

## Della Rocca's Relations Regress and Bradley's Relations Regresses

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### Abstract

In his recent *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca develops a regress-theoretic case, reminiscent of F.H. Bradley's famous argument in *Appearance and Reality*, against the intelligibility of relations and in favor of a monistic conception of reality. I argue that Della Rocca illicitly supposes that "internal" relations – in one sense of that word – lead to a "chain" regress, a regress of relations relating relations and relata. In contrast, I contend that if "internal" or grounded relations lead to a regress at all, it is a kind of "fission" regress within the relata themselves, and that a chain regress for relations only arises, if at all, for so-called "external" relations, relations not grounded in their relata. In this way, I contend that Della Rocca pursues a regress for so-called "internal" or grounded relations that only arises, if at all, for so-called "external" relations, relations not grounded in their relata. I compare Della Rocca's case against relations with Bradley's reasoning in *Appearance and Reality*, and suggest in this context that Bradley may, perhaps, have the upper hand.

### 1. Introduction

The topic of relations is of considerable importance for comprehensive metaphysics, especially when it comes to the issue of pluralism versus monism as competing accounts about the nature and structure of reality. A pluralistic or atomistic conception of the world seems to require distinct terms in relation; hence, if relations are unintelligible or incoherent, the same goes for a pluralistic or atomistic conception of the world. The result is then a monistic view of reality as a unified whole that cannot without distortion be partitioned into distinct terms in relation.

The importance of the topic of relations was apparent to many philosophers in late 1800s and early 1900s. Thus after arguing for the unreality of relations in Chapter 3 of *Appearance and Reality*, F.H. Bradley wrote:

The reader, who has followed and grasped the principle of this chapter, will have little need to spend his time upon those which succeed it. He will have seen that our

experience, where relational, is not true; and he will have condemned, almost without hearing, the great mass of phenomena. (1893/1969, 29)

Bradley's point is that most, and perhaps all, of the concepts we use to think about the world presuppose relations, concepts like space, time, change, causation, substance, property, quality, the self. Hence, in condemning relations, we thereby condemn these ways of thinking about the world, these ways of arranging what comes to us in experience.

Similarly, despite vehemently rejecting Bradley's monism, Bertrand Russell wrote in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*:

The subject of relations is difficult, and I am far from claiming to be now clear about it. The question of relations is one of the most important that arise in philosophy, as most other issues turn on it; monism and pluralism; the question whether anything is wholly true except the whole of truth, or wholly real except the whole of reality; idealism and realism, in some of their forms; perhaps the very existence of philosophy as a subject distinct from science and possessing a method of its own. (1918/1985, 138)

Russell agrees with Bradley about the significance of the issue of relations and he apparently agrees that one can move from the rejection of relations to monism; he simply disagrees with Bradley concerning the status of relations.

In his recent *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Michael Della Rocca develops a case against relations and in favor of monism. While differing in the details, Della Rocca argues, in a Bradleyian fashion, that the very notion of distinct things in relation leads to an infinite regress and therefore should be condemned as unintelligible or incoherent. And in a Bradleyian fashion, Della Rocca applies this result to array of subjects – substance, action, knowledge, meaning, and metaphysical explanation – arguing that standard theories about them ought to be rejected, essentially on the grounds that they involve, in one way or another, relations. And, again, like Bradley, Della Rocca infers a monistic view of reality.

My aim in what follows is to evaluate Della Rocca's regress-theoretic case against relations. I argue that Della Rocca illicitly supposes that "internal" relations – in one sense of that word – lead to a "chain" regress, a regress of relations relating relations and relata. In contrast, I contend that if "internal" or grounded relations lead to a regress at all, it is a kind of "fission" regress within the relata

themselves, and that a chain regress for relations only arises, if at all, for so-called “external” relations, relations not grounded in their relata. In this way, I contend that Della Rocca pursues a regress for so-called “internal” or grounded relations that only arises, if at all, for so-called “external” relations. Along the way I compare Della Rocca’s case against relations with Bradley’s reasoning in *Appearance and Reality*, and suggest in this context that Bradley may, perhaps, have the upper hand.

