REGRESS, UNITY, FACTS, AND PROPOSITIONS

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§1. Introduction

The problem, or cluster of problems, of the unity of the proposition, and the cluster of problems that tend to go under the name of Bradley's regress, have recently again become a going concern for philosophers, after having for some time apparently been regarded as primarily of historical interest.[1] However, while I find the problems of sufficient interest that this tendency is in some ways laudable, my view, roughly put, is that when confusions and conflations are set aside, relatively easy solutions – perhaps one might say *dissolutions* – can be given of these problems.

In what follows I aim to make good on this claim. I will first (sections two and three) describe the unity of the proposition, together with some historical and contemporary purported solutions. In sections four and five I turn to the different regress problems, and lay out my preferred (dis)solution of the regress problem that seems most worthy of being taken seriously. Sections six and seven apply the lessons of this discussion to the unity problems and compare other views on the regress problems.

§2. The unity of the proposition

Let us start by considering the problem of the unity of the proposition, and its close relative, the problem of the unity of the fact. In fact, there are several different problems here, and they deserve distinguishing between. The problems most naturally come up against a background of Russell's (1903/96) view on propositions as structured entities built up out of particulars, properties and relations; and I will present them against the background of that view. They can also arise for other views on propositions, but the extent to which it is so is another matter.

First, we have

DIFFERENCE: Why isn't the proposition that p identical to the fact that p?[2]

The proposition that John loves Mary contains John, loves, and Mary as constituents, in that order. So does the fact that John loves Mary. Mustn't it then be the case that the proposition and

[1] See e.g. King (2007), Candlish (2007), Gaskin (2008) and Burge (2007).
[2] See e.g. Candlish (1996), p. 105f, for a discussion of this in the context of discussing the unity of the proposition.

the fact are identical? But that would be an embarrassment. For if so, then it is impossible to judge a false proposition to be true. For a thinker to be able to judge a proposition, true or false, to be true, the proposition must exist. But then the corresponding fact must exist. And it is sufficient for a proposition to be true that the corresponding fact exists. This was a famous problem with Russell's (1903/96) view. It is obviously avoided by any view on which the constituents of the proposition that p are different from the constituents of the fact that p, for example a view on which propositions consist of senses or of linguistic entities. However, even for a such a view a problem of *Generalized Difference* arises: how is a given proposition p different from other complex entities with the same constituents as p? Second, there is

> ORDER: What accounts for the difference between the proposition *that John loves Mary* and the proposition *that Mary loves John*?[3]

The propositions contain the same constituents. How can they still be different? Third, we have

> COMBINABILITY: Take the constituents of propositions: e.g. *John*, *loves*, *Mary*, etc. Some of them can be conjoined so as to form propositions (e.g., *John*, *loves*, and *Mary*); some others cannot (e.g., *John* and *Mary*). Why?

None of these first three problems is naturally called the problem of the *unity* of the proposition. The problem of unity, properly so called, rather seems to be a fourth distinct problem:

> UNITY: How can there be this complex, the proposition, made up of its constituents, as opposed to merely (the collection of) the constituents themselves?

Even given a satisfactory answer to Unity, the question can remain of why some collections of entities but not others can form propositions. Even given a satisfactory answer to Combinability one can still be baffled by how there can be such complex entities as propositions in the first place. But of course one may speculate, and reasonably, that a satisfactory answer to one question will suggest also a satisfactory answer to the others.

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[3] Using the label 'Order' suggests that the difference between the propositions is that the constituents are ordered differently. This can be seen as tendentious. See e.g. Fine (2000) and Williamson (1985), who focus on the problem for this assumption that arises if the fact that John loves Mary and the fact that Mary is loved by John are one and the same fact. Since the details are orthogonal to my main topic here, I will slide over them.

The problems of Order, Combinability and Unity, although raised as problems regarding *propositions*, have counterparts in the case of *facts*. What is the difference between the fact that John loves Mary and the fact that Mary loves John? Why can some collections of entities but not others combine so as to form a fact? How can there be a complex entity, the fact, as opposed to merely the collection of the constituents of this entity?

Problems similar to that of Unity arguably arise with respect to all complex entities; or, if one thinks 'mere' aggregates or collections are unproblematic, all complex entities which are not mere aggregates or collections. In each case one may ask: how can there be a complex entity here, as opposed to merely the constituents themselves? Once we see how general the problem is, we may want to dismiss it: what sorts of answers can be given to questions at this level of extreme generality? If anything should make us skeptical of the existence of propositions, it is not the question of unity. The same goes for facts, and the question of the unity of a fact.[4]

Mark Sainsbury (1996) prominently brings up another problem in connection with that of the unity of the proposition:

> REPRESENTATION: How can there be such things as propositions, which have representational properties but are not themselves linguistic or mental or dependent on anything linguistic or mental (but are expressed by linguistic or mental things)?

This is an interesting and potentially deep problem. There is however reason for doubt concerning to what extent it is connected with the other unity problems, and how reasonable it is to take this problem to be what was discussed in early analytic philosophy. It seems quite different in kind from the other problems brought up in connection with the unity of the proposition. For example, the problem of Representation is not essentially bound up with the idea of propositions being structured entities built up from simpler parts.[5] (There can of course be theoretical assumptions under which Representation is intimately connected with the other problems. For example,

[4] Dodd (1999) argues, in the course of an extended argument against states of affairs, that the unity of a state of affairs is something that must be explained. He does not raise the question of whether the supposed problem generalizes to other complex entities.

[5] Sainsbury (1996) prominently brings up the claim that propositions are sets of possible worlds for critical discussion.

