

Bradley vs Russell on the Metaphysics of Relations

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Abstract

In this paper we revisit the debate between Bradley and Russell on the nature of relations, focusing especially on a series of papers published in *Mind* between 1910 and 1911. Bradley's criticisms and Russell's response to them as developed in these papers are crucial for understanding their views on the nature of relations, but have not been given much attention in the recent literature. The main argument of the paper is that at the core of the disagreement between Russell and Bradley was a fundamental difference concerning the methodology of metaphysics.

In this paper we revisit a central debate in the history of analytic philosophy, the debate between Bradley and Russell on the nature of relations, focusing especially on a series of papers published in *Mind* between 1910 and 1911. Bradley's criticisms against Russell's theory of relations and Russell's response to them as developed in the *Mind* papers are crucial for understanding their views on the nature of relations, but have not been given much attention as compared to the arguments found in Bradley (1897) and Russell (1903) (see Candlish (2007) for such an example). The paper falls into two (related) parts. In the first part, we go over Bradley's claim that Russell's theory of relations is inconsistent and unravel its structure and its philosophical presuppositions. We conclude that the debate between Russell and Bradley would have finished in a stalemate, had Russell just insisted that relations relate their relata without, as Bradley had argued, qualifying them. In the second part, we show how Russell offered an independent argument for his theory of relations, which was an a posteriori one and related to the role of the theory on the foundations of mathematics and science. We conclude that at the core of the disagreement between Russell and Bradley was a fundamental difference concerning the methodology of metaphysics.

Russellian relations i) do not qualify their terms; ii) are ontologically fundamental; but iii) succeed in relating their terms. For Bradley, this is an inconsistent triad. In a series of papers in *Mind*, Bradley argued that in describing the metaphysics of relations, Russell is committed to two theses that are incompatible: *metaphysical pluralism* and *complex unity*. *Metaphysical pluralism*, which Bradley attributed to Russell, is the view that 'nothing is admissible beyond simple terms and external relations' (1910b, 281). Bradley takes it that external relations do not qualify (or make a difference to) their relata. As he puts it, for the pluralist reality comprises 'self-existent pieces of fact and truth' (1910a, 259). *Metaphysical pluralism* is in direct contrast to Bradley's *metaphysical monism*, according to which, fundamentally, reality is a unified whole which is something over and above terms in relation. *Complex unity* is the view that, as Bradley puts it, there are 'unities which are complex and which cannot be analysed into terms and relations' (1910b, 281). That is, when a is related by R to b, the complex aRb is something over and above an aggregate of its constituents a, b and R. Bradley argued that *complex unity* contradicts *metaphysical pluralism*.

To see how the contradiction arises, let us first clarify what Bradley means when he says that a relation affects its terms. The key idea is that a relation makes a difference to the terms related, not just because we can ascribe a relational property to a term in relation, but because the relation, in some sense, affects its terms intrinsically. We can

think of this as implying that a term x that comes to be related to a term y changes intrinsically: it is no longer the same term that was before it acquired the relation to y . When, for instance, we say of two red-haired persons that “They are the same in being red-haired”, we bring the two persons under a new whole such that ‘the red-hairedness itself has become a subject and a point of unity connecting the diversities of each instance’ (1897, 579). Given this, Bradley argued that ‘in passing into this unity I cannot see how to deny that the terms have been altered’ (579). So, for Bradley no relation is external to its terms. But according to Russellian *metaphysical pluralism*, what exists are simple terms and relations, where to call a term ‘simple’ means that it does not contain any intrinsic complexity. Hence, Russellian relations are external, in the sense that they do not qualify their simple terms.

Here is, then, Bradley’s argument for incompatibility. To explain how complex unity is possible, we have to show how a relation can succeed in relating its terms. This requires either that terms are intrinsically complex, or a form of non-relational unity. Bradley’s own preference was for the latter option. But in either case, complex unity is incompatible with *metaphysical pluralism*’s commitment to simple terms and external relations. Hence, *complex unity* is incompatible with *metaphysical pluralism*. According to Bradley, Russell is confronted with a dilemma: either he tries to explain complex unity, but then he has to abandon pluralism; or he accepts pluralism, but then complex unity is left unexplained. In terms of the triad noted above, Russell has either to deny that i) relations do not qualify their terms; or ii) that relations are ontologically fundamental; or iii) that relations succeed in relating their terms.