## 2. Della Rocca on Relations

In *The Parmenidean Ascent*, Della Rocca develops a self-consciously Bradleyian case against relations and in favor of a form of monism that denies all differentiation.<sup>1</sup> Before explaining Della Rocca’s argument, it is important to mark a way in which my exposition will deviate from how Della Rocca himself presents his case. In particular, in explaining Della Rocca’s argument, I will present it in its most general form, as a general case against relations. For his part, Della Rocca does not present his argument in this way. Rather, he presents it, in various closely related forms, in the context of discussing topics like substance, knowledge, action, meaning, and metaphysical explanation. He claims that most and perhaps all theories about these subjects presuppose relations; and since relations should be rejected, he concludes that none of these theories can succeed. But the closest he comes to a truly general case against relations is in the context of discussing substance and accounts of what it is that makes a substance a substance. In that context, he considers various ways of making sense of a “substance-making relation”, and argues that none of them are successful – each involves objectionable primitives, regresses, or explanatory circles. Nonetheless, he clearly takes this case to be general and, so far as I can tell, the success (or failure) of his argument does not turn, say, on whether the focus is

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<sup>1</sup> In the jargon popularized by Jonathan Schaffer in his “Monism: the Priority of the Whole” (2010) and elsewhere, Della Rocca favors a form of “existence monism” – that there is only one thing – as opposed to the weaker “priority monism” – that the cosmos has parts, but that they are grounded in the whole. Indeed, as Della Rocca recognizes, his monism may be more extreme than even existence monism, since existence monism supposes that there is one thing, but the very notion of one thing may involve relations, since numbers involve relations. It should also be marked, as Bradley seemed to recognize, that a case for monism premised on a rejection of relations cannot accept a distinction between the fundamental and the derivative: this would require relations between the fundamental and the derivative, and thus would seem unable to embrace Schaffer’s so-called “priority monism”, which takes the cosmos to be fundamental vis-à-vis its myriad derivative parts.

on substance – or, for that matter, knowledge, meaning, action, or metaphysical explanation. Rather, again, the argument is intended to be general, to undermine the very idea of distinct terms in relation, to raise a challenge to the intelligibility of what Bradley called “the relational way of thought”.

Suppose, then, that we take there to be a relation R between a term A and a term B. How are we to make sense of this situation? Della Rocca proposes four alternatives, which he views as exclusive and exhaustive:

1. R is primitive: there is nothing in virtue of which R obtains between A and B.
2. R is not primitive, but is grounded in both A and B.
3. R is not primitive, but is grounded in A (or B) alone.
4. R is not primitive, but is grounded in a non-terminating regress or circle with a multiplicity of items. (60)

Most of the action is with (2) and (3), but it is worth briefly considering why Della Rocca considers (1) and (4) to be nonstarters.

Most centrally, Della Rocca takes his rejection of (1) to be premised on the contention that “a relation must obtain in virtue of some thing or things”, that “relations need to be made intelligible, and that they are made so in terms of their grounds” (61). Della Rocca takes Bradley to agree with him on this point, and as a matter of textual interpretation he seems correct. Bradley begins Chapter 3 of *Appearance and Reality* by writing of the division of the world into terms and relations that “it can hardly be maintained that this character calls for no understanding – that it is a unique way of being which the reality possesses, and which we have got merely to receive” (21). Bradley’s point is that relations cannot simply be taken for granted, that the relating character of relations is something that needs a theoretical account, something that needs to be made intelligible. Following Della Rocca, one way to put the point is that Bradley was apparently committed to something like the Principle of Sufficient Reason, at least with respect to relations and putative relational situations.

Della Rocca has little patience with (4), premising its rejection on a general rejection of explanatory regresses and circles, and premising this on a commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason – following Bradley, again, least for relations and putative relational situations. In effect, (2) and (3) are condemned for entailing such regresses or circles; and so (4) is automatically eliminated on this basis.

While I do not take Della Rocca’s rejection of (1) and (4) to be entirely obvious, I will set these options aside in what follows. As above, the more interesting philosophical action, in my view, is with (2) and (3), to which I now turn.