I should also mention that Sainsbury distinguishes between problems related to that of the unity of the proposition in a way that parallels the distinctions I have drawn. He distinguishes four problems: what I have called Order, what I have called Combinability, a problem which as stated is ambiguous between Unity and Representation, and a problem not here listed as a separate item: "given a collection of meanings (e.g. Desdemona, love and Cassio), how does one distinguish between those arrangements of that collection which do say something (e.g. that Desdemona loves Cassio) and those that do not (e.g. love Desdemona Cassio)".

Candlish and Damnjanovic (forthcoming) argue that for Wittgenstein, a proposition's capacity to represent is tied to its being a unity.)

§3. Some purported solutions to the problem of unity

To get more of a grip on these problems and their relations, let us consider, and briefly evaluate, some different theories which have been to some extent motivated by them. I will keep making the point that the theories deal only with proper subsets of the problems. This is not generally a serious criticism in light of the differences between the problems. It is reasonable to think that different problems require different kinds of solutions.

Consider first Russell's (e.g. (1910) and (1912)) *multiple relation theory of judgment* (MRTJ), which eschews propositions.[6] On MRTJ, when a thinker judges that A loves B, this is not a matter of a binary relation between this thinker and a proposition but it is a relation between the thinker and A, loves, and B. The judgment is true when there is a corresponding object, A's loving B, but false otherwise. This theory is often seen as motivated by concerns with unity of the proposition problems.

MRTJ obviously avoids Difference. Similarly, it avoids Representation. As for Order, in a sense MRTJ avoids this problem since it does away with propositions. But a related problem remains: what is the difference between judging that John loves Mary and judging that Mary loves John? Or, for that matter, between entertaining the proposition that John loves Mary and merely thinking John, loves, Mary, in that order? Similarly, since it does away with propositions, it avoids Combinability as it stands, but it does not help with the question why we can judge that John loves Mary but not that John Mary. MRTJ appears to avoid Unity, as it doesn't postulate a unified entity, the proposition. However, it can be urged that it still faces the analogous problem of what unifies the *act of judgment*. And as for all these three latter problems, note that it doesn't help at all with their analogues in the case of facts.

There is a general lesson: many of the so-called unity of the proposition problems do not essentially have to do with *propositions as entities*. Doing away with the entities does not do away with the underlying problem. Of course, it could be, for all I have said, that MRTJ can form part of a satisfactory resolution of the problems. By itself, it does not accomplish much. Needless to say, MRTJ does not help with any of the problems primarily concerning *facts*.

Turn next to Frege. There are different Fregean claims which need to be distinguished; it will be useful to consider them separately. Take first Frege's claim that there is a fundamental

[6] Candlish (2007; see too his earlier article, 1996) provides a helpful overview of Russell's different attempts to deal with the issue of the unity of the proposition.

distinction between *objects*, which are what can serve as referents of singular terms, and *concepts*, which are what can serve as referents of (first- and higher-level) predicates. Objects are 'saturated' and concepts 'unsaturated'. This is often discussed as a purported solution to the problem of the unity of the proposition. The criticisms of this idea of Frege's that can typically be found in the literature typically focus on either the concept horse problem, which is held to show the idea to be untenable, or on how unsatisfactory Frege's – metaphorical – explanation of the difference between concepts and objects is.

But regardless of how unsatisfactory Frege's explanation of the difference is, one can still evaluate the suggestion that there is some fundamental distinction between the referents of singular terms and the referents of predicates. In particular, one can still find oneself led to the conclusion that there undeniably must be *some* such distinction. And serious though the concept horse problem is, it may be instructive to set it aside and see what Frege's account *promises* to give us. For the discussions in the literature, although critical, tend to suggest that were Frege's concept/object distinction tenable then it would solve the problems relating to the unity of the proposition.[7]

Frege not only proposed a concept/object distinction but also repudiated facts and Russellian propositions, having entities at the level of reference as constituents. In order clearly to separate appeal to Frege's concept/object distinction from other Fregean theses, I will first consider the *hybrid view* – certainly not held by Frege – that propositions are Russellian in the sense just characterized but consist of Fregean concepts and objects. (One might, of course, reasonably hold that Frege's specific view on concepts as functions rules out that there should be complexes built up from concepts and objects. But the general claims, that there is a certain type of entity such that entities of this type can only be the referents of predicates and that predicates can only have referents of this type, do not rule out the existence of such complexes.)

[7] Gaskin (1995), p. 162f, appears to think that Frege's doctrine, involving the idea that concepts and objects are, as Frege himself puts it, made for each other, would solve the problem if acceptable. But he thinks the concept horse problem refutes the doctrine. Linsky (1992), p. 247f, also gives voice to this view. Sainsbury (1996), p. 145f, dismisses the idea that Frege's concept/object distinction, even if sustainable, solves the problems raised. But Sainsbury's reasons are different from those given here. King (2007), p. 18f, criticizes Frege's saturatedness/unsaturatedness distinction as being unsatisfactorily explained, and moreover thinks arguments to the effect that names do not have senses poses a problem for the Fregean line. But even if Frege's distinction is not satisfactorily explained, it could be reasonable to hold that *there must be some such distinction*. And arguments to the effect that names don't have senses, while obviously in tension with parts of Frege's view, seem orthogonal to the claim that a Fregean concept/object distinction must be drawn. Vallicella (2000), p. 242f, makes the point I am concerned to make: other concerns aside, Frege's account still fails to solve many problems raised.

