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F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*

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Abstract

This paper elucidates the central argument of F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. Published in 1893, it is widely seen as the culminating work of the Oxford Idealist movement. Bradley contends that Reality or the Absolute is the sum-total of all sentient experience. Nothing that does not exist to experience can be said to exist at all. This Reality is a single, unified, whole. It is one individual entity compounded out of all experience within the universe. By experience, Bradley means all forms of awareness of the world, including ideas, sensations, emotions, and desires. Experience occurs within Finite Centres. The most basic form of experience is Immediate Experience – the simple awareness that humans and animals have of being in the world, when we are aware that a world exists with textures, shapes, colours, and patterns, but we have not yet thought about that world, have not divided experience up into objects, qualities, or relations between objects. We are not even conscious of our own 'selves' as something distinct from the world. This Immediate Experience of a variegated One is, for Bradley, as close to Reality as we ever get. But the human mind operates by breaking up this unity. It constructs a conscious 'self' which views the external world through a subject-object paradigm, and it peoples this external world with objects, qualities, time, space, and relations. The result is the world of Appearance. Appearance is how Reality presents itself to the thinking consciousness. It is not Real, which is proven by the fact that it is contradictory. All thinking about the world of Appearance is contradictory because it is not Real: the mind introduces subject-object relations and distinct objects into a Reality where they do not exist. This Bradley shows through his analysis of the concept of relations. When conscious minds seek to comprehend experience they posit relations between objects: but relations between objects are an incoherent concept that cannot unite what the mind has separated. Hence, the human mind can never know the ultimate truth about Reality, being condemned to operate always amidst contradictory Appearances. Nevertheless, in attempting to bind together the elements of experience as a coherent whole thought is, at least, moving *towards* Reality and there are *degrees* of truth. No proposition about experience is ever wholly wrong. The more our understanding of a thing is grounded in an integrated set of concrete relations, so that it is more self-sufficient and individual, the greater is its degree of truth. But nothing within finite experience can ever be wholly individual

or wholly self-determining. Only Absolute Reality is this – and this humans can never know due to the finite and limited nature of their cognitive and experiencing faculties.

The issue F.H. Bradley confronts in *Appearance and Reality* (1893) is: what is the nature of Reality and how does our experience and thought about the world stand in relation to it? His argument is that most of what we commonly attribute to Reality relates, not to Reality, but to *Appearance*: how things *seem* to be but are *not* in Reality. What makes Bradley's book especially tricky is that it starts with a critique of the concepts we conventionally deploy to describe and understand the world, concepts like space, time, objects, and relations. These concepts purport to refer to Reality, whereas in fact, contends Bradley, they apply to Appearances only. Thus, the first part of the book is given over to a rapid exposure of the logical inconsistencies and contradictions entailed in everyday thinking about the perceptual world and leaves one's head aching. Only subsequently does Bradley expounds his theory of what Reality actually is – no easy task, since it is Bradley's argument that Reality, as such, is unknowable. Even so, it is his positive doctrine which is crucial; once established, the contradictions of Appearances follow naturally and to encounter them is less disturbing. Hence, in expounding Bradley's argument we begin, not with his critique of conventional views, but with his own positive conception of Reality and how humans stand in relation to it.



F.H. Bradley (1846-1924), Portrait by Reginald Eves, Merton College

The Real or the Absolute

What is the ultimate nature of Reality? What is the truly Real, or what Bradley calls the Absolute? The point to be grasped is that Bradley rejects any idea that ultimate Reality can

be made up of multiple elements, or that it can consist of entities related to each other.¹ While we might be tempted to see the world as consisting of an aggregate of elements related together in complex ways, Bradley would not accept this at all. This is because any attempt to view the world as consisting of multiple entities that are somehow related to each other always ends in contradiction. The mind becomes trapped in confusion and inconsistency – when, for example, it tries to define what an object is, or what a relation between objects is.² Reality, therefore, cannot consist of relations between things (for this yields contradictions). It must be one. And this one is the Absolute. To quote Bradley:

[T]he Absolute is not many; there are no independent reals. The universe is one in this sense that its differences exist harmoniously within one whole, beyond which there is nothing. Hence the Absolute is, so far, an individual and a system ...³

What, then, is the nature of the Absolute or ultimate Reality? 'The Absolute', says T.L.S. Sprigge, 'is simply the totality of all that there truly is', where to say that it is all that *truly* is, means to say that it is a single unified yet variegated experience.⁴ The Absolute or Reality is a unified experience containing all that truly is. Appearance, by contrast, is something posited of the Absolute by a finite mind – it is a partial revealing or interpretation of the Absolute. Appearance is part of the Absolute, but since it is only a part and not the whole, it is not Real.

Characteristics of the Real

1. *It is the integrated totality of all Things as a Whole.* It is a single organised system, or what Bradley called a *concrete universal*: a unity existing in a diversity of concrete things. It is one thing not a collection of many things. Individual things are abstractions from the unified whole of the Absolute and are thus not real as things – they cannot stand apart from the Absolute totality. This is because each particular thing is defined and formed in its relationship to other things and, ultimately, to the universe as a whole. Indeed, what we conventionally regard as an individual thing is not really individual at all: it cannot, to put it simply, stand on its own two legs and is dependent on other things. The more we situate an abstracted thing within the context of the whole of which it is part the more the individual thing dissolves into the wider context which is, thereby, more truly individual than the initial thing we began with. As Bradley explains:

It is certain that everything is determined by the relations in which it stands. It is certain that, with increase of determinateness, a thing becomes more and more real ... anything, fully determined, would be the Absolute itself. There is a point where increase of reality implies passage beyond self. A thing by enlargement becomes a mere factor in the whole next above it; and, in the end, all provinces and all relative wholes cease to keep their separate characters.⁵

¹ C.f. W.J. Mander, *Perspectives on the Logic and Metaphysics of F.H. Bradley* (Thoemmes Press, Bristol, 1996), p. xi.

² This is the conclusion of the first part of his book. We return to this below.

³ F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (2nd Edition, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1897), p. 144.

⁴ T.L.S. Sprigge, *James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality* (Open Court, Chicago, 1993), p. 264.

⁵ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 494.

Sprigge illustrates this point by the example of a street. We might be tempted to take a single street in a town as an independent object. But on closer inspection we find that this street can only be understood in its relations to other streets – such as the streets that lead into it. But these local streets can only be properly understood in relation to the town as a whole (are they a main thoroughfare or part of a suburb?). The town is more a true individual than the initial street, it is more coherent and self-determining. Even so, it is not a true individual as it, too, cannot be understood separately from a county or a region with which it is connected – perhaps as a market town, or a centre of industry. And this region cannot be properly understood independently of a nation, and so on until one arrives at the final covering point of understanding – the universe of things as a whole, namely the Absolute. The Absolute alone is a true and complete individual as it depends upon nothing else. As Bradley explains:

Anything less than the Whole has turned out to be not self-contained. Its being involves in its very essence a relation to the outside, and it is thus inwardly infected by externality. Everywhere the finite is self-transcendent, alienated from itself, and passing away from itself towards another existence.¹

So, says Sprigge, if A is related R to B, then there must be a whole which includes A and B – call this X. Since X incorporates A and B it is more of an individual than either A or B alone, but it is not, as such, an individual. For if X is related to Y, then there will be a Z which includes X and Y (and also A and B), and so on, till one arrives at the Absolute. And the Absolute totality of things is the truest, most real, single thing there is.² There cannot be anything beyond this since then the Absolute would not be the Absolute – it would be partial and depend upon some other thing. The Absolute is self-subsistent, it depends on nothing outside of it. It is ONE.