Russell’s response to the problem of complex unity is to defy the charge of inconsistency. He takes it that though the constituents of a complex can be discovered by analysis, the complex cannot be reconstituted by enumerating the constituents ‘since any such enumeration gives us a plurality, not a unity’ (1910, 373). To go from a plurality (a mere aggregate) to the complex unity (which is ‘one, not many’), relations should be seen as ‘actually relating’ the terms and not merely as members of aggregates (374). So, Russell thinks he can avoid the charge of inconsistency by taking it to be the case that complex unity is grounded in the fact that relations do succeed in relating their terms. In effect, Russell holds onto the triad by denying a presupposition of Bradley’s argument, viz., that relations have to qualify their relata to relate them.

This move is clearly not acceptable by Bradley for whom the claim that a relation can succeed in relating its terms without making a difference to them is unintelligible. So what is the root of the debate? Bradley thinks that if a relation makes no difference to its relata, there is no reason why two terms are related by one particular relation rather than another. This can be seen in a central disagreement in the 1910-1911 *Mind* papers, which concerns whether a term can be related to itself. Russell accepts such relations (e.g. that a term is identical to itself), because he needs them in order to give an account of mathematics. For Bradley, in contrast, a relation always implies *diversity* of terms. If a term is identical to itself (as Russell insists), then, since identity is a relation, it follows that a term is also different from itself, which is absurd. Moreover, as Bradley adds, if all relations are external (i.e. they do not make a difference to their terms), ‘the difference of a term from itself seems as justifiable as its identity with itself’ (1910b, 283). In other words, Russellian externality means that there is no reason to suppose that a term has R and not R' to itself; so, in principle, a term can have both identity and difference from itself.

Unlike Bradley, Russell thinks there is no further reason why a term has the relations that it has and not others; this is just a brute fact. By the same token, Russell thinks that a relation need not make a difference to its terms in order to relate them: it is a brute fact that a relation succeeds in relating its terms. Unsurprisingly, in his (1911) Bradley questions this argument. He insists that no explanation has been offered for 'the difference between a relation which relates in fact and one which does not so relate' (289); hence, he simply points out that the problem of complex unity remains unsolved (see also his (1914) where he repeats the argument).

So is the result a stalemate? If all that Russell said was that it is a brute fact that relations relate, it seems that Bradley would have scored a good point against him. But Russell has a different kind of argument on offer. It relates to how best to understand the epistemology of metaphysical theories, i.e. what kind of justification we possess for fundamental metaphysical theses. Here, we locate a crucial difference between Bradley and Russell. For Bradley, self-evidence plays a central role. The claim that a relation requires diversity, as well as the claim that a relation qualifies its terms, are accepted on these grounds. For Russell, however, self-evidence cannot have priority over a kind of inductive justification that fundamental metaphysical theses can have. As a scientific theory can be accepted on the basis of its observational consequences, and as even mathematical axioms (e.g. in set theory) can be accepted on the basis of their implications, metaphysical theses (in this case fundamental claims about the nature of relations) can similarly be accepted by their consequences. Though Russell does not reject self-evidence as a source of justification for metaphysical theses, he insists that self-evidence cannot have priority over inductive justification, since that would mean that there is a 'greater degree of certainty' (1910, 378) associated with metaphysical theories than we can have about scientific theories and even daily life. In fact, the opposite is true, since it is more probable that we make some mistake in metaphysics, than that there is 'so fundamental a falsehood in science' (1924, 146).

Here is how this 'kind of inductive argument' (1910, 377) works in the case of Russell's account of relations. The main criterion is how much 'truth to science and common sense' (377) the theory allows. According to Russell, Bradley's theory fares very badly, since, as Bradley himself put it in his (1897), the account of relations he offers, requires us to 'condemn, almost without a hearing, the great mass of phenomena' (34). Russell's theory, on the other hand, enables an account of mathematics, as well as of other areas of science where asymmetrical relations are central. So, the ultimate argument for Russellian external relations is an a posteriori argument: external relations (relations which satisfy all three of the items in the triad noted above) are necessary for making sense of mathematics and science. This argument is central in both Russell's reply to Bradley (1910) and in 'Logical atomism' (1924), where Russell offers the theory of types as a central ingredient of his account, which was absent in his (1911). This shows a continuity in Russell's thinking about the ultimate justification of the metaphysics of external relations that has been overlooked in the literature.

We conclude that in offering their respective metaphysics of relations, Bradley and Russell adopted different methodologies. Whereas both think that there is a fundamental choice to be made between monism and pluralism, for Russell this choice is made, at least partially, 'on empirical grounds': if we reject the existence of 'ultimate relational facts', then we cannot 'possibly interpret those numerous parts of science which employ asymmetrical relations' (1924, 145). This naturalistic attitude towards

metaphysics is not shared by Bradley, for whom the kind of self-evidence associated with fundamental metaphysical claims has epistemological priority.

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