on the view that explanation can be by things. The truthmaker realists are right to think that explanations of truths must bottom out in something real, something existing. It is to give up on this idea, at the centre of any realist view that deserves its name, to accept ‘truthmaking’ by ‘things being so-and-so’: we are not providing an ontological ground for the truth that a is F by just saying that a is F . I think, however, that the realist core of the idea that explanation is ultimately by things can be maintained even if we let some (special!) other *formal* properties of the things than their existence do some of the explanatory work, in particular their essence and their structure.

The exemplification relation: formal and internal

What explains the difference between Fa on the one, and a and F on the other hand, is that in the first, but not necessarily the second case, the exemplification relation holds between a and F . The fact that a is F is different from the (mere) sum of its components exactly in the cases where a is not F . The exemplification relation, however, is not a ‘extra’ component of the fact: it is the relation of parthood that the universal F bears to the particular a if and only if a is F . Parthood is therefore exemplified, i.e. itself a part of a and F , hence, by the transitivity of parthood, also a part of a . We do have a regress: parthood is exemplified within a infinitely many times.

There is a regress, because the parthood relation has to be itself a part to be exemplified. The regress, however, is neither ontologically nor explanatorily vicious. It is ontologically harmless, because exemplification, on any account of this relation as a universal, will be a relation relating itself – this is not more problematical than the self-exemplification of the property of being a property.

More critically, the regress is not explanatorily vicious: the explanation of the unity of the fact is given, on the first stage, by a itself. This is an explanation by a thing, not by the fact that a contains F . It is true that F is a part of a if and only if a explains that Fa , but this does not mean that the latter explanation is implicitly conditional, that it ‘works’ only under some condition. The explanation is contingent, this is true, but so is the explanandum. I submit that this is acceptable, and that **(Nec)** has therefore to be rejected.

The explanatorily vicious regress is avoided due to two formal features of the exemplification relation construed as parthood: its internality, and its formality. If F is part of a , they stand in an internal relation, supervening on the intrinsic natures of the relata. The internality of exemplification explains the internality of resemblance: if the universal is literally part of the particular that exemplifies it, two resembling particulars literally share a universal as their common part.² Relations are parts of the mereological sum of their relata.

Exemplification, construed as parthood, is a formal relation. The exemplification regress is as harmless as the truth-regress (if p is true, it is true that p is true etc.) of which Hochberg says:

The subsequent facts in the chain are not involved in the specification of the truth conditions for the initial statements, which is what would make the chain a vicious regress. (Hochberg 1988: 193)

While exemplification is exemplified by the particular, the universal and the exemplification relation, this fact supervenes on the particular exemplifying the universal: “the predicates may ascend, but not the reality in virtue of which they apply” (Armstrong 2004: 106).

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²If you think that only material or concrete objects can literally have parts, think of the particular as extended in more than three (or four) dimensions, as a location in quality space as it were: add a dimension for every degree of independent qualitative variation, in which it either is or is not extended (or extended to some degree in the case of quantities). Its extension in these dimensions are the universals it exemplifies.