2. *The Absolute is Experience.* The stuff of the Absolute is experiences. It is not experienced – there is nothing outside of it to experience it. Rather, it is the sum total of all possible experiences. We cannot speak of a totality of things unless those things exist in experience. If they did not exist in experience then they would not exist at all. ‘The idea of something’, remarks Sprigge, ‘which is without either being an experience, or included in one, is incoherent.’³ So everything that can be said to exist must exist in experience. ‘Sentient experience, in short’, says Bradley, ‘is reality, and what is not this is not real’.⁴ The world of nature, for example, the world of material things like plants and mountains, is the product of sentient experience. It is ‘the physical universe apprehended in any way whatever by finite souls. Outside of this boundary there is no Nature.’⁵ The physical, if unrelated to a finite sentient being, is not a possible actuality. So long as something is known to some form of sentience it exists. If it is not, it doesn’t. It is meaningless to talk of anything as existing if it does not exist in experience – for there would then be nowhere for it to exist at all. As Bradley writes:

Find any piece of existence, take up anything that any one could possibly call a fact, or could in any sense assert to have being, and then judge if it does not consist in sentient experience. Try to discover any sense in which you can still continue to speak of it, when all perception and feeling have been removed; or point out any fragment of its matter, any aspect of its being, which is not derived from and is not still relative to

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

² Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, pp. 266-67.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁴ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 144.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

this source. When the experiment is made strictly, I can myself conceive of nothing else than the experienced. Anything, in no sense felt or perceived, becomes to me quite unmeaning.¹

Thus, Reality *is* experience. It is not that reality is structured through experience in some way; it is that experience *is* Reality and *vice versa*. 'You cannot find fact unless in unity with sentience, and one cannot in the end be divided from the other ... But to be utterly indivisible from feeling or perception, to be an integral element in a whole which is experienced, this surely is itself to *be* experience.'² And by experience, Bradley meant not just conscious experience, as when we are conscious, say, of being in a room, but *experience as felt in every way by the sentient being*, through its sensory feelings, or its emotions, thoughts, and desires – what we might call the felt-experience of being alive in the world. Indeed, it is not experience of the subject-object type, where I (the subject) perceive an object. Such subject-object distinctions are an abstraction from experience. The experience Bradley means is an experience prior to, and more basic than, the subject-object type of consciousness. It is, as we have said, the awareness of any sentient being (including animals) of being in the world. Only what exists to sentient beings can be said to exist. Existence outside of sentient awareness is not to exist in any meaningful or comprehensible way at all.

We spoke of the Absolute being the integrated totality of all things. But, of course, these things are only things as existing in experience. So we can more properly say that *the Absolute is the integrated totality of all experiences*. The Absolute is a single unified experience, but an experience that contains every possible experience of the universe there could be: all experiences which have occurred and all experiences which may yet occur. 'The Absolute', says Bradley, 'is each appearance, and is all, but it is not any one as such.'³ It contains all thought, all feeling, all volition, since 'in that higher unity no fraction of anything is lost.'⁴ This cosmic experience just *is*. It is timeless. The shifting experiences of our own individual time and space-based experiences occur within it – and of course we are, each of us, aware that our own experience of time occurs within a world of events which precedes us and succeeds us and is always slipping away. To the Absolute our individual experiences are just part of a perpetual flux occurring within a single changeless reality. All history occurs within it: 'The Absolute has no history of its own, though it contains histories without number.'⁵ Everything that occurs in experience occurs within the Absolute experience. Put simply, to have a single universe there must be a single experience. 'Reality', as W.F. Lofthouse usefully remarks, 'is the complete coherence of experience.'⁶ Bradley summarises his argument as follows:

Our conclusion, so far, will be this, that the absolute is one system, and that its contents are nothing but sentient experience. It will hence be a single and all-inclusive experience, which embraces every partial diversity in concord. For it cannot be less than appearance, and hence no feeling or thought, of any kind, can fall outside its limits. And if it is more than any feeling or thought which we know, it must still remain

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁶ W.F. Lofthouse, *F.H. Bradley* (Epworth Press, London, 1949), p. 122.

more of the same nature. It cannot pass into another region beyond what falls under the general head of sentience.

3. *The Absolute is Non-Contradictory*

'Ultimate reality is such,' writes Bradley, 'that it does not contradict itself; here is an absolute criterion.'¹ Reality cannot be ultimately inconsistent or contradictory for then it wouldn't cohere at all and rational thought about it would be impossible since two opposite propositions might be true simultaneously. So Bradley assumes two things: truth must satisfy the intellect – i.e. be consistent; and that the truth is Real. Like Hegel, he holds that the rational is the Real. As Bradley admits in the Appendix to his book, he takes for granted that what satisfies the intellect 'is real and true'. This cannot be proven, since to prove or disprove it one would have to use reasoning and thus assume the very rationality at issue.² This absolute criterion does a lot of work for Bradley since he repeatedly deploys it to separate Appearance from Reality. Reality is non-contradictory; hence, any sphere of thought or perception which is characterised by contradictions or inconsistencies cannot be Real. 'Reality, as contrasted with Appearance', writes Sushil Saxena, 'is the character of being free from contradiction.'³ Whenever an idea we hold about reality or the nature of things leads us into contradiction or confusion or inconsistency then our ideas relate to Appearances. When our ideas do not lead us into contradiction, then we are in the realm of Truth or Reality or the Absolute. The contradictions we encounter in experience must therefore be put there by us: the mind, in trying to grasp reality, has distorted it, since Reality itself is not contradictory.

So Absolute Reality must be individual and consistent. And only the world as a whole can be this. The particular individual things we encounter are not self-subsistent and they are not non-contradictory. All other forms of finite existence, from things to the human self to God, are ruthlessly dissolved away from Bradley. Nothing, he shows, can ultimately exist but the Absolute, and this, summarises Rudolph Metz, is 'unity, wholeness, rest, harmony, as the all-comprehensive, as complete truth ...'⁴ It is the thing-in-itself.

How, then, are we to begin to know this Absolute, this Real?

Experience as the Means to the Absolute

Bradley argued that the only way to know the Absolute or the Real is through experience. Since nothing can be said to exist independent of experience, Reality must exist in experience. If it is not in experience then it cannot be said to exist at all. Reality, then, is to be known through experience. Not that it is possible for finite sentient beings to know the Absolute as such – for then we should have to be one with the Absolute and would cease to exist. But while it is impossible 'to construct absolute life in its detail, to have the specific experience in which it consists', we can 'gain an idea of its main features – an idea true so far as it goes, though abstract and incomplete ...'⁵ How can we know the Absolute through experience?

¹ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 136.

² *Ibid.*, p. 554.

³ S. Saxena, *Studies in the Metaphysics of Bradley* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1967), p. 54.

⁴ R. Metz, *A Hundred Years of British Philosophy* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1938), p. 336.

⁵ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 159.

According to Bradley, there are three distinct levels of experience:

1. Immediate Experience – feeling
2. Relational Experience - thought
3. Supra-Relational Experience – thought striving for the Absolute.

These form a developmental sequence. All forms of experience relate to the world of Appearance. The world of Appearance exists – but it is contradictory and cannot reveal to us Reality. This is true of all the categories we must use when referring to phenomenal experience. They all involve contradiction, above all because they all involve the contradictory idea of relations.¹ Hence if we are to get closer to things as they really are in ultimate Reality we need to go back beyond the distortions of relational thought to their origin in feeling or immediate experience.

Immediate Experience

Immediate Experience or feeling is, comments William Mander, ‘the basic experiential state in which reality is given or encountered.’ It is the totality of experience of which we are aware, through feeling or perception, at a given moment of time. This feeling ‘is our only handle on reality.’² It is not, he continues, the narrow experience of the senses; it is all types of sensation, emotion, will, and desire: anything that makes us aware of existence. Bradley spoke of immediate experience as follows:

[I]n mere feeling, or immediate presentation, we have the experience of a whole. This whole contains diversity, and, on the other hand, is not parted by relations ... We ... have experience in which there is no distinction between my awareness and that of which it is aware. There is an immediate feeling, a knowing and being in one, with which knowledge begins; and, though this in a manner is transcended, it nevertheless remains throughout as the present foundation of my known world.³

Immediate Experience is the world we inhabit at any moment in time – in which we live rather as a fish lives in water. It is simply there. It is experience to which we have applied no concepts, or labelled any objects, or to which we have even directed our attention. We are not, strictly speaking, conscious of it. Immediate Experience is not, indeed, to be confused with consciousness. They are different things and Immediate Experience is the more fundamental: ‘consciousness’, says Bradley, ‘to my mind, is not original. What comes first in each of us is rather feeling, a state as yet without either an object or subject.’⁴ The essential thing to appreciate about Immediate Experience is that it is a single, unified, world; a world in which, although there is diversity, all is integrated seamlessly. It is the experience we have at its simplest, where it is not broken up into objects or organised under concepts; where there are not primary and secondary qualities; where we do not posit relationships between things; and where we are not conscious of being ourselves separate from the world we observe, seeing the world as somehow ‘other’ to us. ‘In such a state’, writes Bradley, ‘there would be feeling, but there would not be any object present as an “other”. And we should so far not be

¹ J. Dunham, I. Hamilton Grant, and S. Watson, *Idealism: the History of a Philosophy* (Acumen, Durham, 2011), p. 168.

² W.J. Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011), p. 111.

³ F.H. Bradley, ‘On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience’, in F.H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1914), pp. 159-60.

