Notes on the Predication Regresses of Parmenides, Bradley, and Loux

Branden Fitelson
09/11/03

Parmenides:
(P_1) "a is F" is true only if "a exemplifies F-ness" is true
(P_2) "a exemplifies F-ness" is true only if "a exemplifies the exemplification of F-ness" is true
(P_3) "a exemplifies the exemplification of F-ness" is true only if "a exemplifies the exemplification of the exemplification of F-ness" is true … *ad infinitum*

Bradley:
(B_1) "a is F" is true only if "a exemplifies F-ness" is true
(B_2) "a exemplifies F-ness" is true only if "$\langle a, F\text{-ness}\rangle$ exemplfies Exemplification" is true
(B_3) "$\langle a, F\text{-ness}\rangle$ exemplfies Exemplification" only if "$\langle\langle a, F\text{-ness}\rangle$,Exemplification$\rangle$ exemplfies Exemplification" … *ad infinitum*

Loux's C-Schema ('universal regress'):
(L_1) "a is F" is true only if "a is such that C" is true
(L_2) "a is such that C" is true only if "a is such that C*" is true
(L_3) "a is such that C*" is true only if "a is such that C**" is true ... *ad infinitum*

Parmenides' regress arises from thinking of "Exemplifies(a,F-ness)" in (P_1) as a's satisfying the *predicate* expression Exemplifies(_,F-ness). We will write this predicate expression as "$E_{\mathbf{F}}(\_)$," and we will write the property corresponding to this predicate as "**EF**" (adding "**E**"s as we ascend levels).

Bradley's regress arises from thinking of "Exemplifies(a,F-ness)" in (B_1) as the pair $\langle a, F\text{-ness}\rangle$'s satisfying the *relational* expression Exemplifies(_,_). We will write this expression as "$E(\_,\_)$", and we will write the relation corresponding to this expression as "**E**" (adding "E"s *and* "**E**"s as we ascend levels).

This allows us to re-write the first two regresses more perspicuously, as:

Parmenides:
(P_1) "a is F" is true only if $E_{\mathbf{F}}(a)$
(P_2) $E_{\mathbf{F}}(a)$ only if $E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a)$
(P_3) $E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a)$ only if $E_{\mathbf{EEF}}(a)$ … *ad infinitum*

Bradley:
(B_1) "a is F" is true only if $E(a,\mathbf{F})$
(B_2) $E(a,\mathbf{F})$ only if $EE(\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E})$
(B_3) $EE(\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E})$ only if $EEE(\langle\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E}\rangle, \mathbf{EE})$ … *ad infinitum*

Parmenides' regress can be seen as an instance of Loux's C-schema, where:

C = "$E_{\mathbf{F}}(a)$",
C^* = "$E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a)$",
C^{**} = "$E_{\mathbf{EEF}}(a)$", and so on.

Each of these conditions can be expressed (sensibly) as "a is such that ___". So, (P_n) can be seen as an instance of (L_n), for each n.

But, can Bradley's regress be fit into Loux's C-scheme? Not as it stands. This is easily seen by asking yourself what C^* would be in the Bradley case. If you say C^* = "$EE(\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E})$", then how can this be seen as an instance of "a is such that ___"? It's the *pair* $\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle$ which is 'such that ___,' not a. And, as we ascend levels, the structure on the C-conditions become more and more complex (more and more deeply nested ordered pairs). Could we formulate a *relational* version of Loux's schema? I don't see how. One problem is that the Bradley regress begins with what looks like a *predication* (*i.e.*, a relation between a particular and a universal), but then turns into a sequence of *relational claims* (*i.e.*, relations between pairs and relations). This makes it tough to fit Bradley's regress into a general schematic form, where all the levels are instances of a single form (*e.g.*, "a is such that C"). Challenge: try to represent the general form of line (B_n) with some schema (not easy). I think this may explain why Loux doesn't appeal to his "C-schema" argument in the context of Bradley's regress.

More importantly, what is the *philosophical* point about the C-schema supposed to be anyway? It seems that Loux is concluding from this C-argument that *any* theory of predication (which does not *eliminate* subject-predicate discourse altogether) will fall prey to a regress of the C-variety. But, if the considerations above are correct, then this claim follows *only* for *Parmenidean* regresses, and *not* Bradleyan regreeses. And, if the Bradley regress is more troublesome (as many believe it is), then this takes some of the steam out of Loux's "universal regress" strategy. In other words, if the Nominalist can avoid the Bradleyan regress – without any restrictions or alterations to their general theory of predication – then shouldn't this count in favor of the nominalist approach to predication?

Epilogue on semantical equivalence: it's somewhat plausible to suggest that $E_{\mathbf{F}}(a) \equiv E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a) \equiv E_{\mathbf{EEF}}(a) \equiv \cdots$. These are all conditions of the form: "a is such that C", and one can easily imagine that "$\mathbf{E}$" is a *redundant* operator. For instance, if we collapse all the strings of "$\mathbf{E}$"s down to a single "$\mathbf{E}$", we immediately have: $E_{\mathbf{F}}(a) \equiv E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a) \equiv E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a) \equiv E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a) \equiv \cdots$, which already gets us equivalence at all levels greater than one. This leaves only the claim $E_{\mathbf{F}}(a)$ $\equiv E_{\mathbf{EF}}(a)$ to be established, in order to eliminate the regress completely. But, consider the claim that $E(a, \mathbf{F}) \equiv EE(\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E}) \equiv EEE(\langle\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E}\rangle, \mathbf{EE}) \cdots$. This seems much less plausible. These aren't even expressions of the same form. So, even if we assume that "E" and "$\mathbf{E}$" are both redundant (in the sense above), this won't do the trick. That is, if we collapse all the strings of "E"s and "$\mathbf{E}$"s down to a single "E" or "$\mathbf{E}$", we have: $E(a, \mathbf{F}) \equiv E(\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E}) \equiv E(\langle\langle a, \mathbf{F}\rangle, \mathbf{E}\rangle, \mathbf{E}) \cdots$, which is by no means obvious, at *any* of the levels.