Frege's concept/object distinction can seem tailor-made to deal with Combinability. Moreover, it may be argued to help with Unity: propositions can exist because the constituents, the unsaturated concepts and the saturated objects, fit each other. However, the distinction between the question of the unity of the proposition and the unity of the fact is relevant here. Some who take the unity of the fact to be a serious problem do so because the existence of the entities that are the purported constituents of the fact is not sufficient for the fact to obtain.[8] The concept/object distinction does not help with this problem.[9] In general, the distinction does not help with any of the problems specifically pertaining to facts.

Frege's concept/object distinction does not help with Difference: if there is both a proposition and a fact made up of the objects John and Mary and the concept loving, merely saying that there is a concept/object distinction does not help distinguish between them. And clearly it does not help with Representation. (Again to stress: of course, Frege *himself* did *not* have in his ontology entities like facts, or other entities built up from concepts and objects 'at the level of reference'. The point about the unhelpfulness of the concept/object distinction is still important.)

What about Order? Frege's concept/object distinction can seem to deal with that. If asked what is the difference between the proposition that John loves Mary and the proposition that Mary loves John, someone armed with the distinction can say: *John* and *Mary* are plugged into different gaps in the concept in the two proposition. But there is still a remaining puzzle concerning Order. If a proposition's nature is exhausted by what its constituents are, then we still have not distinguished the two propositions. All we have in both cases are *John*, *Mary*, and *loving*, with its two gaps.

So far the only distinctly Fregean view I have taken into account is that there is a concept/object distinction. Frege of course held other specific views and it might be held that it is these that help Frege deal with the unity of the proposition. Let me first discuss in turn appeal to senses; then I will turn to the context principle and the idea that concepts do not enjoy independent existence.

First, senses. Frege of course believed in *senses*, and took propositions (or 'Thoughts') to be built up out of senses. And just as he believed in a fundamental cleavage between concepts and objects at the level of reference, he believed in a fundamental cleavage between saturated and unsaturated senses.[10] Let us now consider this view on propositions.

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[8] See e.g. Orilia (2007).

[9] MacBride (2005), p. 605, stresses this same point.

[10] Frege argues for both doctrines in tandem. It is worth noting that in principle the case for one doctrine could be good without the other one being so. For example: Frege himself carefully

Of course if propositions consist of senses, there is a difference between propositions and facts, so Difference is taken care of, but Generalized Difference remains. But the problem of Order is obviously still not dealt with. One might be inclined to say that Frege's appeal to senses helps also with Representation. The supposed reason would be that senses are in and of themselves representational entities. But all we are doing when appealing to senses to explain how propositions are representational is to insist that they are built up from entities which are themselves representational. We do not explain how there can be these representational entities in the first place.[11] Lastly, note that appeal to senses only promises to help with problems specifically about propositions; problems specifically relating to facts simply are not dealt with.

Sometimes it is said that through his adherence to the context principle, Frege avoids the unity problems.[12] The idea is that given the context principle, the proposition is prior to its parts and so questions about how the proposition is built up from its parts are avoided. Connected to this is the idea that concepts do not enjoy independent existence.[13]

Full discussion of this would take us too far afield. But distinguishing between the different unity problems is helpful here too. The proposed account clearly does not help with Difference and Representation. Unity is the problem most clearly dealt with. If a proposition isn't dependent on its constituents but rather it's the other way around then questions of how the constituents can combine to constitute the proposition can be thought to drop out. But Order

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distinguishes senses from any sort of mental entities. But suppose we did take senses to be something like what Frege calls 'ideas'. Ideas would seem to be, in Frege's terminology, objects, and even if properties and relations – Fregean concepts – are unsaturated, the *idea* of a property or relation might still fail to be.

It is sometimes suggested that Frege didn't take any senses to be unsaturated but only took entities at the level of reference to be unsaturated, or, perhaps better, that senses can be described as unsaturated only indirectly, where a sense can be described as unsaturated iff the reference it stands for is unsaturated. Let me not get into potentially contentious matters of Frege interpretation. (But Frege says (1892), "not all parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be 'unsaturated', or predicative; otherwise they would not hold together" (p. 193).) There is still a reason to focus on the possibility of unsaturated senses in the main text. If Frege didn't believe in unsaturated senses, no complex entities he believed in are composed of saturated and unsaturated constituents.

[11] Burge (2007), in a critical notice of Davidson (2005), argues that for a Fregean solution to a linguistic problem – predication – parallel to the metaphysical problems concerning the nature of propositions and facts with which I have been concerned here. But Burge's "Fregean" solution crucially involves saying that the relation predicates stand in to what they denote is different from the relation names stand in to what they denote and he distances himself from Frege's claim that no name can denote what a predicate denotes. It is thus different from the orthodox Fregean view I discuss in the text.

[12] See e.g. Linsky (1992), p. 266f and Textor (2009), p. 63fn6.

[13] Consider e.g. Frege's 1882 letter to Anton Marty, where he says, "I think of a concept as having arisen by decomposition from a judgeable content", quoted in Currie (1984), p. 333.

remains: even given the view under consideration, one can ask what differentiates propositions with the same constituents. It is harder to assess what happens with Combinability. However, it may be thought that Combinability is an issue only if the constituents have an in some sense independent nature which explains how it can combine with other entities to form propositions. If this is right, then the problem of Combinability does not arise given the view we are now considering.

A distinct concern is that while saying that subpropositional constituents metaphysically depend on propositions rather than vice versa might be of help with the unity of atomic propositions, there is a unity problem also for complex propositions: we can for example ask about the relation between the proposition that if p then q and the proposition that if q then p.