⁴ F.H. Bradley, ‘Consciousness and Experience’, *ibid.*, p. 194.

aware of any distinction between that which is felt and that which feels.¹ It is, in other words, prior to the distinction between the self and not-self – it is a state without subject or object. I don't think: I exist and now I am having this or that experience. In Immediate Experience I am not aware of 'me' distinct from my experience. I am, if you like, lost in the felt experience of being in the world. And as there is no sense of 'I' standing against the 'that', there is no distinction between thought and being, no sense of truth or falsehood. It is, simply, an immediately given whole. To quote Bradley:

If, seeking reality, we go to experience, what we certainly do *not* find is a subject or an object, or indeed any other thing whatever, standing separate and on its own bottom. What we discover rather is a whole in which distinctions can be made, but in which divisions do not exist.

This Immediate Experience is the felt background of all experience. All finite experience depends on this felt background – it is the self's connection with the whole of reality but at a point at which the concept or sense of a 'self' has yet to be formulated. On this felt background, writes Bradley, 'depends the unity and continuity of our lives'.² Even when that concept of self, and of the 'other' and its relations, is formulated, we still have, in experience, a 'feeling which is not an object, and at all our moments the entirety of what comes to us, however much distinguished and relational, is felt as compromised within a unity which is not relational.'³

Now this Immediate Experience is not merely the perpetual background to all our other experience; it is also, a crucially, the closest we ever get to the Absolute. It is, says James Bradley, 'a continuous whole of content constituting a non-relational unity of subject and object.'⁴ It is an 'experienced non-relational unity of many in one'.⁵ And in this it has much in common with the Absolute, which, as we have seen, is just the totality of experience as such. Indeed, as Bradley explains:

[I]n mere feeling, or immediate presentation, we have the experience of a whole. This whole contains diversity, and, on the other hand, is not parted by relations. Such an experience, we must admit, is most imperfect and unstable, and its inconsistencies lead us at once to transcend it ... But it serves to suggest to us the general idea of a total experience, where will and thought and feeling may all once more be one.⁶

The contrast is with T.H. Green, who not only thought that sensations were discrete and required a structuring mind to make them whole by connecting them through relations, but that these relations were a characteristic of reality. Bradley, on the other hand, thought that sensations were part of the whole from the beginning and did not need a rational mind to unite them. Indeed, he rejected the whole concept of entities being connected by relations. Far from the rational mind uniting what was initially divided, it was the effect of the rational mind to divide what was initially one. As he wrote in 'On Our Knowledge of Immediate Experience':

¹ Bradley, 'On Our knowledge', p. 174.

² Bradley, 'Consciousness and Experience', p. 195.

³ Bradley, 'On Our Knowledge', p. 178.

⁴ James Bradley, 'F.H. Bradley's Metaphysics of Feeling and its Place in the History of Philosophy', in A. Manser and G. Stock (ed), *The Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984), p. 230.

⁵ Bradley, 'On Our Knowledge', p. 175.

⁶ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, pp. 159-60.

Nothing in the end is real but what is felt, and for me nothing in the end is real but what I feel. To take reality as a relational scheme, no matter whether the relations are 'external' or 'internal', seems therefore impossible and perhaps even ridiculous.¹

By this notion of feeling Bradley was able, says James Bradley, to defend the idea of monism in the tradition of the German Post-Kantians, but to do so, not by referring to Hegel's dialectic of ideas, but *via* a development of the Lockean theory of sensation, thereby enabling him to unite British Empiricism with German Idealism. It is this *feeling* that provides us with a 'positive idea of non-relational unity.' Our original awareness of things – of the 'this' of experience – always comes through the continuous flow of feeling. Hence feeling cannot be reducible to ideas or relations – if anything, it is the other way around. Our knowledge of objects both depends on, as is condemned as incoherent by, feeling. In consequence Reality cannot be identified with the system of thought.

Finite Centres

Immediate Experience occurs within what Bradley calls **Finite Centres of experience**. As we have noted, immediate experience exists prior to any categorisation of experience, and perhaps the most basic categorisation we make is to introduce the concept of a subjective self which experiences an external world as object. The idea of a 'self' is one that we construct *out of* immediate experience and as soon as we enter the realm of the self we have left that of Immediate Experience and entered the world of relations – most obviously the relation of the subject to the object. Hence, to begin with, Bradley seeks to avoid this abstraction of the 'self' by simply attributing Immediate Experience to a more neutral finite centre of experience or 'feeling centre'. These finite 'feeling centres' provide, says Sprigge, 'the concrete filling of the Absolute. It is constituted ... by an inconceivably large multitude of such centres.'² The Absolute, as experience, is constituted by an effectively infinite number of finite centres. The best approach to what they are, continues Sprigge, is to say that a Finite Centre is the kind of thing you are seeking to know when you ask what it is like to be some person at a particular moment of time.³ It is the experienced world of a person at a given moment of time – the individual's 'momentary subjective version of the world' but without reference to the actual person or self.⁴ Each animal, too, would have a succession of Finite Centres: one may ask – what would it be like to experience the world as that sea-gull flying above me is experiencing it NOW. Finite Centres are loci of 'this-now' Immediate Experiences. Hence each 'person' has a multitude of Finite Centres with each passing moment of time. What unites them is that they are the centre of their own subjective take on the world. Basically, a Finite Centre is something with a consciousness and it relates to that consciousness and not its body, physiognomy, or sense of personal existence, etc.

These finite centres are not objects existing in time or space and we must not confuse them with 'selves'. They are the raw data from which objects and relations and selves are built up as ideal constructions. They are the pre-conceptual experiential base from which we *construct* our entire conception of the world. 'Object and subject and every possible relation and term', writes Bradley, 'to be experienced at all, must fall within and depend vitally on such a felt

¹ Bradley, 'On Our Knowledge', p. 190.

² Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, p. 276.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279

unity.¹ Time exists within a finite centre – the Finite Centre is the source of time, it is not *in* time.² Similarly, they are not in space: space is created within the experience of the Finite Centre. Any particular dated and located event in the object world exists, says Sprigge, in virtue of the fact that it is either perceptually or conceptually presented within the felt unity of such a centre. Equally they are not ‘selves’. A self is something which endures through time and stands in a subject-object relation to its experience. By contrast, says Mander, a Finite Centre has no duration and contains no subject-object distinction. A sense of self is something abstracted out of a Finite Centre: I belong to a Finite Centre, the Finite Centre does not belong to me. The self is an ideal construction lacking ultimate reality.³ Each Finite Centre will present an event from a particular spatial or temporal point of view. They are, says Sprigge, individual bits of story telling by which the Absolute tells itself the story or history of the ordinary world of physical events. It is one of the positions from which the Absolute looks out eternally at the world.

Emergence of a Sense of Self within Finite Centres

As we have emphasised, there is no sense of a ‘self’ in Immediate Experience. There is no distinction between subject and object, just a single differentiated whole. The self emerges out of the Immediate Experience of a Finite Centre: ‘the self ... involves and only exists through intellectual construction. The self is thus a construction based on, and itself transcending, immediate experience.’⁴ How, then, does a sense of self, of a ‘me’ standing against a ‘not-me’, emerge within this schema? Two aspects of Finite Centres are important here.

1. *Each Finite Centre is a momentary experience of a whole.* Although each Finite Centre captures a succession of momentary worlds of immediate experience – a series of ‘this-nows’ – within each momentary world there is a feeling (we might call it memory) that each momentary experience takes over from a preceding momentary experience and is succeeded by another. While this cannot be proven, the sense that it is the case is sufficient to yield the feeling that Finite Centres are continuants, made up of a series of momentary experiences blurred into one. This continuing element, while not a self as such (since a self must be posited within a Finite Centre, whereas we are here dealing with a continuity of Finite Centres as such), the idea of some stable entity characterised by a series of states points towards the conception of an experiencing self (or what Bradley calls a ‘soul’) and is a condition for it. Thus, for Bradley:

The soul is a finite centre of immediate experience, possessed of a certain temporal continuity of existence, and again of a certain identity of character... The soul ... is one of these same personal centres, not taken at an instant, but regarded as a ‘thing’. It is a feeling whole which is considered to continue in time, and to maintain

¹ Bradley, ‘On Our Knowledge’, p. 176.

² Sprigge, *James and Bradley*, p. 282.

³ Mander, *British Idealism*, pp. 112-113.