Regarding (2), Della Rocca reasons as follows. So, suppose that R is grounded in both A and B. That is, suppose that R is partially grounded in A and partially grounded in B. On this option, R may be regarded as an “internal” relation – in one sense of that word – a relation grounded in its relata such that given the relata with their properties, one thereby has the relation (I will have more to say about this notion below).<sup>2</sup> Now, Della Rocca supposes that in this case, R is not only grounded in A and B, but also grounded in the partial grounding relation between A and R and between B and R. Call the relation of partial grounding between A and R, “R1”; call the relation of partial grounding between B and R, “R2”. Generally, Della Rocca puts the point by remarking that

the relation by its nature demands not only that its relata be in place, but – because a relation is by its nature dependent on its relata – the relation also demands that there be a relation of partial grounding between the relation and each relatum individually. (62)

He elaborates on the point with a theological metaphor:

Let’s say I am a relation R and I don’t yet exist... so I demand of God that God create me... So God said, “OK...tell me what you need.” And in demanding of God that I come into existence, I demand not only that there first be A (and perhaps another relatum of the relation R), but I also demand the path – the relation R1 – between A and me, i.e., between A and R. (I may also demand that that there be a path between the other relatum and me.)

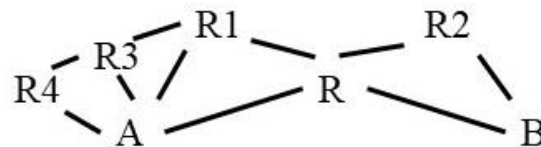
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<sup>2</sup> For useful discussion of “internal” as opposed to “external” relations, see Heil 2021. For what it is worth, Ewing 1934/2013 distinguishes a wide array of different senses in which relations have been called “internal”, and argues that these different senses have often been conflated.

So the relation, R, depends not only on A, but also on R1, the relation of partial grounding between A and R.<sup>3</sup> (63)

More generally, Della Rocca supposes that “if standing in a grounding relation is part of the nature of the grounded... then the grounded is grounded in part in the relation of grounding between the grounded and the ground” (ibid). So much grounding! – But perhaps that’s how it goes.

Given all this, it is not too difficult to see how a regress will ensue. For, given that R1 (setting aside R2, for which the same reasoning will apply) is a relation, by parity of reasoning it must also be grounded; and by parity of reasoning, it must be grounded, in part, in some further relation, call it “R3”, between A and R1. So, R1 is (at least) partially grounded in A and partially grounded in R3, the partial grounding relation between A and R1, such that A partially grounds R1. But, by parity of reasoning, R3 must also be grounded, and must also be grounded in part in some further relation of partial grounding R4. And so on, and so on. In this way, there is an apparent regress of relating relations, relations posited as partial grounds for prior relations. Thus Della Rocca writes that “in order to metaphysically explain R and thus in order to metaphysically explain R1, it now turns out that we must metaphysically explain R3, and so on ad infinitum” (64). Moreover, the regress appears to be vicious, as the explanation or account of the original relation R can never be completed (ibid). So, option (2) also seems unsuccessful for making intelligible A and B standing in a relation R. The regress can be represented as follows (Figure 1):



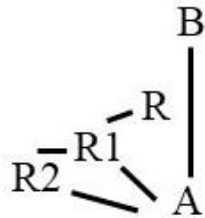
In this representation, I’ve only attempted to fill out the left side, starting with R1 as a relation posited between A and R; R3 is then posited as a relation of partial grounding between A and R1; R4 is then

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<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere, I’ve made some changes to the notation for consistency with my discussions.

posited as a relation of partial grounding between A and R3. By parity of reasoning, this positing of relations between relata will continue indefinitely and can never be completed. As Bradley put things in a related context, the attempt to make sense of the original relational situation has resulted in an “eddy of hopeless process”, in which “we are forced to go on finding new relations without end” (28).

Della Rocca pursues a basically the same line of thought when it comes to (3), according to which R is grounded not in both A and B, but in either A alone or B alone. In this sense, R may be regarded as what Karen Bennett refers to as a “superinternal” relation, a relation grounded in only one of its relata (I will have more to say about this notion below).<sup>4</sup> For once again, Della Rocca insists that “we have to appeal to a further relation in spelling out the grounds of relation R” (71). Call this relation, the relation in virtue of which R is grounded in A (or B), “R1”. In other words, R1 is the relation of partial grounding between A and R. R, that is, is grounded in A and R1, with R1 being the “path” from A to R. By parity of reasoning, R1 must also be grounded, and must be partially grounded in some further relation, call it “R2”, between A and R1 – and so on. As with (2), the regress appears vicious, since we never make intelligible the original relation R grounded in A. Again, a visual representation may be useful (Figure 2):



In this representation, I’ve only attempted to fill out the regress of relations beginning with R1 as a partial ground of R obtaining between A and B; R1 in turn demands a further relation R2 as a partial ground, and so on.