The Frege-inspired view just considered deals only with propositions, and not with facts. Colin Johnston (2007) deals with the question of what view on the unity of the fact was defended in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The view he ascribes to Wittgenstein is similar in spirit to the view just considered. He says that for Wittgenstein, "[t]he possibilities of an object to occur in facts are constitutive of, rather than resultant from, its essential nature….Objects do not….stand alone… with natures which (happen to!) fit them to combine together; rather what an object is in essence is a possible part of facts. There is no actuality in which an object's possibilities for combination are grounded; an object is, essentially, incomplete".[14] Summarizing his discussion, he says, "… whilst the [1918] Russell uses the incompleteness of his universals to account for the unity of facts, for Wittgenstein that unity is a product together of the incompletenesss of all the fact-constituents – the objects all hang in one another".[15]

The account, as stated, concerns facts rather than propositions, so let me start by considering its successfulness there. The account is tailored to deal with Combinability. And while one might have wanted some more informative answer to the question raised by Combinability – just what is it about these and these entities which make them capable of combining into facts – the account may be successful as far as it goes with that problem. But it does not help at all with Order. It helps with Unity as actually stated, as a question concerning *how there can be* complex entities of such a kind. But there is a Unity problem nearby, with which it doesn't help. Even if entities a, R and b carry within them the possibility of combining into the fact that a Rs b, it still remains that the entities a, R, and b could exist without this fact obtaining, and if one wants to ask what must be the case for this to obtain, talking about what possibilities are inherent in a, R and b will not help. Concerns like these will be prominent when

[14] Johnston (2007), p. 242.
[15] Johnston (2007), p. 243.

we turn to regress problems. In some ways the account is more helpful when it comes to propositions. It does not help with Order in that case either. But the solution to Combinability carries over. And the concern about the unity of facts that I raised has no direct analogue in the case of propositions: necessarily, if the constituents of a proposition exist, so does the proposition. The account does not, however, touch on Representation. And it does not seem to help with Difference. The possibility of there being such a proposition as the proposition that a Rs b, and the possibility of there being such a fact as the fact that a Rs b, are both explained by what's inherent in a, R and b, but this doesn't help explain the difference between the proposition and the fact.

In his recent (2007), Jeffrey King presents an original response to the problem of the unity of the proposition (albeit one he says is inspired by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*[16]): Propositions are facts. But the proposition that John loves Mary isn't, absurdly, identified with the fact that John loves Mary: instead, it is identified with the fact that representations of John, loving, and Mary are suitably related. King ably defends his identification of propositions with these facts against objections. But seen in the bigger context of the cluster of problems related to that of the unity of the proposition, his account can still seem strange: for the same problems that arise with respect to propositions arise with respect to facts, and then reducing propositions to facts does not amount to much of an advance. The problem of Difference, of how the proposition that P is distinct from the fact that P, is of course neatly dealt with by King's account: King allows that propositions are facts but identifies them with other facts. But a variant of Order remains: how, in general, is the *fact* that a Rs b distinct from the fact that b Rs a? When it comes to Combinability, King does not even attempt to deal with the issue of why some entities but not others can be combined so as to form facts (although his account may be helpful when it comes to the issue of which entities can combine into *facts which are propositions*). As for Unity, King reduces the problem of how there can be such complexes as propositions to the problem of how there can be such complexes as facts. Does that really amount to progress?

When it comes to Representation, King has a rather special view, as emphasized more in his (2009) than in his (2007). He rejects the view that propositions "by their very natures and independently of all minds and languages" represent the world.[17] Instead he proposes a view on which "it is something we speakers of languages do that results in propositions representing

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[16] King refers to *Tractatus* 3.1432:

> We must not say, "The complex sign '*aRb*' says '*a* stands in relation *R* to *b*'"; but we must say, "*That* '*a*' stands in a certain relation to '*b*' says *that aRb*".

[17] King (2009), p. 259. The formulation then keeps recurring, always emphasized.

things as being a certain way and so having truth conditions".[18] This means that King in effect rejects a presupposition of the problem of Representation.[19]

§4. Regress problems

The problem of the unity of the proposition is often brought up in conjunction with Bradley's regress, and the two problems are regarded as tightly historically connected. For example, Leonard Linsky begins his influential discussion of the problem of the unity of the proposition by stating Bradley's regress and saying, "Russell's concern with the problem of unity is a response to Bradley".[20] I will now turn to Bradley's regress, or rather to the family of problems associated with that label; as we shall see, there are crucial distinctions to be drawn. As many other writers do, I will set aside the historical question of which of these problems Bradley is best seen as stressing.

Consider first the following regress: (1) Assume that R holds between A and P. (2) If A is related to something by R then A is related to R. (3) If any two entities, E1 and E2, are related to each other, then there exists a third entity, a relation which relates them. (4) Now, it follows from (1) and (2) that A is related to R. (5) But from (3) it follows then that there exists a relation, R', which relates A to R. (6) Applying (2) again, it follows that A is related to R'. (7) It therefore follows by (3) that there is a relation R'' which relates A and R'. Etc.[21]

The main thing to note about this regress – for future reference, call it the *infinity regress* – is that it is by no means obvious why it should be regarded as vicious. The argument can be regarded as establishing that there are infinitely many different relations. There are, to be sure, parsimony considerations which would lead some to be loath to accept such a conclusion. But it is natural to think that any such philosopher should want to find fault with premise (3) anyway.

As stated, the infinity regress argument establishes only the existence of infinitely many relations. But it would be easy to tweak it so that it establishes the existence of infinitely many distinct facts. The same remarks apply to the argument thus tweaked.