⁴ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 524.

a certain sameness. And the soul is, therefore, not presented fact, but is an ideal construction which transcends what is given.¹

2. *Finite Centres are designated 'finite' by Bradley because each one is limited.* There is a world of experience they encompass – but there is also a world of experience beyond which is *felt* to exist but which any given Finite Centre cannot contain. As Bradley explains:

Outside that of which a man [i.e. a Finite Centre] is aware there is ... a larger world of experience. The content of this world ... is in a sense continuous with that which directly fills his consciousness. But he cannot experience the former content immediately, and, were he to do so, then (as it seems to me) the man's self would be destroyed. The position of the line dividing these two worlds no doubt may fluctuate. More and less of content may come from time to time within the man's feeling centre. But so long as that centre exists, there is a world within it which is experienced immediately, and the world without it which is not in this sense experienced at all.²

Immediate felt experience is *not* finite; it has no distinctive boundaries. It is only as it is filtered through finite centres that it becomes finite and is bounded; that it has, says Mander, an edge.³ This is, says Mander, vital to Bradley's developmental scheme. It means that the sense of the finite, when contrasted with the limitless nature of immediate felt experience, creates a tension between the two. Immediate Experience appears to be simply one: an undifferentiated and harmonious entity with no distinctions. But, in fact, it is never solely this. There is, from the beginning, a tension *within* the Finite Centre between 'this-mine' and the 'not-self'. This clash or contradiction sets up the impulse towards relational consciousness. For the feeling that reality extends beyond the limits of the Finite Centre creates the sense that there is a distinction between subject and object, between self and not-self, which is the hallmark of relational thought and this spells the demise of immediacy of feeling.⁴ The process is illustrated in Figure One. The Immediate Experience of the Finite Centre has no distinct boundary, extending out into the world as a whole. Yet still there is margin beyond which sensory impressions cease to impress themselves as part of the Finite Centre's Immediate Experience. Out of this distinction emerges a sense of self and not-self. A 'this-mine' self is carved out of Immediate Experience and from this point on subject-object relations develop.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

² Bradley, 'On Our Knowledge', pp. 172-3.

³ Mander, *British Idealism*, pp. 113-114.

⁴ C.f. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 460.

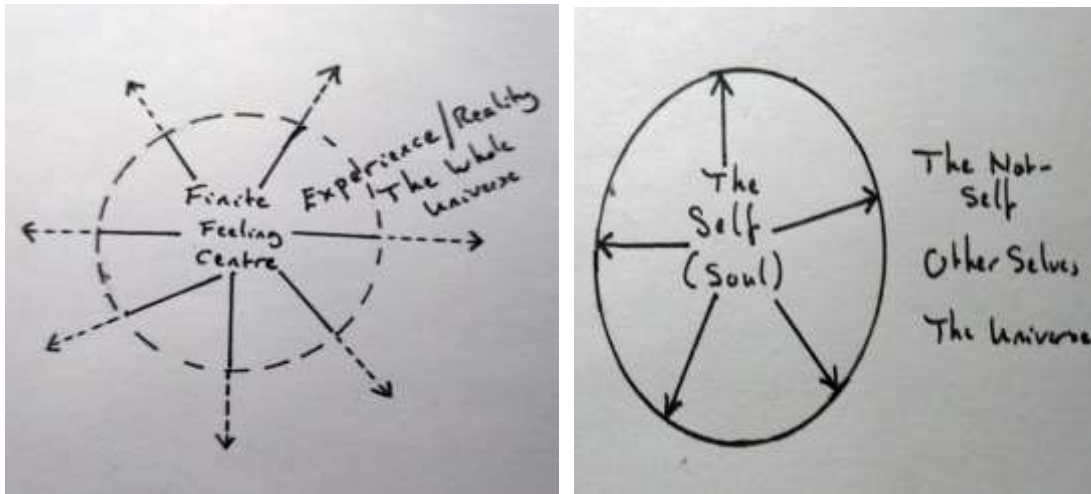


Figure One. Emergence of sense of Self out of Finite Centre

Immediate Experience is felt but it is not understood. It is not reflected upon. As soon as we begin to reflect upon or become aware consciously of experience in any way – indeed, as soon as we construct out of Immediate Experience the idea of a continuous self or soul – we break apart the original unity of the world and bifurcate it into two entities, subject and object, both of which are an abstraction *out of* experience. It is now that we enter the realm of relational abstract thinking.

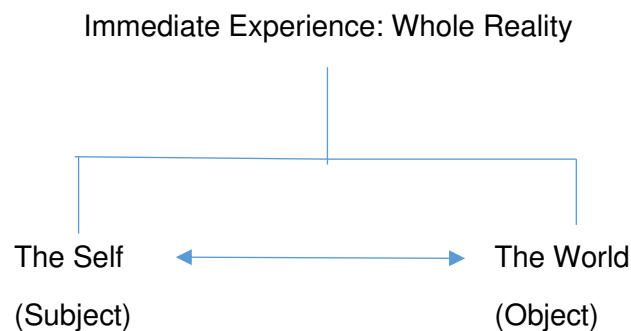


Figure Two. Emergence of Subject-Object Relations out of Immediate Experience

This is the world of metaphysics. Through metaphysics we seek to recover through thought the sense of the real that we had *via* Immediate Experience. It is an attempt that is doomed to failure; but still it must be made. Hence Bradley's remark that 'Metaphysics is the finding of bad reasons for what we believe upon instinct, but to find these reasons is no less an instinct.' Yet through attempts to rationalise experience, Immediate Experience is not left behind. It

remains present as the foundation of relational conceptual experience, reminding us ‘that complex wholes are felt as single experiences.’¹

Conscious Reflective Experience

It is natural to think that, when we move from felt experience to conscious, discriminating, reflective experience, we are moving closer to Reality, that we are getting a better grasp of things as they really are. This is not Bradley’s view. For Bradley, when we slip from Immediate to Conscious Experience, as we continually do, we are moving, not towards Reality, but away from it. There are several ways in which this happens.

1. Thought destroys the inherent unity of Reality

In Reality, every existing thing combines always two aspects: first, its existence; second, its qualities or characteristics. The existence of a thing is indicated by the statement ‘that it is’, while its qualities or predicates are indicated by ‘what it is’. Bradley says that anything which can be said to exist must possess *both* these aspects, the ‘that’ and the ‘what’. ‘That anything should be, and should yet be nothing in particular, or that a quality should not qualify and give a character to anything, is obviously impossible.’² The existence of a thing and its nature are inextricably combined and in Reality they are one. This unity thought destroys. When we think about something we abstract the quality or character of a thing from its existence. When we think about a horse we form an idea of a horse possessing certain qualities. Where there once was a unity between the existence and quality of a horse, there are now two things: the horse as existing thing and horse as idea in my mind. This is what thought does: it separates the ‘what’ of something (its qualities) from the ‘that’ of something (its actual existence).

Neither of these aspects [the ‘that’ and the ‘what’], if you isolate it, can be taken as real, or indeed in that case is itself any longer. They are distinguishable only and are not divisible. And yet thought seems essentially to consist in their division. For thought is clearly, to some extent at least, ideal. Without an idea there is no thinking, and an idea implies the separation of content from existence. It is a ‘what’ which, so far as it is a mere idea, clearly *is* not, and if it also *were*, could so far, not be called ideal. For ideality lies in the disjoining of quality from being.³

Thinking about experience, then, is inherently divisive: our mind formulates judgements about Reality, and this is only possible if thought and Reality are separated. We are inclined to regard the formulation of judgements as a mark of our sophistication in the understanding of Reality, when, in truth, it is the exact reverse. If thought and reality were the same then judgement would not be possible – there would just be a unified one. For judgement to be possible, there must be a difference between thought and reality: Reality and thought are not the same thing. And this means absolute and complete truth is impossible: no idea about the world can ever be the same as the world, for, if it were, it would not be an idea *about* the world

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 521.

² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

at all – it would *be* the world, it would be Reality where ‘that’ and ‘what’ were the same and one. And this would extinguish thought as such:

In every judgement the genuine subject is reality, which goes beyond the predicate and of which the predicate is an adjective. And I would urge first that, in desiring to transcend this distinction, thought is aiming at suicide.¹

Hence, while Reality is True, this truth can never be wholly known within the thinking mind.

The truth belongs to existence, but it does not as such exist. It is a character which indeed reality possesses, but a character which, as truth and ideal, has been set loose from existence; and it is never rejoined to it in such a way as to come together singly and *make* a fact ... [Truth’s] predicate can never be equivalent to its subject. And if it became so, and if its adjectives could be at once self-consistent and re-welded to existence, it would not be truth any longer. It would have then passed into another and a higher reality.²

However rich is our thought, it can never be rich enough to contain the whole existing reality. Thus, the very act of thinking about Reality separates us from it.