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<sup>4</sup> See Bennett 2011 and 2017.

Since Della Rocca regards (1), (2), (3), and (4) as exhaustive alternatives when it comes to making sense of A and B standing in R, the conclusion is that relations are unintelligible, incoherent upon reflection.

Before moving on to my critique of Della Rocca's argument against (2) and (3), a couple of points are worth marking. In particular, as suggested in my presentation of Della Rocca's regress of relations, the regress is a kind of "chain regress", an infinite chain of relations posited between relata, such that the original putative relational situation is never made intelligible: each relation requires a new relation between itself and a further relatum. Now, Bradley himself famously – or infamously, some would say – pursued this type of regress as part of his overall case against relations. Nonetheless, Bradley's chain regress, far from working from the assumption that relations are grounded in their relata, instead targets the position according to which relations are "more or less independent" from what they relate, according to which relations are afforded the status of something like substances in their own right (17). Bradley first considers this possibility in Chapter 2 of *Appearance and Reality* and returns to it later near the end of Chapter 3. Here is how Bradley puts the point in Chapter 2. Suppose we have two terms, A and B, with a relation C between them, where C is taken to be "more or less independent" from A and B:

The relation C has been admitted different from A and B, and no longer is predicated of them. Something, however, seems to be said of this relation C, and said, again, of A and B... If so, it would appear to be another relation, D, in which C, on one side, and, on the other side, A and B, stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process. The new relation D can be predicated in no way of C, or of A and B; and hence we must have recourse to a fresh relation, E, which comes between D and whatever we had before. But this must lead to another, F; and so on, indefinitely. (18)

Later Bradley writes that "the links are united by a link, and this bond of union is a link which also has two ends; and these require each a fresh link to connect them with the old", resulting in "an eddy of hopeless process" (28). My point is that whatever else may be said of Bradley's chain regress, it works from a rather different assumption than Della Rocca's chain regress: Bradley's chain regress works from the assumption that relations are "more or less independent" from what they relate; Della Rocca,



in contrast, works from the assumption that relations are grounded in their relata. This difference will play an important role in the discussions to come.

### **3. Critique of Della Rocca**

In my view, Bradley basically had things right when it comes to chain regresses. Bradley supposed, to the extent that there is a chain regress problem for relations, this regress only arises for relations taken as “more or less independent” from what they relate and in that sense “external”. In contrast, Bradley supposed to the extent that there is a regress-theoretic problem with grounded relations, it is a kind of “fission” regress within the terms themselves. Della Rocca is correct, then, that grounded relations may, perhaps, lead to a regress; his mistake, in my view, is to think that this is a kind of chain regress in the manner of Figure 1 or Figure 2. The reason for this, as I will explain, is that where a relation R between terms A and B is grounded in both A and B, A and B together may provide complete grounds for R and do not require the positing of further partial grounding relations between A and R on the one hand and B and R on the other hand. Similarly, where A alone grounds A’s standing in a relation R to a term B, there is no need to posit a further relation of grounding between A and R.

I’ll now unpack these ideas.

Consider, then, option (2) for making sense of a relational situation, according to which the relation R is partially grounded in A and partially grounded in B. I will suppose, and I believe that Della Rocca would agree, that in this case, given A and B and their respective properties, one thereby has the relation R between A and B. A somewhat plausible example of this would be a taller than relation between two human beings, call them “H1” and “H2”. Given H1 and their height, and given H2 and their height, it automatically follows that either H1 is taller than H2, that H2 is taller than H1, or that H1 and H2 are the exact same height. Indeed, it is tempting to suppose that there is a sense in which such relations are not relations at all, since they are wholly accounted for in terms of their relata and the respective properties of their relata. This is why, for example, John Heil proposes that while such cases may involve relational truths, such truths may have nonrelational truthmakers, namely the

individuals with their respective properties.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, while Heil concedes that there may be true statements according to which, for instance, one individual is taller than another, it may be possible to avoid positing an irreducible relation of taller than between such individuals.