One way to turn the infinity regress into a regress argument that is genuinely vicious would involve making assumptions to the effect that for each element in the endless series of relations or acts, it is explained by, or metaphysically dependent on, a later element. E.g., that R(a,b) would be dependent on the fact that R'(R,a,b), which in turn would be dependent on the

[18] King (2009), p. 261.
[19] In this he is not alone. See here also Candlish and Damnjanovic (forthcoming) on Wittgenstein's view.
[20] Linsky (1992), p. 247. Compare Gaskin (1995), p. 162, who says that the problem of the unity of the proposition is what underlies Bradley's regress.
[21] Adapted from Grossmann (1982), p. 135.

fact that R''(R',R,a,b), etc. This regress – call it the *dependence regress* – is vicious if we assume, as is natural although perhaps not beyond doubt, that a chain of dependence must somewhere reach ground.[22] Even given such an assumption, however, it is unclear why the dependence regress should be troubling. Why, given that there are two facts like R(a,b) and R'(R,a,b), should it be said that the former depends on the latter? There are two reasons for doubt. First, given that these facts necessarily co-obtain one may reasonably be skeptical of any claim to the effect that a significant dependence relation obtains between them; whatever one depends on, the other depends on. Second, even supposing that one can asymmetrically depend on the other, what could possibly underlie a claim to the effect that the less complex fact must depend on the more complex one, especially since such a claim leads to regress?[23]

If there is any regress argument in the vicinity worth worrying about, it is rather a different kind of regress argument, to which I now turn. Take a fact: that a is F. What is the nature of this fact? If we take the predicate to stand for a property, the property F, then, arguably, a and this property are constituents of the fact. But, the regress argument goes, the fact cannot simply consist of a and F. For a can exist and F can exist even if a isn't F. For it to be a fact that a is F, a must instantiate F. But adding the talk of instantiation just gets us another constituent of the fact: the relation of instantiation, call it Inst. But a can exist, F can exist, and Inst can exist even if a isn't F. Trying the same strategy as before we can say that a, F and Inst must stand in the right relation for it to be a fact that a is F. But it should be clear that we are off on a regress.

As stated, the regress concerns *facts*, and I will keep referring to it as the *fact regress*. But it is not obvious that we need to reify facts to get the regress going. All we need is a notion of something's being the case, whether or not this is to be thought of in terms of *entities* such as facts: Suppose *it is the case that* a is F. What does the world need to be like it order for it to be so?

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[22] The distinction I draw between the infinity regress and the corresponding explanation regress is familiar from the literature. Compare e.g. Russell's (1903/96) distinction between a harmless regress and a vicious regress which arises in the analysis of meaning, §§55, 99, 329, as well as Lewis's (2002) discussion of the relation of *having* obtaining between a thing and the property it has.

[23] Ross Cameron (2008) says

> The mistake in the metaphysical form of Bradley's regress is to think that the state of affairs of a's being F is dependent on a further state of affairs, that of a and F's being related by the instantiation relation. There is no state of affairs of a and F's being related by the instantiation relation. (p. 3)

Here he slides from denying the dependence of the state of affairs of a's being F upon a further state of affairs to denying that the further state of affairs even exists. It appears that he must hold that if the further state of affairs exists, then the state of affairs of a's being F depends on it. But what justifies such an assumption?

The existence of a and F is not sufficient for it to be the case that a is F. For it to be the case that a is F, a must instantiate F. But the existence of a, F, and Inst is not sufficient for it to be the case that a is F. Etc.

The regress displayed by this argument brought up clearly is *vicious*, for at no stage of the reasoning do we actually find ourselves in a position to say that the fact exists – or that something is the case – but we just add more and more entities, to no avail. Here the problem isn't primarily with the existence of infinitely many relations or facts; nor is it a matter of dependence relations between facts. It rather concerns what it takes for one particular fact to obtain in the first place.[24]

To my mind, the fact regress is the most interesting of the regress arguments. But again there is a fairly straightforward resolution. Even before being presented with a regress argument, one might well have thought that for a fact to obtain, the mere existence of its constituents is not, in general, sufficient for it to obtain. It also matters what the constituents are like and how they are related to each other. On this view on the regress, the regress arises solely because it is assumed that a fact is, as it were, wholly determined by – is fully explained by; obtains solely by virtue of – the existence of its constituents. Once we abandon this assumption, then the problem vanishes.

The diagnosis becomes clearer if we try to set out the argument step by step: (1) Suppose that the fact that a has F obtains. (2) The existence of a and F is not sufficient for this fact to obtain. (3) For the fact to obtain, a and F must also be suitably related. (4) So there must exist a relation – R – relating a and F. (5) This relation R contributes to the fact's obtaining exactly by being a constituent of it. (6) But the existence of a, F, and R is not sufficient for the fact to obtain. (7) For the fact to obtain, a, F, and R must also be suitably related. (8) So there must exist a relation – R* – relating a, F and R. (9) This relation R* must itself be a constituent of the fact. Etc.

Steps (2) and (3) are unassailable. The believer in relations cannot comfortably balk at (4). But why, exactly, should (5) be accepted? When the argument is set out this way, (5) seems like an obvious culprit. In fact, (5) seems to go wrong in two ways. First, can we not instead say that even if, necessarily, the fact obtains only if its constituents of stand in relation R to each other, R need not be a constituent of the fact? On this view, the fact obtains because a and F are suitably related, but the relation which relates a and F is not itself a constituent of the fact.[25]

[24] See here also e.g. MacBride (2005), p. 86f, as well as Orilia (2007), who both take care to distinguish this kind of regress argument from others.

