

Chapter Two

THE INFINITE REGRESS

MANY of the major forms of philosophical reasoning were first employed by Plato, either as a result of his reflection upon the procedures adopted by Socrates or under Eleatic inspiration. The infinite regress is no exception; we meet it in the *Parmenides*, where the following dialogue occurs:

Parmenides: I fancy the consideration which leads you to imagine the existence of these various unitary forms is to this effect: when you have judged a number of things to be large, you presumably pronounce, in a review of them all, that they present one and the same pattern, and this is why you regard the large as one thing.

Socrates: Precisely so.

Parmenides: But what of *the* large and other large things? When you pass them all mentally in review in the same fashion, must this not again give rise to the appearance of a single large something, in virtue of which they all appear large?

Socrates: Presumably.

Parmenides: Consequently a second form of magnitude will present itself, distinct alike from *just* magnitude, and from the things which participate of magnitude. On a fuller view of all these cases, we shall discover yet a further form, in virtue of which they will all be large; thus, you see, every one of your forms will no longer be one, but an indefinite plurality.¹

I do not wish to become further involved than is necessary for my present purposes in the difficulties of Platonic exegesis; Parmenides' regress is indeed less important for me in what I take to be its actual controversial context in

¹ §132 trans. A. E. Taylor.

the *Parmenides* than as suggesting an argument which might well have been, but has not quite been, there propounded. The problem which is preoccupying Plato, very naturally in view of the intellectual situation of his time, is 'the one and the many'—the question whether, as Parmenides had argued, there is a single ultimate entity, the One, or whether, on the other hand, there is an indefinite multiplicity, as Plato takes Heraclitus to have maintained. The theory of forms can be considered, from one point of view, as an attempt to compromise in this dispute by maintaining that there is a relatively small number of ultimate entities, the forms; everything else is real only in so far as it stands in some relation—say, the relation of participation—to these forms. Then Parmenides uses the infinite regress argument in order to show that this compromise is an unstable one: that if we try to give any account of the relation between, say, the form 'largeness' and the various everyday things we call 'large', we find ourselves compelled to suppose that there is another form of largeness which is necessarily involved in the relation between the particular large objects and the original form of largeness, and hence the small group of forms turns into an infinite plurality. Thus Plato's compromise: 'a plurality, yes, but a limited plurality' breaks down.

There is, however, a more fundamental argument which is readily suggested by what Parmenides has to say, especially when it is taken in conjunction with an earlier remark in the dialogue: 'You hold, you tell me, that there are certain forms: the rest of the things around us participate in these and consequently take their denominations from them?' In the light of this remark, we can interpret the theory of forms as an analysis of predication: as a possible answer to a question which has certainly been of interest to philosophers—'how is it possible for a number of different things to have the same property in common?'—the answer, namely, 'in virtue of the fact that they are all related in a certain way to the same form'. Philosophers

have very commonly supposed that there is something puzzling, mysterious, unintelligible in the fact that a number of different things can 'share the same property'; the theory of forms can be interpreted as one method of 'making predication intelligible'.

The infinite regress argument can then be used as an emphatic way of pointing out that if 'sharing the same property' is unintelligible, then so also is 'participating in the same form'. For suppose we consider any property P which x, y, z , share; and then we say that when x, y, z appear to share the property P what really happens is that they are related in a certain way to the form P. Then we have simply replaced the original property of 'being P' by a new property 'being-related-to-the-form-P'. If there is any unintelligibility attaching to the fact that x, y, z , can all share the property P, there will be exactly the same difficulty in understanding how they can all share the property of 'being-related-to-the-form-P'.¹ But this point, which could be made directly, can be developed in a forcible way—and a way which suits Parmenides admirably, since his main concern is with multiplicity—by saying that if we can understand how x, y, z , can be P only by supposing them to be related to the form P, then equally we can understand how they can all be related to the form P only by supposing them to be related to the form of 'being-related-to-P' and, then again, we can understand how they can all share the property of 'being-related-to-the-form-of-being-related to P', only by supposing them all to be related to still another form—the form of 'being-related-to-the-form-of-being-related to P'—and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus we never would be in a position to understand how x, y, z can be P. Yet this is what the theory of forms promises to make clear to us. The infinite regress argument brings home to us the fact that the intelligibility the philosopher is seeking is not to be found by going further along the path

¹ See also John Anderson: 'Universals and Occurrences', *Aust. Jnl. Phil.*, 1929, p. 138.

he has begun to tread; having failed to achieve it by introducing a single form into the situation, he is not going to do any better by introducing still more forms.