2. Thought is an Incomplete Experience of Reality

Even if, Bradley remarks, thought was to somehow hold within itself the harmonious unity of objects and qualities as an undifferentiated one – in the manner suggested by Idealists like Green and Hegel – then this would still not be Absolute Reality. For Reality is experience, and experience does not merely exist in ideas and relations; it is experienced through sensual feeling – through pain and pleasure, will and passion. Absolute Experience ‘must keep every item of our experience’, merging thought, feeling, and will into one Whole.

Such a whole state would possess in a superior form that immediacy which we find (more or less) in feeling; and in this whole all divisions would be healed up. It would be experience entire, containing all elements in harmony. Thought would be present as a higher intuition; will would be there where the ideal had become reality; and beauty and pleasure and feeling would live on in this total fulfilment.³

Thought cannot accommodate these aspects of experience since it operates in a world of abstract ideas, and this means there is a side of existence beyond thought and again no ‘truth’ held within thought can wholly coincide with Reality.

And the question is *not* whether the universe is in any sense intelligible. The question is whether, if you thought it and understood it, there would be no difference left between your thought and the thing.⁴

To this question Bradley answers: No. However fully you thought the world, your ideas could never truly encompass the richness of experience. ‘Nothing in the end is real’, he writes, ‘but

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

what is felt, and for me nothing in the end is real but what I feel ... The real, to be real, must be felt.' Bradley had made this point earlier, in his *Principles of Logic*, when he argued:

Unless thought stands for something that falls beyond mere intelligence, if 'thinking' is not used with some strange implication that never was part of the meaning of the word, a lingering scruple still forbids us to believe that reality can ever be purely rational. It may come from a failure in my metaphysics, or from a weakness of the flesh which continues to blind me, but the notion that existence could be the same as understanding strikes as cold and ghost-like as the dreariest materialism. That the glory of this world in the end is appearance leaves the world more glorious, if we feel it is a show of some fuller splendour; but the sensuous curtain is a deception and a cheat, if it hides some colourless movement of atoms, some spectral woof of impalpable abstractions, or unearthly ballet of bloodless categories Our principles may be true, but they are not reality. They no more *make* that Whole which commands our devotion, than some shredded dissection of human tatters *is* that warm and breathing beauty of flesh which our hearts found delightful.¹

3. Conscious Experience is Inherently Relational

Conscious Experience is always Relational Experience. It is, says Mander, 'any experience or thought about the world that employs relations in any way at all' – which is, as Green had already shown, all *thought* about the world.² All our thoughts about the world involve relating things to one another. When we think about the world of experience we deploy what Bradley called 'the machinery of terms and relations.' We talk of objects and their relations with each other; we situate them in time and space; and we distinguish between primary and secondary qualities. This is, indeed, the mechanism of how we think about the world. But there is, according to Bradley, a problem: there is simply no place or scope within Reality to insert any such mechanism of terms and relations. Reality is one and undivided. Terms (objects) and relations between terms have no existence within Reality. Hence, whenever we talk of terms and relations we are not talking, not about Reality, but about how Reality appears to us.³

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of this is the act of discriminating objects with qualities in our experience. In Immediate Experience there are no objects, and hence no relations between objects. Our Immediate Experience is a simple undifferentiated one. But as soon as we become consciously aware of experience, as soon as we reflect upon it, we discriminate one or more elements from the felt mass. Even to do this is to abstract one element out of experience, and by this process no complete enumeration of the original Immediate Experience could ever be arrived at. And having once discriminated between objects in experience we begin to draw contrasts. We say that x is bigger or smaller than y; that it is a different colour from y, or of a rougher or smoother texture; that it has a different shape or that x is heavier or lighter than y, that it is shiny or dull, that it is in front of y or behind y, and so on. Always, to ascribe qualities to x we are discriminating it from other things. We don't just point to an object and say 'that'. We also say 'what' it is – that chair. And that chair, as Green argued, stands in relation to that desk and that bookcase. If we did not distinguish between objects, and the qualities were literally shared between x and y, then we could not

¹ F.H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, Second Edition, 1922), pp. 590-91.

² Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 104.

³ C.f. *ibid.*, p. 105.

distinguish x from y at all as they would be the same. There would be no objects or qualities: 'qualities, taken without relations, have no intelligible meaning.' Hence, when we discriminate we contrast, and when we contrast we divide the world into multiple entities, and then we must relate them one to another. So again, to think anything about the world, to think in terms of objects with qualities, we are thinking about a world where relations between things exist. 'Bradley assumes', writes R.W. Church, 'that a difference is a relation and that a relation is a difference. His main point here is that where there are different qualities, there are qualities related by their differences.'¹ Further, we also relate parts of things to other parts of things (front and back, top and bottom), and we relate things through time – the book before me now is the book I had before me ten minutes ago. These relations give the consciously experienced world its coherence. 'Nothing is wholly or ultimately separate from anything else, and the more you probe into experience the more relations you unearth.'² It is the ever-deepening system of relations that leads both Green and Bradley to a monistic account of experienced reality.³ But, in contrast to Green, Bradley held that these relations are created by us and do not reflect external reality: they are our own mental creations. While Green and Bradley agree that it is the essence of thinking to generate such relations, Bradley argues (like Kant) that relations are simply a function of the mind, whereas Green went on to contend that relations characterise the objective world of nature. It is this latter claim Bradley rejects. To summarise the difference between Green and Bradley:

- *Green thought relations were vital and real, while Bradley thought they were vital but unreal.* Green thought relations were the mark of reality itself: reality is the fixed and unalterable order of relations. By contrast, Bradley judges relations to be incoherent and impossible. Relationality, however pervasive, is an incurable defect and a sign that we are dealing with Appearance not Reality. Ultimate reality is non-relational since it is one not many.
- *While Green believed that relational thought unified and bound together what would otherwise be distinct, Bradley, by contrast, sees relational thought as disruptive and destructive, something that pulls apart what was originally together.*⁴ Relations do two contradictory things: yes, they unite two or more distinct elements; but at the same time they separate those elements. We can't have relations without terms that they relate. So to posit a relation between A and B we must first identify A and B as separate terms and then re-unite them *via* some relation. Relations assert themselves into the world by first dividing it. To quote Mander: 'You can only unify what is already disunited ... and so relations, with their machinery of distinct terms and connecting links, are as much agents of disintegration as combination. They perversely offer to stitch back together what they at the same time pull apart.'⁵

Thus while, in Appearance, both Green and Bradley think that relations unify all things, creating a unity in which everything is related to everything else, Green thinks this interrelatedness is a feature of reality as such, whereas for Bradley Reality is a unity *despite* relations. Reality remains, notwithstanding the disruptive effect of relations, at bottom a non-relational unity – the kind of non-relational unity we glimpse in Immediate Experience. And what proves that relations belong to Appearance and not Reality, is that they are contradictory.

¹ R.W. Church, *Bradley's Dialectic* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1942), p. 28.

² Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 129.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Remember that, for Bradley, an unequivocal definition of Absolute Reality is that it is free of contradictions. The world of relations is shot-through with contradictions, thereby proving that relations are created by us and are products of the mind. Ultimate Reality, writes Mander, is 'to be thought of as the residue remaining once all input or contamination by "us" has been removed.'¹

Bradley's Critique of Relations

Bradley's demonstration that the concept of a relation is contradictory and therefore not real is well known to students today as an example of an infinite regress. His reasoning goes as follows.

There are, says Bradley, two conceivable types of relation: external and internal:

1. External: a relation is some kind of third component placed between the two terms
2. Internal: a property or quality attaching to the terms themselves.

Either conception leads to contradictions.

External Relation as a third component

Let us take the relation: Socrates is taller than Plato. Here we have two terms, Socrates and Plato, linked by a third term: Taller than. This means Socrates stands in the relation 'taller than' to Plato. 'Taller than' connects Socrates to Plato, but what connects Socrates to 'Taller than'? This must be another relation. So we now have not three terms but five: **Socrates is related to Taller Than** which is **related to Plato**. But then, what connects Socrates to the new relation that connects Socrates to 'Taller than'? This process must clearly go on for ever. Expressing this idea more formally: if A stands in relation R to B, what links A to R? We need a further Relation R₁ which links A to R. But then we need a further relation, R₂, to connect A to R₁. And so on – as Diagram Three illustrates. This is an infinite regress, and the result is we can never establish a relation between A and B by this means.²

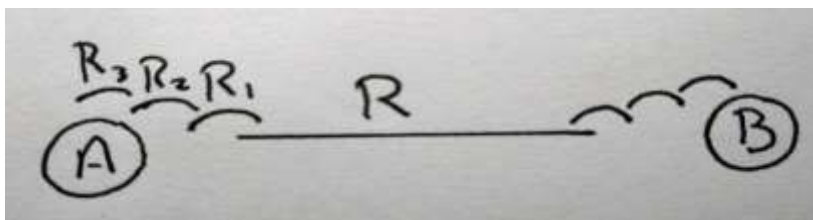


Diagram Three. The Infinite Regress of External Relations

Internal Relation as a Property

The alternative is to say that the Relation is not a separate term between A and B but part of them – an *internal relation*. So now we say that 'Socrates is taller than Plato' is a truth about

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

² P. Basile, *Experience and Relations: An Examination of F.H. Bradley's Conception of Reality* (Verlag Paul Haupt, Bern, 1999, p. 194.