[25] Peter van Inwagen (1993, ch. 2) defends a similar account, albeit in the context of a discussion of internal and external relations. In his (1992), David Lewis proposed a 'weakened' truthmaker

Compare perhaps: the constituents of a sentence do not include the relation which relates the constituents of a sentence into the sentence they are. So it is not well motivated that the relation that relates the constituents is itself a constituent. Second, of course this first point does not do away with the regress. Even if we do not say that the new relation is a constituent of the fact, it still remains the mere existence of this relation, together with the existence of the constituents, is not sufficient for the fact to obtain. That brings me to the main point regarding the fact regress: the existence of the constituents, and of the relation which relates the constituents, is not in general sufficient for a fact to obtain. But this, far from being a problem, is a result. What the world is like is not determined solely by *what* entities exist, but also by *how* these entities are related to each other. To sum up: (5) assumes that the relation postulated earlier in the argument must be a constituent of the fact (call this the *constituency assumption*) and that it is relevant to the fact's obtaining only by its existence (call this the *existence-only assumption*). I reject both assumptions. Certainly the rejection of the existence-only assumption is more central. One can avoid the regress while holding on to the constituency assumption. One can say that since it is a fact that a is F because a instantiates the property of being F, instantiation too is a constituent of that fact. But there is no need to postulate further constituents still, once one has abandoned the existence-only assumption.

Saying that the fact that a is F obtains because of how a and F are related, as I do when explaining my opposition to (5), might sound as if it positively invites a regress on its own: the fact that a is F obtains because the fact that a is related by R to F obtains, and this fact itself in turns obtains because…. Certainly the formulation I employ can be used that way. But what I want to say is simply that a fact's obtaining is not generally something that's fully determined by the existence of its constituents alone. This is a negative point. Subscribing to it isn't to subscribe to the positive claim that a fact's obtaining is always explained by the obtaining of a more complex fact. Especially since this latter assumption leads to regress, it is better to say that some facts are primitive, in the sense that their obtaining is neither fully explained by non-fact entities nor explained by distinct facts. When describing an intuitively basic fact F, I will describe it by saying that it has such-and-such constituents related so-and-so and that it obtains because the constituents are so related. But so to describe F is not to say that F depends on a more complex fact of which the relation in question is a constituent; it is only to say what F itself is like.

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principle, according to which truths are made true not only by *whether* things are but also by *how* they are. There is obviously significant resemblance between this and my proposed way of dealing with the fact regress. But Lewis does not relate his proposed weakened truthmaker principle to regress problems.

§5. Propositions and sentences

Each of the regress arguments so far considered concerns facts rather than propositions. But there is a problem concerning propositions (the 'proposition regress', as I will call it) which is similar to the fact regress. Assume the 'Russellian' view on propositions as entities with particulars, properties and relations as constituents. Then a proposition is not, as we may put it, *fully characterized* by saying what its constituents are. For example, two distinct propositions can be made up of the same constituents. (E.g., the proposition that John loves Mary and the proposition that Mary loves John.) More radically, the mere collection of things, John, loving and Mary, can be said not to amount to a proposition at all. To, so to speak, arrive at the proposition that John loves Mary, we need, it may be said, in addition to John, loving and Mary, a relation relating John, loving and Mary in the right way. (A candidate might be something like the relation *x and y, in that order, are represented as instantiating R*.) But the existence of John, Mary, loving, and this relation likewise do not uniquely determine this proposition. Etc.

The proposition regress is not exactly parallel to the fact regress. The existence of what we would ordinarily take to be the constituents of a structured proposition is metaphysically sufficient for the existence of the proposition: necessarily, if the constituents exist, so does the proposition. This differs from the case of facts.

To the extent that the proposed solution to the problem posed by the fact regress is attractive, a parallel solution to the problem posed by the proposition regress should be attractive: the proposition is its constituents related in a particular way, and the relation which relates the constituents is not simply regarded as another constituent if the proposition.[26]

One may also think that there is a related problem concerning sentences: what, semantically, distinguishes a sentence which says something from a mere list of expressions? If we take the semantic contribution of each expression simply to consist in what the expression stands for, we may find this question problematic. But not even then does the question appear obviously problematic, for one may think that it is a further semantically relevant feature of the sentence, namely *its structure*, which helps distinguish the sentence from a mere list.

Comparing the case of sentences helps illustrate the proposed solution to the regress problems. In the case of a sentence, it is plainly obvious that what makes some expressions form a sentence is that they are related a certain way, but the way they are related is not itself a constituent of the sentence. What I suggest regarding facts and propositions is analogous.

§6. Back to the unity problems

[26] See Orilia (1991), p. 104 for a different statement of a broadly Bradleian proposition regress.

Armed with these points about the various regress problems, let us now return to the unity of the proposition problems, and the analogous unity of the fact problems. The main lesson of the discussion of the fact regress and the proposition regress was that facts and propositions are not fully characterized by the existence of the entities that are constituents of them; it also matters how the constituents are related. While I this point by itself does not help deal with all the unity problems, it helps with some and suggests what a full solution would be to others – and whatever problems remain are arguably not worth worrying about anyway.

Start with Difference. Here is a simple solution to that problem: the proposition that R(a,b) differs from the fact that R(a,b), even if they have the same constituents, for the relation relating the constituents is different in the two cases. Generalized Difference is dealt with in the same way.