Then the point of this argument, however it be expressed, is that if the fact that a number of things can have a property in common is somehow 'unintelligible' or 'requires explanation', that unintelligibility cannot be removed by pointing to some property which they all possess, e.g. the property of imitating a form. Of course, this is so only if our problem has the generalized form characteristic of philosophy. If, for example, we are puzzled about the fact that a number of philosophers all write in a similar style, our puzzlement might certainly vanish once it is pointed out to us that they are all imitating the same philosopher. The possibility of providing an explanation of this type in empirical cases has no doubt led philosophers to suppose that if we are puzzled about the general logical problem how a number of things can share the same property then the solution to our puzzle in this case, too, lies in supposing that they have some other property in common—for example, that they are all related to the same form. But in the logical case an infinite regress is generated, as it is not in the empirical case.

If, it should be observed, a philosopher were simply to say this: 'When things have a property in common, they are always related to a form', no regress arises. It could be true, for all the regress argument can show to the contrary, that there is a form of muddiness and that all muddy things are in fact rather like this form; it could be true, even, that once upon a time somebody looked at the form of muddiness, decided that he would like there to be a lot of muddy things, and so created them—as somebody might look at a painting and then decide to make a number of copies of it. For, on these hypotheses, it is not denied that in fact the things in question are all muddy. That they came into existence in a particular way, by being copied from a model, is a historical hypothesis, no concern of logic; that

they are all rather like a form would be, logically speaking, an accident. The regress arises only if it is supposed that things cannot *really* have a property in common, that *really* all they can have in common is a relationship to a form. The main point of the regress argument could be set out thus: 'If things which appear to have a property in common are really all related to the same form, then since things which are really all related to the same form really have a property in common, it will follow that things which appear to have a property in common really have a property in common.' In other words, the appeal to forms, which is meant to provide a substitute for 'really having a predicate in common' quite fails to fulfil that purpose.

The argument is perfectly general. If it is valid, then it does not matter *what* property we mention, it can never be the case that the possession of this property makes it possible for things to have a property in common. If, for example, we substitute 'being called by the same name' or 'coming under the same concept' for 'being related to the same form', the force of the infinite regress is unaffected. This means that if anybody wants to have it explained to him how a number of different things can share the same property, he has to be told that this *cannot be explained*, in the sense, at least, that we cannot substitute for 'having the same property' another predicate the use of which does not already presume that things can have a predicate in common. Of course, there are other senses of the word 'explanation' in which 'having the same property' can be explained: in the sense, for example, that 'being at a philosophical Congress' can be explained by (i.e. elucidated by) 'being at a meeting where a lot of philosophers talk'. We might, that is, find another way of expressing 'having the same properties' which is, in some respects, clearer. If, for example, somebody were to say that 'having the same properties in common' means 'having qualities or relations in common' then obviously no regress is involved.

Or we might try to show, by looking more closely at the

notion of 'same', that philosophers have been *unnecessarily* puzzled by the predicate 'having the same property'. That, roughly speaking, is Wittgenstein's technique; and perhaps such a line of reasoning would have to supplement the bare assertion: 'It is impossible in principle to explain how things can have the same property in common'—a statement backed by an infinite regress argument—before that statement could be expected to satisfy the puzzled philosopher. But the importance of the infinite regress argument remains: it shows that in an important sense of 'explain' it is impossible to explain predication. If somebody says: 'I find it unintelligible that things should have the same property', there is a sense in which we have to say to him: 'that's just the way things are'. Similarly, if somebody says 'I'm puzzled why anything should exist at all', then an infinite regress argument can be used to point out that, anyhow, this is not the sort of puzzlement that can be relieved by drawing attention to the existence of something, in the way in which if someone is puzzled about there being flies in his house we might draw attention to a hole in his flyscreens.