Socrates relative to Plato. But there is more to Socrates and Plato than just their height. This is just one aspect of each of them. The effect of this is to break each into component parts that must be related. Thus, if we say that A stands in relation R to B, then A is made up of two parts: A1 (which is the part related to B, the height of the two men) and A2 which is the part of A which is not related to Plato but is related to A1 – say the length of Socrates’s legs. This means that A1 and A2 must now be related by a new term R1. But not all of A2 is related to A1. There is another part of A2 which is not related to A1 (which is, remember, that aspect of Socrates that relates to him being taller than Plato). Call this A3. So, now we need a relation between A2 and A3. And this then further subdivides A3, since part of A3 is not related to A2 – call this A4, and so on. The attempt to relate Socrates internally to Plato causes a disintegration in what we understand by Socrates.

On the basis of this reasoning, Bradley concluded that the idea of a relation is self-contradictory. A relation is the idea of a link that will bind the many together – but in reality, the links are unable to bind anything. The attempt to unify plural individuals has failed. The effect of exposing the contradictions of relations in this way are profound, since it follows that the entire world of Appearances is contradictory since all thinking about Appearances involves the use of relations. For example:

- Qualities. If we are to distinguish qualities we must make relations – one quality is identified by its contrasting relation to another: taller than, harder than, brighter than, better than, larger than, darker than, faster than etc. Without relations there can be no qualities, just as without qualities there can be no relations – there would be no terms to relate. But since there are no relations there can be no qualities either – one thing cannot be distinguished from another as it cannot be related to it. As we have seen, there is no non-contradictory way to say that Socrates is taller than Plato.
- Time. If time is made up of a series of moments, then these units must be combined together to make a duration. But if there can be no relations between units of time then the whole cannot possess duration as we cannot add together the moments and bind them with relations. Alternatively, if the whole has duration then the units become part of it – they merge into it being the same. Then there is just one: which means there is no time as the one cannot have duration, it just is.
- The Thing. There is no way of talking about things that is not contradictory. We cannot talk of the thing as underlying its Appearances for, if it isn’t in Appearances, how can we say it exists at all? We can say nothing about it. Or maybe an object is a set of qualities in relation? But relations have been shown to be unreal and so there is nothing binding the qualities together.

Thus, every entity or concept that exists within conscious thought about the world is contradictory. This is the world of Appearances, where we grasp only parts and not the whole, a multiplicity and not a unity, the relational and fragmentary, the transitory and not the eternal. Appearance is thus defined in negative terms. It is characterised by relational thinking replete with contradictions and is always short of the truth. It is less than Reality, which is free from contradiction, unified, whole, at rest, all comprehensive, and complete truth.

To summarise. To know the existent – i.e. to know the ‘That’ – is to know the Absolute itself and our finite minds cannot do this. To think is to abstract from the Real by making distinctions and drawing relations, and this means to operate in a dualism between the existent and its qualities. Quite simply, the more the qualities we perceive are the result of idealised abstractions, the further from reality we are. The mind operates in this world of abstractions,

the world of Appearance, as this is the only world in which it can exist in at all. But this means that the mind cannot think its way to the truth. As Bradley remarks:

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. It is a makeshift, a device, a mere practical compromise, most necessary, but in the end most indefensible.¹

Thought's ideality means it is always incommensurable with Reality.² This gap between object and thought means that absolute truth is impossible. In other words:

Finite Felt Experience < Reality

Finite Thought < Finite Felt Experience

All-Inclusive Supra-Relational Experience

The contradictions of relational thought seem to drive us to the conclusion that the world of Appearance is positively misleading as a guide to Reality or the Absolute. Yet we cannot simply discard Appearance as unreal. For Appearance *does* exist. It exists in experience and thus belongs to Reality since, for Bradley, Reality = Experience. Further, Reality needs Appearance if it is to exist. Without Appearance, Reality would be a non-entity in the sense that it could not be part of experience – and only what is part of experience exists.³ So: Reality includes Appearance.

...all appearance must belong to reality. For what appears is, and whatever is cannot fall outside the real ... The character of the real is to possess everything phenomenal in a harmonious form.⁴

The problem, then, is to heal the division between Reality and Appearance. Neither can exist apart. Appearance needs Reality to complete itself, and Reality needs Appearance to give itself content and actuality. The mind is instinctively drawn to bridging this gap and uniting Appearance with Reality. While this gap between Appearance and Reality can never be completely bridged, we can narrow it, and, says Muirhead, 'the *direction*' of travel 'is an open secret, and that, if there are phases of experience which point in that direction, these may be enough to add something to our knowledge.'⁵ The contradictions of relational experience cause the mind, whose nature is to seek the truth, to rectify them and heal itself. To quote Mander:

Specifically it is seen that error arises precisely from the separation of things one from another, from which it follows that the more they are reconnected, the more things are returned in understanding to the context from which they were abstracted, the more

¹ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 33.

² J. H. Muirhead, *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1931), p. 271.

³ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 487.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵ Muirhead, *Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy*, p. 269.

holistic our picture becomes, and the closer we will approximate to truth. By putting the jigsaw back together we replace the pluralist vision with a holistic one.¹

The basic goal here is to merge thought with felt reality – to experience life in such a way that subject and object and will and thought and feeling are one. This, ultimately, cannot be done, since ‘these conditions of [thought’s] perfection are partly alien to itself’ and ‘we cannot say either that, by itself, it can arrive at completion, or that, when perfected, it, as such, any longer exists.’² But a clue as to how this *might* be done is provided by the Immediate Experience with which we began. In Immediate Experience there was unity; there was diversity without discrimination; experience and being were united – if only temporarily and not completely (since Finite Centres, as we have seen, cannot encompass all of Immediate Experience). Immediate Experience, then, suggests to us a whole single reality, and it is this whole single reality that thought tries to recover through relational thought. ‘It endeavours’, writes Bradley, ‘to find an arrangement of ideas, self-consistent and complete; and by this predicate it has to qualify and make good the Reality.’³ This attempt to bind our experiences together through relations is the right instinct, even if it can never succeed. ‘We divide A from B’, remarks Mander, ‘but then add that, of course, A and B must be taken together. Yet they are still separated in thought.’⁴ Thought is instinctively aware of the underlying identity of existence (and the continually recurring of moments of felt Immediate Experience provide a reminder), and the attempt to develop ever-richer relational experience is its means to attain it. To quote Bradley:

Thought desires for its content the character which makes reality. These features, if realized, would destroy mere thought; and hence they are an Other beyond thought. But thought, nevertheless, can desire them, because its content has them already in incomplete form ... The relational form is a compromise on which thought stands, and which it develops. It is an attempt to unite differences which have broken out of the felt totality. Differences forced together by an underlying identity, and a compromise between the plurality and the unity – this is the essence of relation.⁵

Thought’s tragedy is that it can never realise this ideal since it is the nature of thought to differentiate – to separate one object from another, and all objects from the subject that thinks them. Hence, however much thought seeks to integrate elements within experience into a single, harmonious whole, it can never take us to Reality: indeed, if it were to do so, thought would extinguish itself. But it is the drive to achieve it through ever-richer relational thinking that constitutes progress.

The Concept of Degrees of Truth

Absolute truth, then, is impossible. But this does not mean that partial truth is impossible. Quite the opposite: no thought or belief about the world is ever wholly false. Every thought about experience contains some truth about reality, and we can therefore distinguish between degrees of truth, according to how close we come to knowing the Absolute. The Absolute has no degrees: it includes all and is completely harmonious. We can never know the Absolute

¹ Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 115.

² Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 383.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁴ Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 115.