It is useful to return to Della Rocca's theological metaphor. Recall, as above, that Della Rocca uses this metaphor to argue that where R is grounded in A and B, to provide a complete grounds for R it is necessary to further posit a relation of partial grounding between A and R and a relation of partial grounding between B and R, from which an apparent regress follows. Reflection on the case, however, suggests a different verdict. Suppose, for instance, that one asks of God to create a taller than relation R between individuals. What does God have to do? So far as I can tell, it wholly suffices that God create an individual H1 with a certain height and an individual H2 with a certain height; there is no further work that God needs to do once this work has been completed. God need not labor further in order to create a relation of partial grounding between H1 and R and a relation of partial grounding between H2 and R. This comes automatically from prior work. Or, similarly: once God creates H1 with a certain height, and then creates H2 with a certain height, there is no need for God to further posit the "path" from H1 to R and from H2 to R. The path, as it were, comes automatically from God's prior work. Or, finally: to make it true that H1 is taller than H2, all God has to do is create H1 with a certain height and H2 with a certain height; to make this true, God does not moreover have to posit a further taller than relation or, likewise, relations of partial grounding between H1's height and a taller than relation between H2's height and a taller than relation.

What I am suggesting, then, is that with option (2), the chain regress really never gets started, since where a relation R is grounded in A and B together, R may be wholly grounded in A and B, such that the relations of partial grounding between A and R and between B and R are not further posits between the positing of A with its properties and the positing of B with its properties. Now, Della

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<sup>5</sup> See Heil 2021.

Rocca seems to be aware of this sort of maneuver. Thus considering the possibility that in the context of Figure 1, “R1 comes for free with A and the other relatum”, that “the relation R1 between A and R comes automatically, as a ‘free lunch’”, he writes:

R holds at least in part because each of A and the other relatum or relata *do their part* in making it the case that R holds. And, A’s part is to partially ground R, to be related to R by R1, the relation of partial grounding. (63)

Some of this, at least, is unobjectionable: it is true that A and B must “do their part” to make it the case that the relation R holds between them; and it is true that in this type of situation, A indeed partially grounds R and B partially grounds R. But this can all be accepted without supposing, as Della Rocca does, that in providing a complete grounds for R, it is necessary to posit further relations of partial grounding between A and R and between B and R. True, A must “do its part” to ground R and B must also “do its part” to ground R. But they can do this, and indeed must do this, given that they exist with the properties that they have. Again, the taller than example is useful: sure, for it to be the case that H1 is taller than H2, H1 must “do its part” to partially ground the taller than relation with H2; likewise, H2 must “do its part” to partially ground the relation. But given H1 with their height, and H2 with their height, there no question of whether or not they “do their part”, no question of whether or not the “path” to the taller than relation obtains.

So, again, my claim is that with option (2), the chain regress never gets started, since there is no need to posit further partial grounding relations between the relata and the original relation. There is no need, as it were, to posits such additional “links” or “paths” from the relata to the original relation. For his part, Della Rocca disagrees with this maneuver (63); but aside from the remarks above, provides no real basis for this disagreement. In short: where R is grounded in A and B, and at least in this sense may be regarded as an “internal” relation, a complete grounds for R may be found simply in A and B with their respective properties, without the need to posit further relations – specifically, relations of partial grounding – between A and R and between A and B.

A similar response can be applied to (3), according to which the relation R between A and B is grounded in A (or, similarly, grounded in B). It is difficult to find noncontroversial, intuitive examples of such relations. As above, Bennett refers to such relations as “superinternal”, where a superinternal relation is “one such that the intrinsic nature of only one of the relata... guarantees not only that the relation holds, but also that the other relatum exists and has the intrinsic nature that it does” (2011, 32). She claims that a physicalist should maintain that the relation between physical facts and mental facts is like this, writing that:

However exactly we should characterize ‘the physical facts’, physicalism is basically the claim that the physical facts ground the mental facts... physicalists will say that the physical facts make it the case that the mental facts are what they are, have the intrinsic natures they do. They will say that it *all unfolds upwards from the physical*. Both the less fundamental facts and the relation that generates them derive from the more fundamental facts. (2011, 32–33)