So far, I have been simplifying, because I have been proceeding as if the infinite regress argument were entirely 'knock-down'. But of course, there are ways of evading it. For example, the following reply might be made: 'I see no difficulty in understanding how different things can have it in common that they enter into a certain relation with something. My puzzle is only about the sharing of the same quality. Hence if " x, y, z , are all P" is explained to me as meaning that " x, y, z are all related to the form of P-ness" (or all come under the concept P or are all called by the same name "P") my difficulties are completely removed. It is not necessary for me to suppose the existence of a further form to explain the possession of a common relational predicate, for this does not *need* explanation. Plato unfortunately failed to make the distinction between relational predicates and qualitative predicates but once it is made

the alleged infinite regress is wholly ineffective.' Plato's argument, on this view, should read as follows: 'Things which appear to have qualities in common are really all related to the same form; things that are really related to the same form really have a relation in common. Therefore things which appear to have qualities in common really have a relation in common.'

To meet such a reply the philosophical argument has to be further developed. One might try to show, for example, that no reason can be given for extending such privileges to relational predicates; that if there is any difficulty in understanding how x , y , z , can all be P, there will be exactly the same difficulty in understanding how they can all be related to P. Or one might rather argue that any such relation will have to rest on a community of characteristics between x , y , and z ; that, for example, we can account for the fact that x , y , z are all related to the form P-ness rather than to the form Q-ness only by supposing that they have qualitative peculiarities in common, which are not shared by the things related to Q-ness. I shall not now pause to consider whether these replies are adequate; but they will serve to draw attention to an important fact—that an infinite regress argument always rests on certain assumptions, in this case that relational predicates are in the same logical position as qualitative predicates.

But before looking a little more fully at the general structure of the infinite regress argument, I shall turn to examine the way it is used by certain contemporary philosophers. Consider first the following from Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*: 'The crucial objection to the intellectualist legend is this. The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle' (p. 30).

Now to Ryle's argument the following objection is sometimes raised: 'I see no reason for believing that our intelligent internal theoretical operations must in turn be preceded by another operation of intelligent theorising. Hence the alleged regress never gets going; we can stop at the point at which we have pointed out that intelligent actions must be preceded by intelligent thinking.'

This objection fails to appreciate the exact character of the position Ryle is arguing against. Against the mere assertion that: 'Every intelligent action is in fact preceded by intelligent thinking', the infinite regress argument certainly does not apply, any more than there is a regress involved in asserting that 'every happy marriage is preceded by a happy engagement'. This is simply a sociological hypothesis to be examined as such: a person can put forward this hypothesis without being at all committed to asserting that every happy engagement is preceded by a previous happy engagement. Similarly, to assert that every intelligent action is preceded by intelligent thinking is to propose a psychological hypothesis which could be criticized only by making observations and seeing whether we can discover cases where in fact intelligent actions occur without being preceded by intelligent thinking. A person who says that in fact intelligent actions always are so preceded is not at all compelled to hold that every intelligent piece of theorizing is in turn preceded by another intelligent piece of theorizing. An infinite regress argument, to put the matter generally, has no applicability to the straightforward empirical assertion that every A is preceded by a B.

But the thesis Ryle is considering is not such a straightforward psychological assertion; it is in fact what we might call a 'constitution-explanation' and these are subject to philosophical criticism. The thesis is that the intelligence of an action is somehow *constituted* by the fact that it is preceded by an intelligent mental operation: just as in the *Parmenides* case a thing's property is supposed to be constituted by its relation to a form. In consequence, we can-

not possibly know that an act is intelligent without first knowing that it is preceded by an intelligent act of thinking, just as we were not able to know that a thing has a property except by knowing that it is related to a form. Then, according to the regress argument, it must equally be the case that the intelligence of the mental operation is constituted by its relation to a previous mental operation and so on *ad infinitum*. So we never are in a position to discover whether an act is or is not intelligent, although this is just what the alleged explanation set out to tell us how to do.