⁵ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 180.

as such. But the Absolute is manifested in Appearances. Thus, while we cannot know the Real, we are surrounded by the Appearances through which the Real manifests itself. They are, if you like, signs or clues as to what Reality is, and according to how far we interpret them aright so we can form propositions of varying degrees of truth. As Bradley remarks:

There is no reality at all anywhere except in appearance, and in our appearance we can discover the main nature of reality.¹

To survey the field of appearances, to measure each by the idea of perfect individuality, and to arrange them in an order and in a system of reality and merit – would be the task of metaphysics.²

‘Seen falsely’, writes Mander, ‘and picked out one by one, aspects of the world present a misleading face and must be called appearance, but seen truly as participants in an integrated whole, they are transformed together to form reality, or the Absolute.’³ Appearance is how the world presents itself to Conscious Experience, and this provides a distorted perspective on reality. When our minds seek to formulate some proposition regarding the nature of reality, what we are really doing is taking something out of context and treating it as though it were fully and independently real. But distortion is a matter of degree, and so there are degrees of reality. How much reality any given experience is accorded depends on the amount of supplementation and transformation that would be required to turn it into Absolute experience. ‘Error is truth when it is supplemented.’⁴ That is to say:

Partial Truth + x = Reality

It is just this transformation, x, that thought is seeking to do when it systematises its experience and establishes relations within it, and in so doing it is coming closer to Reality and to truth. The greater is x, the less true is any given truth. Essentially, a judgement is more true:

- The more coherent it is: the more internal harmonies it contains
- The less abstract and the more individual detail it contains. Truth consists of a union of thought and appearances of fact – mere thought without facts can never be Real or reach the truth. It is ‘the union in all perception of thought with sense, the co-presence everywhere in all appearances of fact with ideality – this is the one foundation of truth.’⁵ ‘The test of truth ... lies in presented fact.’⁶
- The more inclusive of wider contextual detail (extensive) a statement is, i.e., the broader and less finite its application, and therefore the more independent and self-determining is the object to which it refers – and hence the more Real.

The more a statement contains these qualities the more self-subsistent and more independent it will be, and the less it will depend on external relations; the more it will approach what Bradley calls a concrete universal – a concept grounded in actual experience yet set within an inclusive context of self-determining relations. As Bradley writes:

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 550.

² *Ibid.*, p. 489.

³ Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 116.

⁴ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 195.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 379.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

Hence to be more or less true, and to be more or less real, is to be separated by an interval, smaller or greater, from all-inclusiveness or self-consistency. Of two given appearances, the one more wide, or more harmonious, is more real. It approaches nearer to a single, all-containing, individuality.¹

What, exactly, does this mean? We need to be cautious here for several reasons. For one thing, given that we never can know what the Real is, it is hard to know how close or far from it any given partial truth is. We can never know exactly how much further deepening and widening a conception will require before it becomes one with Reality. Second, the sphere of human knowledge which we are accustomed to think of taking us closest to Reality – namely natural science – is one which, for Bradley, takes us *away* from Reality. This is because the basic scientific method is abstraction, and over time science becomes more and more abstract. In doing so, it takes us away from Reality, since Reality is particular. The more general science becomes the less true it is. To think, say, of an object at all is to practice abstraction – to lift an element out of experience and treat it as if it were an independent, self-subsistent, entity, which of course it is not. But science then proceeds to abstract ever more from this abstraction. In place of a particular object it abstracts objects in general; and then from objects it abstracts some aspect of their existence, say their mass or their motion, and formulates general laws regarding these aspects. In this way science is peopled by exactly the bloodless ghost-like ideas that Bradley said could never correspond with the tactile, sensual, nature of what he, at least, believed was reality. Thus science, remarks Mander, ‘is an irredeemably falsifying abstraction from the immediate whole that is reality.’² The very facts of science itself are a product of this process.

The merely given facts are the imaginary creatures of false theory. They are manufactured by a mind which abstracts one aspect of the concrete known whole, and sets this abstracted aspect out by itself as a real thing.³

This doesn’t mean that science has no uses. Abstraction is an indispensable tool of analysis. But it cannot yield up Reality.

So how can we approach Reality through thought? The method is to attempt to reduce the generality of any thought by incorporating into the thought itself the wider context from which its object is taken, thus simultaneously increasing both its detail and the range of its application – beginning, thereby, to reunite the ‘what’ and the ‘that’. In this way we make the object more determinate and less dependent upon conditions lying beyond it. As an example, Bradley cites the idea of a dollar. The idea of a dollar alone is vague and lacking in content and meaning. But an actual dollar situated in time and space exists within a rich set of relations – with banks and shops and wage payments and a savings box and symbols and printing presses and so on. As we incorporate this context into our understanding of the dollar, the idea of a dollar becomes more complete and more real.⁴ But it can never be wholly real since whenever we posit an object in thought we always engage in some degree of abstraction and hence there will always be conditions and determinants lying beyond this abstracted object – many of which will be unknown to us. We can never be certain we know the truth of any object of experience for there will be determining relations besides those which we know and comprehend to be relevant and these may, indeed, be the most important. Certain truth

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

² Mander, *British Idealism*, p. 117.

³ F.H. Bradley, ‘On Truth and Copying’, in *Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 108.

⁴ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, pp. 380-81.

applies only to the Absolute, for then there are no determining relations: the Absolute is whole and self-sufficient in itself and depends on nothing beyond it.¹ Put simply, finite truths depend upon other truths, which are themselves dependent and not fully known; Absolute truth does not depend on other truths. Finite truths are always to some degree false, and the degree to which this is true is indicated by the degree to which we can conceive the opposite to be true.

A thing is more real as its opposite is more inconceivable ... The stronger, the more systematic and more fully organised, a body of knowledge becomes, so much the more impossible becomes that which in any point conflicts with it.²

To illustrate more fully how the mind might arrive at higher degrees of truth or Reality, let us take an early essay by Michael Oakeshott on the nature of the state.³ In his 1929 essay 'The Authority of the State', Oakeshott, himself a philosopher in the Idealist tradition, considers a series of commonly encountered definitions of the state, and rejects each in turn for being abstractions from reality, and thus unable to provide a clear and complete account of what the state actually is. Thus, it might be said that the state is an area of territory. But this cannot satisfy, since a unit of territory by itself doesn't make a state: its territorial 'footprint' is just one aspect of the state – it does not define what the state is. The state could be designated as a collection of persons. But this again is an abstraction: it doesn't specify the concrete relationship between them. Grouping peoples in charts and labelling them doesn't make an actual state. Thirdly, a state might be said to be an organisation of persons for secular purposes. Yet this also, says Oakeshott, is an abstraction that 'leads not to a fact but to a fiction'.⁴ This is because there are no purely secular persons pursuing purely secular purposes. Religion and God have played some (and often a very important) role in all known states, so the definition of the state as a secular organisation is not real: 'society as it organizes itself apart from God is an abstraction, and a conception which ends in an abstraction requires no further evidence of its imperfection.'⁵ Alternatively, it is often said that the state is the 'political machinery of government in a community'. Does this, asks Oakeshott, give us 'fact or abstraction'?

Men as governed are abstractions, for no man is merely what the government as such thinks he is; and consequently the political whole which such 'persons' constitute is an abstraction also An aspect of almost all social relations is expressed by means of government, but no single, concrete social relationship can ever be expressed in this manner ... If the state be no more than the government or the community as organized for merely political purposes, then it is a bare abstraction, a fiction not a fact.⁶

As is apparent, any attempt to extract one aspect of experience and constitute it as the whole – whether territory, persons, or governing mechanisms – yields concepts which have no place in concrete reality. They are fictions. These fictions may be useful – it may be useful to think about the state as an administrative system or a legal entity, but still they remain fictions. They take us away from existent reality not towards it. And this is shown by fact that none of these definitions are independent wholes; they are each dependent upon something else. For

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

² *Ibid.*, p. 543.