For Bennett, the relation of metaphysical grounding is “superinternal” in this sense, such that “when A grounds B, the ground of B is not A plus the grounding relation – the grounds of B are simply A” (2011, 31). In other words, where there is grounding, it may indeed be true that, well, there is a relation of grounding, but the relation of grounding is not a further posit between the grounds and the grounded. Indeed, part of Bennett’s motivation for this conception of grounding as “superinternal” is her recognition that to suppose otherwise – to suppose that grounding relations must be posited between the grounds and the grounded – apparently leads to an objectionable regress. In my view, while I think that there are further questions that can be asked about “superinternal” relations,<sup>6</sup> Bennett is basically right that such regresses can be avoided in the manner that she recommends, namely by refusing to posit further grounding relations between grounds and the grounded, and instead supposing that everything is grounded in the grounds.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Audi 2020. In my view, two central questions here concern, first, the extent to which superinternal relations are properly regarded as relations at all and, second, the implications that putative superinternal relations have regarding the nature of the grounds. For example, regarding the second issue, one may wonder whether a physicalist can really hold that physical properties are superinternally related to mental properties or rather, on the hand, whether such a putative relation undermines the character of the physical as purely physical. Further discussion of these issues, however, must here be set aside.

Here again it is useful to return to Della Rocca's theological metaphor. Suppose God is tasked with making it the case that A stands in a relation R to B, where this is grounded in A alone. It is true, to be sure, that God has to create the "path" between A and R; God has to make it the case that A grounds R and that A stands in R to B. But to do this, all God has to do is to create A; God does not have to create A and then furthermore make it the case that A grounds the relation R between A and B. Perhaps, as Bennett contends, a physicalist should suppose that the physical's grounding the mental is a "superinternal" relation. In this case, it is not that God has to create the physical, and furthermore make it the case that the physical grounds the mental. Rather, all God has to do is create the physical; the mental, and the physical's grounding the mental, comes along for free. So, comparable to my response to Della Rocca's chain regress with respect to (2), my view regarding (3) is that one can, and should, deny that a relation's being grounded in just one of its relata requires positing a further relation of partial grounding between the grounding relatum and the initial grounding relation. And again, it is useful to think about this in terms of truthmaking: where a relation R between A and B is grounded in A alone, it is true that A grounds the relation between R and B, but this is made true by A alone; there is no need to posit a further relation between A and R, a relation of grounding (or partial grounding). So, as with (2), my claim regarding (3) is that Della Rocca's chain regress never gets started; there is no need to insert relations between relata indefinitely in the way that he supposes.

Della Rocca would likely remain unsatisfied with this line of response. In particular, when considering something like the present line of thought, Della Rocca charges that it amounts to a "Moliere moment" (72). More specifically, Della Rocca supposes that certain sort of explanations are unacceptable, those that simply appeal to the nature of a thing. In Moliere's example, one might attempt to explain why something causes sleepiness by appealing to its "dormitive virtue", that is, its tendency to bring about sleepiness. Such an explanation is at best uninformative, at worst viciously circular. The worry, as I understand it, is that the present line of thought amounts to supposing nothing more or less than that it is in the nature of A to ground B and A's grounding B. Or, more specifically still, Della

Rocca views the present sort of maneuver as facing a dilemma: either it amounts to such a “Moliere moment”, or else it requires positing further relations, leading to a regress. Neither option, however, is satisfactory.

There are a few things to say in response. The first concerns the general status of “Moliere moments” and the related issue of explanatory bedrock. As above, it is plausible that Bradley worked with something like the Principle of Sufficient Reason, at least as applied to relational situations, an assumption that Della Rocca adopts. Nonetheless, accepting a Principle of Sufficient Reason for relational situations does not entail accepting a fully general version of such a principle to the effect that every fact or situation or entity whatsoever admits of explanation.<sup>7</sup> The second thing to say is that even if the present line of thought is unacceptable in virtue of committing an unacceptable Moliere-style explanation, this is different from supposing that there is a regress and, in particular, a chain regress of sort that Della Rocca pursues. In other words, while perhaps there is a problem here, it need not be a regress-theoretic problem; and, again, to the extent that there is a problem, this may require endorsing a completely general version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The third and final thing to say is that while providing an account of that in virtue of which A grounds B and A’s grounding B may require appealing to further relations, this is far from showing that such an account will in turn lead to an infinite chain regress of relating relations. Della Rocca seems to suppose otherwise, writing in this context:

we need to specify how the... relation R is grounded in A alone. But this “how” points to the fact that we need to specify another relation – call it R\* – in virtue of which R is grounded in A alone. In other words, we are now seeking a relation R\* which is the relation of grounding between A and R... [And] we are naturally led to ask: what is R\* grounded in? (73)

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<sup>7</sup> Della Rocca argues that such a position is inherently unstable – that one ought to either embrace a fully general Principle of Sufficient Reason or no such principle at all. His reasoning for this conclusion is dense, and I cannot go into the details here. I will simply note that, in my view at least, there is room to maneuver, and that there may very well be coherent conceptual space for one to maintain, in effect, that there are limits to when and where it is appropriate to ask “why?”, and that facts about natures of identities may well be such a case.