Now here again a certain assumption is made (parallel to the assumption that relational predicates are in the same position, in respects essential for the argument, as qualitative predicates): the assumption, namely, that what is true of the intelligence of actions is true also of the intelligence of intelligent thinking, that, for example, there is no 'privilege' attaching to the intelligence of thinking which would make it possible to 'read off' its intelligence directly. Suppose someone were to say: 'Intelligence consists in thinking syllogistically. We need only look at a piece of thinking to see whether it is syllogistic in form or not. To call an action "intelligent" is just a way of saying that it has been preceded by such a syllogistic piece of thinking.' Then the regress would not apply. Although the intelligence of actions would be constituted by their relation to preceding, intelligent, acts of mind, the intelligence of such acts of mind would not be constituted by their relation to still other acts of mind. But such a person would also really be denying that the action is intelligent in the sense in which the thinking is intelligent; Ryle has felt justified in presuming that the person who says that an action, to be intelligent, must be preceded by intelligent thinking would also say that the action is intelligent in the same sense that the thinking is intelligent. But once again we observe that an infinite regress can be evaded, temporarily at least, by claiming privilege for the first step in the alleged regress; and that to rebut this claim the philosopher has to show

that there is no good reason for extending such a privilege to a particular class of cases.

It will by now be apparent that an infinite regress argument, like any other argument, has force only under relatively complex circumstances. We can, wrongly, be convinced that by it alone we can demolish a philosophical explanation when in fact we are working with an auxiliary hypothesis—the assumption that no privilege is to be claimed for any of the class of propositions to be explained—and this hypothesis our opponents will simply not admit. Thus to revert to an earlier example, they will not admit that to explain why ‘anything’ exists by reference to God’s existence involves a regress, because, they will say, the existence of God does not require explanation in the sense in which the existence of other things requires explanation. (God is not, that is, part of ‘anything’.)

The role of these claims to privilege will become a little clearer if we consider the difference between what is sometimes called a ‘vicious’ and a ‘harmless’ infinite regress: it would be better to say, an infinite regress and an infinite series. Consider such propositions as: every event has a predecessor, every event has a cause, it is always logically possible to question a proposition. Now, it is sometimes objected to assertions such as these that ‘they involve an infinite regress’, a regress which can only be stopped by claiming privilege for a particular event which has no predecessor (e.g. the creation of the universe) or some proposition which it is logically impossible to question (e.g. that a necessary being must exist). But in fact the regress argument simply does not apply in these cases. If to ‘it is logically possible to doubt every proposition’ the objection is raised: ‘then it must be logically possible to doubt *this* proposition, and logically possible to doubt whether this proposition can be logically doubted, and so on’—the reply can simply be given ‘and so it is’.

Similarly, if to ‘every event has a cause’ the objection is raised: ‘But this cause will itself be a kind of event, and so

must have a cause, and this event in turn will have a cause and so on', then the reply can be made: 'Yes, certainly, no regress is here involved, but only an infinite series'. What makes the difference? Why can't the 'friends of the forms' retort with equal force: 'Yes, of course, there is an infinity of forms'.

The difference is that in the case of the forms the series *has* to be a finite one, if explanation by forms is to be effective, whereas in the case of causal explanation it need not be finite. Compare the following: (1) Every event has a cause; (2) to know that an event has happened one must know how it came about. The first simply tells us that if we are interested in the cause of an event, there will always be such a cause for us to discover. But it leaves us free to start and stop at any point we choose in the search for causes; we can, if we want to, go on to look for the cause of the cause and so on *ad infinitum*, but we need not do so; if we have found a cause, we have found a cause, whatever *its* cause may be. The second assertion, however, would never allow us to assert that we know that an event has happened—although it professes to lay down the conditions under which we can make precisely that assertion. For if we cannot know that an event has taken place unless we know the event that is its cause, then equally we cannot know that the cause-event has taken place unless we know its cause, and so on *ad infinitum*. In short, if the theory is to fulfil its promise, the series must stop somewhere, and yet the theory is such that the series cannot stop anywhere—unless, that is, a claim of privilege can be sustained for a certain kind of event, e.g. the creation of the Universe. It is easy to construct similar pairs of assertions, of which one commits us to the view that some procedure *can* be carried on *ad infinitum*, the other commits us to the view that an infinite series would have to be completed before the procedure could be carried out at all. For example, (1) every term is definable; (2) one cannot understand a term unless one knows its definition; (1) every proposition has

consequences; (2) to know a proposition one must know its consequences; (1) every line is infinitely divisible; (2) to move along a line we must move through all its parts. In each case, the second assertion involves a *prima facie* infinite regress, although in each case, too, the regress can, in principle, be avoided by a claim of privilege—for simple terms which are their own definition, for propositions which are their own consequence, for parts which have no parts. In each case, too, the first proposition of the pair points to an infinite series, but does not generate an infinite regress.