When it comes to Order, one can just appeal to the order-sensitivity of the relating relation. When it comes to the fact that R(a,b), the instantiation relation relates a, R, and b *in that order*. This may sound unimpressive. Someone intent on pressing the problem may be inclined to say: but what makes it the case that a goes into one argument place of the relation and b into another? But at some point explanations come to an end. What sort of account might even count as a satisfactory explanation of this sort of thing? Compare: if it is supposed that John loves Mary, and you wonder why John goes into one argument place of the loving relation and Mary another, why should this be supposed to be a reasonable thing to wonder? What sort of answer might satisfy, if the straightforward answer that John is the lover and Mary is the lovee doesn't?

When it comes to Combinability, the solution to the fact and proposition regresses suggests the following answer: only such-and-such collections of entities can combine into facts, for only such-and-such collections of entities can be the arguments of the relating relations. Here, however, one might reasonably expect more: some sort of account of the exact differences between kinds of entity which in turn explains this fact about the relating relations.

Already earlier, I said that Unity is a non-problem. Let me now say a bit more. As indicated above, it is sometimes suggested that what stands in need of explanation is the existence of complexes different from mere aggregates or collections. But why treat these cases differently in the first place? Why is it supposed to be more problematic to hold that there is a complex entity, a fact, which obtains when the constituent entities stand in the instantiation relation, than it is to hold that there is another type of complex entity, an aggregate, which exists when the constituent entities stand in the parthood relation to the whole, or to hold that there is a set which exists when the constituent entities stand in the membership relation? A difference between the fact case and these other two cases is of course that in the latter two cases, the complex entity

necessarily exists if the constituents do. But in this respect, propositions group with aggregates and sets and not with facts.

Representation, lastly, is a different matter altogether. For anyone attracted to the solution to the proposition regress that I have presented, it will be natural to equate questions about the existence of representational entities such as propositions with the relation relating the constituents somehow being a representational relation. But this by itself will not and should not mollify anyone seriously concerned with Representation: for one might in principle wonder how, language- and mind-independently, there could be a genuinely representational relation.

§7. Comparison with other views

It will be useful to compare the views I have here defended on the fact and proposition regresses – the most significant of the different regress arguments – with other views on regress problems found in the literature. Some theories dealing with the problem of the unity of the proposition surveyed already above. One main point is that most of those theories deal only with propositions and are not immediately generalizable to facts, and it is thus clear that they do not deal with the fact regress. An exception is the view of (Johnston's) Wittgenstein, but a problem with that view was that while it helps with the question of how a certain fact *can* obtain, it does not address precisely the question dramatized by the fact regress: what a fact's actually obtaining requires. In this section, I will turn to some other views in the literature, more specifically concerned with the regress problems.

Some possible ways of blocking the fact regress are *radical* in that they involve rejecting the whole metaphysical picture presupposed in the regress argument. They involve denying the existence of facts or of properties and relations; or denying that facts are in any significant sense have constituents; or saying that properties and relations should not be understood as universals but as tropes. I will here set aside such proposals. (One question, illustrated by the above point about how the regress argument can be run even if facts are not reified, concerns whether these radical measures avoid the underlying problem.) Rather, my concern is whether there is a way of defending the general metaphysical picture – of there being facts, somehow built up from particulars, properties and relations – in face of the regress argument.

Over the years, David Armstrong has responded in different ways to regress worries of the kind brought up. But a common thread to Armstrong's responses to the regress is that instantiation is somehow special. In his (1989), he says

We have to allow the introduction of a fundamental tie or nexus: instantiation. But suppose

> that we have that a instantiates F or that a and b in that order instantiate R. Do we have to advance any further? I do not think that we do. For note that the alleged advance is now, as it was not at the first step, logically determined by the postulated state of affairs. If a instantiates F and instantiation is a universal-like entity, then we are logically forced to say that a, F, and instantiation instantiate instantiation, and so on. But perhaps we can allow this while denying that to "a, F, and instantiation instantiating instantiation" any extra state of affairs in the world corresponds. As we go on expanding the regress, our statements remain true, but no new truth-maker, or ontological ground, is required for all these statements to be true.[27]

This point is in turn connected to Armstrong's view that

> …talking about states of affairs is a simpler and more perspicuous way of talking than talking about instantiation. The *fundamental tie*, or *nexus*, in a Universals theory is nothing but the bringing together of particulars and universals in states of affairs.[28]

Insofar as the regress worry is that if one fact exists, so does infinitely many ever more complex facts, Armstrong's response – saying that the superficially different facts are in fact identical – is relevant. But a more important worry is that raised by the fact regress. Collapsing the putatively infinitely many facts into one does nothing to dispel that worry.[29]

On the view I have outlined, instantiation can seem special, but in a different way from that in which it is special on Armstrong's view. Instantiation appears special because it can conjoin some entities into a fact without itself being a constituent of that fact. I can see a few different concerns one might have regarding this.

First, I suppose it is possible to worry that a putative relation must either always be a constituent of a fact or always relate the constituents of a fact without itself being a constituent, but it cannot be sometimes the one and sometimes the other. Since instantiation on the view suggested sometimes relates the constituents without being a constituent, it follows it is then never a constituent. So instantiation is odd: while it is a relation it is unlike other relations in that it cannot be a constituent of a fact. However, it is hard to see the force of the worry that if

[27] Armstrong (1989), p. 109f.
[28] Armstrong (1989), p. 110.
[29] Nolan (2008) presents an account similar to that of Armstrong (1989). Vallicella (2000), p. 245, and MacBride (2005a), p. 86f, make essentially the point I make in the main text (but MacBride discusses Herbert Hochberg and not Armstrong).

instantiation sometimes relates without being a constituent, then it can never be a constituent. Why can't it be that when it comes to the fact that a is F, the instantiation relation is not itself a constituent of this fact, even though, necessarily, if a is F then a instantiates the property of being F, and in the fact that a instantiates the property of being F, instantiation is one of the constituents? (Compare: relations can be taken to be able to stand in the relation of mereological parthood, so there can, for example, be a sum of the relations love and hatred. If so, then parthood itself can be part of sums. But it is not a part of all sums, even if in each sum, the parts stand in the parthood relation to the whole.)