Perhaps giving an account of that in virtue of which A grounds B and grounds A's ground B will need to appeal to relations at some point, but what I do not see is why this must lead to an infinite regress of relating relations. Indeed, on the preferred conception of superinternal relations, one would expect that such an account will simply appeal to A. Maybe this will involve an objectionable Moliere-style explanation, but it is not clear why this must be the case. The example of physicalism may be useful: in supposing that the physical grounds the mental, perhaps the physicalist is committed to there being something in virtue of which the physical grounds the mental. Maybe this will end up amounting to saying that it is of the nature of the physical to ground the mental, but it is at least not obvious why this must be the case or why, if this is not the case, a problematic regress will ensue. Rather, one may suppose that there are facts about the relevant physical states and properties that explains why they ground the mental in the way that they do; but on this kind of picture, and as I believe Bennett would agree, it all goes back to the physical, that is the explanatory bedrock, and that if this is the case there is just no need to posit an infinite regress of relating relations.

My position, then, is that "internal" and "superinternal" relations do not yield a chain regress of relations between relata or, as Bradley puts it, "an eddy of hopeless process" of "links" inserted between prior "links". In effect, my charge is that the chain regress that Della Rocca pursues, if it arises at all, only arises for relations as "more or less independent" from what they relate, as something like independent beings or substances in their own right. Della Rocca's mistake is to think, in contrast, that this kind of regress can also be developed for relations understood as "internal" or even "superinternal". In this way, it may be said that in developing the regress-theoretic case against options (2) and (3), Della Rocca treats the relation R as both internal and external: "internal", in the sense that R is grounded in either A and B together or in A (or B) alone; "external", in that the kind of regress he develops only arises, if at all, for relations that aren't grounded in the way that (2) and (3) suppose. My claim, in a nutshell, is that you can't have it both ways.

So, whatever else may be said about (2) and (3), the problem is not that they give rise to a chain regress of relations between relata. But is there a problematic regress at all? I am not sure. Nonetheless, it is worth marking that Bradley argued that there is such a regress, what is sometimes referred to as a “fission” regress within the relata themselves.<sup>8</sup> The basic line of thought runs as follows.

In this context, Bradley takes himself to have established that a plurality of terms requires relations, at least relations of difference and distinctness. Having established this, Bradley then moves on to consider how one might go about making sense of a metaphysic consisting of terms with relations. One option here is that terms might be “wholly resolved into the relations” (25). Bradley has little patience with this maneuver, insisting that “nothing cannot be related” and thus that it is impossible for a metaphysic of terms in relation to amount to a metaphysics of “mere relations” (ibid). The result of this, Bradley remarks, is that “qualities must be, and must *also* be related” (26). They must be, because they cannot be “wholly resolved” into relations; but they must also be related, because they are unintelligible without relations. While Bradley puts the point in terms of qualities, I take it that his point is intended to be general, to apply to terms generally: any comprehensive metaphysical picture needs terms, since terms cannot be made into nothing but relations; and any such picture with terms also needs relations, since terms are unintelligible without relations.

The problem, according to Bradley, is that this kind of position now leads to a diversity “inside each quality”, such that each quality, or term more generally, “has a double character, as both supporting and as being made by the relation” (ibid). As I understand Bradley's case, on the current proposal, relations are being treated as aspects or properties of the terms that stand in the relation, and that because of this each such term has a “double character”: it has its character as something apart from the relations in which it stands (since, again, a term cannot be wholly resolved into relations); and it has its character as standing in its various relations, which are on this proposal being treated as

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<sup>8</sup> As in Candlish 2007.



aspects or properties or characteristics of the terms. The problem, however, is that there are now multiple aspects of each term, the aspect of that term as it is apart from its relations and the aspect of that term as it is in its relation or relations. The question, then, is how these two aspects of the term are related; and it seems that upon trying to answer this question, one is quickly led to a regress, a “principle of fission which conducts us to no end” (ibid).