The difference between infinite process and infinite regress is essential, say, to Karl Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Against the possibility of a principle of induction Popper argues as follows: 'For the principle of induction must be a universal statement in its turn. Thus if we try to regard its truth as known from experience, then the very same problems which occasioned its introduction will arise all over again. To justify it, we should have to employ inductive inferences; and to justify these we should have to assume an inductive principle of a higher order; and so on. Thus the attempt to base the principle of induction on experience breaks down, since it must lead to an infinite regress' (p. 29). This is a perfectly valid infinite regress, which can only be avoided by argument to show that the principle of induction is somehow privileged: that, as Mill suggests, it can be reliably based upon experience without needing the aid of a principle of induction, that it 'isn't a proposition at all', or something of this sort.

Now, on Popper's own view, a scientific theory is testable only if statements of a lower level of universality are deducible from it; these statements must be testable in their turn and so on *ad infinitum*. And this, he says, may look like an infinite regress. But, as he points out, no regress is involved. Of course, difficulties do arise, if we say, for example, 'we are justified in believing a proposition only if it has been tested by experience', and combine *that* with the view that 'to test a proposition by experience is to

deduce from it conclusions which we are justified in believing'. For it will then follow that 'we are justified in believing a proposition only if we can deduce from it propositions we are justified in believing'; a regress applies to *this* conclusion, but not to the original assertion that 'every proposition is testable'.

As I have already suggested, it is the first step in the regress that counts, for we at once, in taking it, draw attention to the fact that the alleged explanation or justification has failed to advance matters; that if there was any difficulty in the original situation, it breaks out in exactly the same form in the alleged explanation. If this is so, the regress at once develops; whether it is so, is the point of controversy. Thus, consider Wittgenstein's argument in *Philosophical Investigations* (§239): 'How is he to know what colour he is to pick out when he hears "red"? Quite simple: he is to take the colour whose image occurs to him when he hears the word. But how is he to know which colour it is "whose image occurs to him"? Is a further criterion needed for that?' Here the original puzzle is how we know to what colour the word 'red' refers. The alleged explanation is that we find this out by having an image of 'red'. But, the argument then runs, if we need a criterion to determine to what colour the word refers, we should equally need a criterion to determine to what colour the image refers. And similarly, we might add, we should need a further criterion to determine to what colour this new criterion applies, and so on. So we could never use the criterion. To point this out *underlines* the unsatisfactory character of the original explanation and makes it perfectly clear, too, that we cannot evade the difficulty by introducing a third criterion into the story.

With these considerations in mind, we can appreciate the points raised by Waismann's recent rejection of the view that the infinite regress constitutes a philosophical proof. Waismann's essay 'How I see Philosophy' in *Contemporary British Philosophy* (Vol. 3) is of particular importance from

my point of view because it is directed against the whole position that there are any 'hard arguments', as he puts it, in philosophy.

He begins by suggesting that the 'homeland' of the infinite regress argument is mathematics. As a prototype of such a mathematical argument he offers a proof that $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational:

'Let me choose as a typical case the proof that $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational. If it were a rational number, we could find two integers m and n such that

$$m^2 = 2n^2 \quad (1)$$

We may then argue as follows. As m^2 is even, m must be even; hence $m = 2m_1$. Substitution yields

$$2m_1^2 = n^2 \quad (2)$$

As n^2 is even, n must be even; hence $n = 2n_1$. Substitution yields

$$m_1^2 = 2n_1^2 \quad (3)$$

If, then, two integers m and n exist which stand in the relation (1), they must have halves which stand in exactly the same relation (3), and these must have halves which stand in the same relation, and so on *ad infinitum*; which is plainly impossible, m and n being finite. Therefore the tentative assumption (1) cannot hold, and $\sqrt{2}$ cannot be rational. Q.E.D.' (p. 476).