³ M. Oakeshott, 'The Authority of the State' (1929), in M. Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* (ed. T. Fuller, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1993).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

example, a governing mechanism is not independent and self-sufficient: it requires a community of persons to act upon and exist within. By itself it could not exist. Oakeshott therefore concludes as follows:

Where, then, shall we turn for a fuller conception of the state? If it is to be a concrete fact, the state must be self-subsistent, something which carries with it the explanation of itself and requires to be linked on to no more comprehensive whole in order to be understood. And it appears to me that nothing fulfils these conditions save the social whole which is correlative to individuals who are complete and living persons; or, in other words, the totality in an actual community which satisfies the whole mind of the individuals who comprise it. All that falls short of this is an abstraction which requires this to explain it. Government and law, economic, religious, intellectual and every other activity and aspect of social life find the explanation in this totality; it is to perfect this, and not merely themselves, that they exist.¹

Oakeshott's mode of proceeding here is very much one Bradley would have endorsed. For Bradley, the criterion of Reality is individuality and the more any form of existence realises this idea of individuality the more real it is. 'And in this scale ... the lower, as its defects are made good, passes beyond itself into the higher.'² And this is the method deployed by Oakeshott until he arrives at a conception of the state which is more concrete and more self-sufficient than any of the others that he considers, and requires the least degree of abstraction. As such it has a higher degree of truth and reality than the previous definitions. It is not the absolute truth and it does involve, still, abstraction. For example, it talks of the minds of the individuals who compose the state, and the mind is just one aspect of experience not the whole; and it talks of a social whole rather than the undifferentiated whole of Reality and so on. To talk of the state at all is to abstract an aspect of Reality. But even so, given these limitations, Oakeshott's conception of the state is closer to Reality than the other definitions and would require less re-arrangement and transformation to be truly Real than those others. And, thus, it provides a model of how the conscious mind might go about bringing relational experience into closer conformity to Reality – always subject to the proviso that it can never truly do so. Metz sums up the matter as follows:

Even within the gloomy and imperfect world of appearance there is a distinction of degrees or levels defined by nearness to or remoteness from the ideal set by the Absolute, the distance of any appearance from the ideal – that is, its degree of reality – being measured by the amount of transformation required to bring it within the system of the real. With reference to the Absolute all things are relative, but there are degrees of relativity, and therefore in a sense degrees of absoluteness or reality, and this makes possible the ranking of things. ... Similarly with truth: viewed from the higher levels of knowledge the lower ones appear as incoherent, contradictory; but when they are taken by themselves and measured by their own order of evidence they are consistent and true.³

¹ *Ibid.*

² Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 497.

³ Metz, *Hundred Years of British Philosophy*, p. 344.

Conclusion

What is Bradley certain about?

1. That Reality exists. This is certain because Experience exists.
2. Experience is Reality. To exist is to be experienced and thus to appear. 'There is but one Reality, and its being consists in experience.'¹ If something cannot be an object of experience then it is meaningless to say it exists. Experience does exist, and so, therefore, does Reality. Indeed, Reality is the whole of Experience.²
3. Reality must be non-contradictory: it cannot contradict itself. If it did, it would not cohere, and would not provide a fixed standard of truth, and rational knowledge of Reality would be impossible.
4. Reality, being coherent and non-contradictory, must be One. If it were many and not One then it would be contradictory, because the idea of relations between multiple entities is contradictory and is a vain attempt to transcend plurality to restore unity. Reality must be an individual.³
5. If Reality is One, and Reality is Experience, then Reality must be the integrated totality of all Experience. All the experience of the universe, generated through what Bradley called Finite Centres, must integrate simultaneously within the Real or Absolute into One experience. Reality is all the experience of all sentient beings at once.⁴ 'That Reality is one system which contains in itself all experience, and, again, that this system itself is experience – so far we may be said to know absolutely and unconditionally'.⁵
6. There are no contradictions in the single Oneness of Reality. Anything less than Absolute Reality will contain discrepancies and contradictions and this shows it belongs to Appearance and not Reality. Thought, which separates 'that' from 'what', relations between objects, objects themselves, time, and space, are all contradictory concepts and apply, therefore, to Appearances and not Reality.
7. Reality is timeless. It exists outside of time and has no history. While Finite Centres experience duration, the Real does not. It just is.
8. Experience includes ideas but it is not confined to ideas. It includes sensations, desires, pains, and pleasures. All these are forms of Experience and all are part of the Real. The Real or Absolute is everything – all thought, all sensation, all pleasure, all pain. Bradley is not an Idealist in the manner of Green; conscious mind, whether individual or cosmic, can never be all Reality to Bradley. 'Whether', he writes, my metaphysics 'be called Realism or Idealism I do not know ... It neither puts ideas and thought first, nor again does it permit us to assert that anything else by itself is more real'.⁶ Bradley, perhaps, is best described as an Experiencist.
9. Finite minds can never directly or truly know Reality. This is impossible for conscious selves as every attempt to think *about* Reality separates us *from* Reality. Reality is One, but thought is inherently dualistic: we think about something, separating subject and object. To be conscious at all is to be separate and distinct from Reality. Hence we can never know Absolute truth.

¹ Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 456.

² *Ibid.*, p. 457.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 519-20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 547.

10. Bradley believes (though he is not certain) that the best insight we have into the nature of Reality is pre-reflective Immediate Experience – those fleeting moments when we are aware of existing in the world but have made no attempt to process this experience. In such moments the world is One – there are no objects, no relations, no time, no me. There is just being in the world, and this sense of a variegated but unified One is something like Reality must be. ‘The idea is imperfect, but is sufficient to serve as a positive basis.’¹
11. All attempts to understand Reality by abstracting aspects of it and treating them independently of the whole carry us *away from* Reality. Whether the abstraction is an object, or a quality, or a self, or a scientific law – in each case we are extracting out from experience one aspect, and as such abstraction, as a mode of thinking, takes us away from the Truth which is One and Whole.

These are some of the things that Bradley holds to be certain. No doubt there are many others in his book, but these would seem to be specially significant. So where, then, does it leave us – we finite consciousnesses formed out of Feeling Centres? How do we stand in relation to Reality? We need to understand that we exist within a world of Appearance and can only so exist. Our cognitive apparatus means we can never know Reality, only the Appearance of Reality. In one sense, the results of this are purely negative. Part of a world of Appearances, all our attempts to rationalise about experience and structure it in terms of objects and relations and laws only take us further from Reality, for to think and theorise about experience we must distort it, separating ourselves and our thoughts from experience, and then, by peopling our experience by objects and relations, we introduce yet more unreality into our world – for there are no objects or relations *in* Reality. Paradoxically, we are never closer to the Real than we are when we first open our eyes and feel we are in the world. As soon as we take cognisance of this fact we break the spell of this glimpse into Reality: in Blake’s phrase, ‘We murder to dissect.’ In this sense Bradley’s conclusions seem to point us either towards nihilism or the practice of meditation whereby we seek a mystical reunion of consciousness and experience. And really the kind of Yogic meditation enjoined by eastern religions would seem to provide a way to glimpse reality.² Bradley’s work suggests there is, indeed, wisdom in the Upanishadic tradition.

Yet this was not the trajectory Bradley plotted in *Appearance and Reality*. Instead, he recognised that it was the inherent tendency of the conscious mind to break apart the original unity of Reality. This is inevitable: mind, for some reason, is programmed only to do this. But, while this unavoidably carries us away from Reality, it does not sever completely our relationship to Reality. We remain always within Experience, which is, of course, the realm of Reality. Equally inevitably, we immediately set to work to put back together the pieces of experience broken apart by us by using our abstract rational minds: we seek to relate the objects of our fractured world, finding ever-richer ways to understand reality, integrating and systematising our thought. Lofthouse summarises Bradley’s philosophy as follows:

It was [Bradley’s] conviction that everything must be understood by reference to everything else, that the parts are unintelligible without the whole, that the whole, as not merely the sum of the parts but the integration of its parts, can never be completely grasped by us, and yet that only as we approach it can we approach either truth or

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 530.

² Mander notes the ‘anti-intellectualist, even a somewhat mystical’ tendency in Bradley’s thought (*British Idealism*, p. 132).

reality ... the whole cannot be understood without the parts or the parts without the whole ...¹

When we seek to integrate our experience in an abstract way (as in many of the sciences) we move away from Reality, but when we endeavour to make our ideas more concrete and less abstract we can arrive at greater degrees of truth. Our rational understanding of Reality can become closer to Reality – even if it can never *be* Reality because our minds cannot properly bind experience back together since we cannot escape the flawed thinking of relations and our thoughts can only encompass one dimension of Reality (thought), where Reality is more than thought, involving feelings and emotions too. It is as if we took up a vase, precious and flawless, and dashed it into pieces upon the floor, and then proceeded to gather together all the pieces and painstakingly glue them back together again. However much the repaired vase resembles the original, the fact remains that it will be different: where once there was a smooth continuous surface there will now be a myriad of separate pieces, each bound together by the alien presence of glue. And, no matter how carefully we assemble the pieces, we will always find some are left-over when we finish. This captures the human quest to know Reality. The world we construct, however impressive it looks, will always be bound to together by unreal relations, and however far we proceed, there will always be vast tracts of Reality that our finite minds can never integrate at all.

¹ Lofthouse, *F.H. Bradley*, p. 35.