To spell out the regress in more detail: the original term or quality has been divided into two aspects or characteristics, as aspect apart from a relation and an aspect as related. Call the original term “A” and the aspects into which it has been divided “B” and “C”. It is important to note that the original task, begun in Chapter 2 of *Appearance of Reality* (“Substantive and Adjective”) was to make sense of the unity of a thing; and to make sense of this, Bradley claimed, it is necessary to make sense of qualities in relation. But it now appears that this task has been exchanged for the task of making sense of the unity of a quality or term in relation, since on the present proposal qualities or terms in relation have themselves proven to have “manifold” content (26). In this sense, the question of how to combine a plurality into a genuine unity remains. Further, and perhaps more damning, is that if the same strategy is applied to how B and C are related so as to constitute A, a “fission” regress seems to ensue. For, by parity of reasoning, B must be something apart from its relation from C; but must also be related to C; call these aspects of B, “D” and “E”. Similarly, by parity of reasoning, C must be something apart from its relation to B, but must also be related to B; call these aspects of C, “F” and G”. By parity of reasoning, it is now necessary to account for how D and E are related and, likewise, how F and G are related; and by parity of reasoning, D, E, F, and G each prove to have a diverse nature and it will be necessary to account for how the diverse nature of each are related – and so on. As Bradley put it, the result is “a principle of fission which conducts us to no end” (26), a diversity within each quality or term that “is fatal to the internal unity of each” (27). The regress here is arguably vicious, since the original task of making sense of the unity of a thing, how a plurality of qualities or terms can be related

so as to constitute a genuine unity, is never completed. Rather, the terms are forever divided, with the task of making sense of terms in relation never completed.<sup>9</sup>

So: perhaps (2) and (3) do lead to a regress, and perhaps this regress is vicious. As above, I am not sure.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, it is safe to say that if there is a regress here, it is not a “chain” regress of the sort that Della Rocca attempts to identify, with relations infinitely inserted between prior relata. It is instead a “fission” regress, with the terms themselves infinitely divided into further terms in relation, with the original task of making sense of the unity of a term never completed. In this respect, Bradley may have gotten things right: conceived in one way, as “more or less independent” from what they relate, relations succumb, if at all, to a vicious “chain” regress; conceived as grounded in their relata, relations succumb, if at all, to a vicious “fission” regress. The regresses are distinct, corresponding to different ways of conceiving of relations and relational situations. Della Rocca essentially conflates these different types of regresses, ignoring the potential for a “fission” regress and instead insisting that a “chain” regress ensues even for relations conceived as “internal” to what they relate, in at least one sense of that term.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As Russell noted, the subject of relations is difficult, and even Russell conceded, in a moment of humility, that he was far from claiming to be clear about the subject. Nonetheless, it is an important subject, especially when it comes to the status of pluralism or atomism on the one hand versus monistic conceptions of reality on the other hand.

Following Bradley’s influential though often misunderstood critique of relations, those critical of “the relational way of thought” have sometimes pursued regress-theoretic arguments. Setting aside

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<sup>9</sup> On the present strategy, relations are treated as attributes or aspects of terms in relation, akin to what Russell would later refer to as the “monadistic” theory of relations. While Russell develops his own critique of the monadistic view premised on its inability to account for asymmetrical relations such that if A stands in a relation R B, B does not stand in R to A, he endorses Bradley’s critique from the point of view of “general philosophy” (1903, 224).

<sup>10</sup> For critical discussion of Bradley’s “fission” argument, as well as his general case against relations, see Perovic 2014; for more sympathetic discussions, see Candlish 2007 and Vallicella 2002.

the details of my discussions, one of my themes in this paper is that different ways of thinking about relations and relational situations may correspond to different regresses. And, to the extent that Bradley recognized this, my claim is that Bradley got things right in pairing a “fission” regress with a conception of relations as “internal” to what they relate while pairing a “chain” regress with a conception of relations as “more or less independent”, and in that sense “external” to what they relate. Relations may, perhaps, lead to one or more vicious regresses, but the problem is not, as Della Rocca contends, that grounded relations result in an infinite regress of relations posited between prior relata.<sup>11</sup>

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