It will at once be apparent that this is not at all the sort of regress we have been describing. Unfortunately, Waismann's method of presentation does not bring out the form of the argument quite clearly. As it stands, one might imagine that it is somehow inconsistent with the finiteness of a number that it should bear the same relation to a number that its half bears to that number's half. And this, of course, is not so. Twelve is twice six, six is twice three and so on *ad infinitum*; and there is nothing in this fact incompatible with the finiteness of twelve and six. The difficulty in the present case is that the halves will always have to be integers, so that m and n must be integers which have

an infinite number of integral halves. And this, so the argument runs, is incompatible with their being finite numbers.

This is a much stronger argument than a philosophical regress, as comes out in the fact that Waismann refers to it as being at once an infinite regress and a *reductio ad absurdum*. The more ordinary way of proving that $\sqrt{2}$ is irrational is by deducing from the hypothesis that $\sqrt{2}$ is rational that numbers exist which both have and do not have common factors. In Waismann's proof it is deduced, rather, that an integer which must exist if $\sqrt{2}$ is rational would have to be both finite and infinite. But the argument is in principle the same; some supposed entity would, if it existed, have contradictory properties, and therefore any proposition which implies that it exists must be rejected. Philosophical regresses, on the contrary, demonstrate only that a supposed way of explaining something or 'making it intelligible' in fact fails to explain, not because the explanation is self-contradictory, but only because it is, in the crucial respect, of the same form as what it explains. Or again, that a proposed criterion is of no use as a criterion, because to apply it we should need already to be able to make the kind of distinction for making which it is supposed to be necessary.

That Waismann does not appreciate this important distinction between destroying the claims of an alleged explanation and disproving the view that something exists comes out very clearly in his comments on Ryle's regress argument about acts of willing. This argument, according to Waismann, sets out 'to prove the non-existence of something', to 'do away with acts and states of mind'. But, of course, it does, and can do, nothing of the sort. Its objective is much more restricted: to overthrow the view that there *must be* acts of will if we are to explain how voluntary acts differ from involuntary acts. If, of course, there is no other reason for supposing that there are acts of will except that they are needed in this sort of explanation, Ryle's argument—if it were valid—would leave a person with *no*

reason for supposing that there are acts of will just as the *Parmenides* regress might leave him with *no* reason for supposing that there are forms, or might only lead him to reject *one* reason for supposing that forms exist. It does not itself disprove the existence of forms.

One might become confused on this point because in writers like Bradley the infinite regress argument is apparently used to prove that 'the world of appearances' is self-contradictory, that nothing can be Real except the Absolute. In this case, as in mathematical examples, the infinite regress argument is associated both with accusations of self-contradictoriness and with the attempt to prove something about 'Reality'. But if we look at Bradley's argument more closely, we see that in fact the infinite regress plays only a limited role in it. It would be possible to admit the validity of his infinite regresses without for a moment accepting his metaphysical conclusions. The regresses are directed, for example, against the attempt to assert that A can stand in the relation R to B only in virtue of the fact that the relation R is a third entity which unites the entity A to the entity B, when the obvious objection is that if there is any difficulty in understanding how A is related to B the same difficulty will apply to the view that A and B are both related to a third entity R. But this, of course, does nothing to show that there is a self-contradiction involved in the notion of relation, or that relations belong only to the world of appearances.

Even if every attempt to explain relations, in the sense in which Bradley is looking for an 'explanation', leads to regresses, this need not disturb us; for we may take it to mean only that relations cannot be explained—in his sense of explanation. We cannot say, without regress, that relations are possible only in virtue of the fact that they are actually qualities of one or other of the terms, or in virtue of the fact that they are entities which fall between the terms; but this is only to say that relations cannot somehow be got rid of out of the world, by being treated as a sub-

species of things, or as a sub-species of qualities. Bradley himself anticipates this sort of objection: 'The arrangement of given facts into relations and qualities may be necessary in practice,' he writes, 'but it is theoretically unintelligible. . . . And 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' (*Appearance and Reality*, p. 25). Now, of course, I am not prepared to admit either that 'the arrangement of given facts into qualities and relations' is a proper description of the situation—for to talk of an 'arrangement' is to suggest that we have been at work in the world tidily distributing it into relations and qualities—or that the 'arrangement' is a 'character of Reality'. In putting the matter in this way, Bradley is assuming his own metaphysical system. But I am asserting that there can be no question of what Bradley calls 'justifying' relations, or of 'making them intelligible', if this means showing that they are derivable from some more fundamental feature of things. Relations are not *unintelligible*, but they cannot, in the required sense, be *made* intelligible (although we can make them intelligible if all this means is helping to remove the appearance of mystery with which they are sometimes surrounded). All this is brought out in the fact that attempts to make relations intelligible, as Bradley saw, issue in infinite regresses.