Second, one might be inclined to object to this suggestion as follows: Is it *only instantiation* (and perhaps other relations in the same narrow category) that is supposed to be able to conjoin some entities into facts without itself being a constituent of these facts? Or are *all* relations supposed to be like that? If the former, instantiation comes off as a peculiar relation, in a special sui generis category. If the latter, then we need not ever regard relations as constituents of facts, and so we have lost the motivation for the view on facts which is under consideration.

The objection presents two alternatives and declares them both unacceptable. It is not actually clear to me that *either* is unacceptable. But let me here simply argue that the first one is not. Compare a different case: mereology. Suppose someone said "(mereological) parthood must be a queer relation indeed if that is the only relation which can bind things together into a mereological sum". That would be an odd thing to say. The reason parthood is the only relation which can do this is that given what a sum is, a sum is constituted by its parts. Why can we not say the same about facts? By what it is for something to be a fact, a fact is where we have constituents bound together by the instantiation relation.

I might add, perhaps, that even if these remarks should prove unpersuasive, all that is jeopardized is my rejection of the constituency assumption. As earlier stressed, already the rejection of the existence-only assumption suffices to block the regress.

In a prominent recent discussion – the entry on Properties in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* – Chris Swoyer says about the fact regress,

> The only way to avoid this difficulty is to insist that instantiation is not a relation, at least not a normal one. Some philosophers hold that it is a *sui generis* linkage that hooks things up without intermediaries. Strawson…calls it a *non-relational tie*; others stress that it is a mode of predication. It may even be that there is no such thing as instantiation at all and that talk of it is just a misleading figure of speech. At this point it is natural to resort to metaphors like Frege's claim that properties have gaps that can be filled by objects or the early

> Wittgenstein's suggestion….that objects and properties can be hooked together like links in a chain. Broad likened instantiation to Metaphysical Glue, noting that when we glue two sheets of paper together we don't need additional glue…to bind the glue to the paper... Glue just sticks. And instantiation just relates. It is metaphysically self-adhesive.[30]

Swoyer does not present this simply as his own view, but rather as a kind of consensus view on the matter. The view on instantiation that Swoyer presents is similar to that Armstrong gives voice to in the quotation above. The difference between their discussions is that Swoyer clearly is concerned with the kind of regress argument I have called the fact regress, and appeals to this view on instantiation in response to that.[31]

If what I have argued is correct, the fact regress gives us no reason to think that instantiation is not a relation. We can simply say that while what makes the fact that John loves Mary obtain is not simply the existence of John, Mary, and loving but that John and Mary, in that order, instantiate the loving relation, the instantiation relation is not a further constituent of that fact. Instantiation can for all that be a relation and be a constituent of some facts, for example the fact *that John and Mary, in that order, instantiate the loving relation*, and the fact *that instantiation is a relation.*

Generally, I do not think it can be comfortably said that there is no such relation as instantiation. One nice argument for the existence of such entities as relations is that relational predicates occur in true sentences and the positions they occupy can be quantified into. One such relational predicate is 'instantiates'. If we deny that instantiation is a relation, we must reject this argument for the existence of relations.

Swoyer does not commit himself to saying that instantiation is not a relation. He also says that instantiation might be an *abnormal* relation. But even this is unwarranted. Instantiation, relating the constituents of a fact without itself always being a constituent of the fact, is no more special than parthood, relating the parts to the whole without itself always being a part of the whole.

There are some superficial similarities between the solution to the fact and proposition regresses here proposed and Wittgenstein's view in the *Tractatus*, on one of the different understandings of Wittgenstein's view.[32] On this understanding of Wittgenstein, his view is that no relations occur as constituents of propositions; instead the propositions say what the say

[30] Swoyer (2000), section 7.8.
[31] Thomas Wetzel's (2003) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on states of affairs defends a view similar to that of Swoyer.
[32] See Candlish and Damnjanovic (2007), p. 244f.

because the constituents are related in the right way. The similarity between my view and this Tractarian view is simply that a relation which is not itself an element of a proposition p is held to unify the constituents of p into p. This Tractarian view goes further and denies that relations ever are elements of propositions.

Richard Gaskin (2008) suggests that Wittgenstein insists on the 'ineffability' of logical form in order to avoid a regress of the kind we have been concerned with:

> If the configuration of names in the sentence – its particular syntax – were itself a picturing component of the sentence, we would need a further component in the sentence to configure the picturing component with the other components. We would be launched on a familiar regress. That Wittgenstein regarded the regress as vicious may be gathered from the fact that his (official) doctrine of the ineffability of form is precisely tailored to inhibit the regress before it can get off the ground. Objects in the world are configured, and names in elementary sentences are configured: but those configurations are not themselves further objects, or further names.[33]

But denying that the logical form of a proposition p is itself a further constituent of p is one thing; saying that there is no way that the logical form can be named is another. To avoid the threatening regress, only the former is needed. To get to the absolute ineffability of logical form, one would need an assumption to the effect that if logical form can be named at all, then the logical form of a proposition p is itself a constituent of p. But this assumption can reasonably be denied. The argument that Gaskin's Wittgenstein relies on is not convincing.

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[33] Gaskin (2008), p. 328. (This repeats an argument given in Gaskin (1995), p. 168.)

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