To return now to Waismann. I am suggesting that he has not really seen the force, or the limitations, of the infinite regress argument in philosophy, mainly because he has wrongly identified it with a quite different argument in mathematics. But a good deal of his time, all the same, is spent in drawing attention to a point I have also emphasized—that it is, in principle, possible to evade (temporarily, at least) infinite regress arguments, especially by claiming privilege for a certain class of propositions. That is the only real ground for his final conclusion that 'no philosophical argument ends with a Q.E.D. However

forceful, it never forces. There is no bullying in philosophy neither with the stick of logic nor with the stick of language' (*Contemporary British Philosophy*, p. 480).

If we are prepared to say that an argument 'forces' only if there is no position one can possibly take up which will evade its conclusion, then no doubt the infinite regress argument does not force. Or rather, even that cannot be said: for if it does not force us to conclude that, say, a supposed explanation fails to explain it *does* force us to say this (presuming we accept the validity of the argument), *unless we are prepared to take a particular sort of evasive step*—to claim privileges. This connects with a wider point: that every valid argument 'forces', in the sense that it restricts freedom of movement, but that no argument forces absolutely. One can evade any empirical argument in any of a number of ways; but the argument still rules out certain possibilities, and it may in practice force us to a certain conclusion. For the means of evasion may not in fact lie open to us, even if we are well aware that they exist as logical possibilities. Pigs might fly, but we shall not wish to be drawn into asserting that they do. Similarly people can in fact be forced by infinite regress arguments to change their views, even if more ways than one of evading the argument still lie before them as logical possibilities.

Perhaps, however, Waismann's answer would be something like this: there are some arguments which can be evaded only by challenging the generally accepted rules for that type of argument—e.g. substitution rules in mathematics, or the rule that suppositions must be rejected which issue in contradictions—and only after arguments of this sort ought we to write Q.E.D. Then claiming privilege for a class of propositions is not challenging the rules, and so an argument which still leaves open the possibility of a claim of privilege ought not to have Q.E.D. written after it. But it is a long way from this to Waismann's further claim that 'all the proofs in a good book on philosophy could be dispensed with without its losing a whit of its convincingness'

(p. 482)—that the most an argument like an infinite regress can do is to point to ‘a knot in thought’, that ‘the real strength lies in the examples’. No empirical proof, on his account of the matter, ought to have Q.E.D. written after it; it does not follow that all the empirical proofs can be left out of, say, a book on biology without its losing a whit of its convincingness.

A little later, Waismann adopts a somewhat weaker position: ‘Arguments on a small scale, containing a few logical steps only, may be rigorous. The substance of my remarks is that the conception of a whole philosophical view is never a matter of logical steps’ (*ibid.*). This seems to me wholly inconsistent with what Waismann has said just above—and I do not see how it is possible to maintain that a philosophy can contain rigorous arguments only if they are ‘on a small scale’, containing only a few logical steps. The rigour cannot somehow go out of them if they are on a larger scale or contain more logical steps.

But I do not wish to claim, in any case, that infinite regresses, or any form of philosophical reasoning, can be used to construct ‘the conception of a whole philosophical view’. The role of infinite regresses is limited; sometimes they do no more than prove that a particular explanation, or a particular criterion, which somebody has proposed quite fails to accomplish what it sets out to accomplish. Sometimes, I suggest, they are more important than this: in company, anyhow, with other philosophical arguments they bring us to see the limits of explanation, what have to be accepted as ‘brute facts’, and the limits of criteria, what distinctions have to be accepted as just recognizable. This is always something formal: that something exists, that things have properties in common, and are related to one another, that there are continuities and discontinuities, that some propositions are true and some false. These are not conclusions deduced from an infinite regress: they are, indeed, not conclusions at all. But that they are not, and cannot be, conclusions, the infinite regress argument helps us to see.