

PREDICATES

Traditional logic analyzed a sentence into two grammatical constituents, viz. the subject and the predicate. The subject is that of which something is said and the predicate is what is said of it. The subject-predicate pattern was supposed to be the paradigm of all descriptive sentences in the indicative mood, i. e. of sentences which are capable of being either true or false. These sentences alone were philosophically interesting, with the result that all other types of sentences, like questions, imperatives, suppositions etc. received scant attention and were insufficiently analysed. Almost the whole of classical Indian thought, for example, is an explication of the variations on the 'subject-predicate' theme.

A grammatical sentence was analysed into the two terms, viz. the subject and the predicate, connected by means of what was called the copula, which is some inflected form or other of the verb 'to be'. The thesis of reductionism, viz. that all sentences can be reduced to the subject-predicate form, puts the poor little verb 'to be' to inordinate strain. Any other verb, any kind of predication, was sought to be reduced to some sort of thing that the subject was. The sentence 'Brutus killed Caesar' thus became 'Brutus was the killer of Caesar'. Straightforward relational sentences were twisted and mangled, in order that they could be made to conform to the prescribed norm. The fact that the stratagem does not succeed is clearly brought out by the utter incompetence of traditional logic, when confronted with a relational inference. Jevons noted that even such a simple argument as "A horse is an animal; therefore, the head of a horse is the head of an animal" cannot at all be handled by the resources of the entire syllogistic machinery.

But apart from the recalcitrance of relations and relational compounds, even the verb 'to be', accepted as *the* verb of predication par excellence, contains hidden complexities which the traditional analysis fails to notice. Take the sentence 'Vaidehī is Sītā', apparently conforming to the paradigmatic pattern. But is 'Sītā' really a predicate? It is a proper name and, as such, a referring expression. Can a proper name be employed as a predicate at all? The import of the sentence is that two referring expressions have the same referent, and the sentence is therefore a statement of identity, containing no predicates, despite the grammatical nuisance of 'Sītā' occurring after the verb 'is', since the role of a proper name is to stand as the subject of a sentence. Predication takes place only when we have a referring expression and another expression of a different sort, e. g. in the sentence 'Sītā is unhappy'. The amendment 'Vaidehī is another name of Sītā' makes the situation worse, for now 'Sītā' is explicitly the subject, about whom we are saying that she has another name too. Identity sentences are predicateless.

Coming to subject-predicate sentences proper, how do we understand the nature of predication? Many philosophers, both ancient and modern, have given an account of predication which can be called the reference theory of predication. According to this account predicates too, like subjects, are referring expressions. Just as subjects refer to things, predicates refer to certain other things. The popular candidates for predicative reference have been variously called universals, ideas, properties, qualities, concepts and what not. Any theory which holds that such abstract entities exist as referents of predicates is some form of realism. Predication then resolves itself to some relation between two sorts of entities. This relation in Plato, e. g. is one of participation or imitation of a form. In more recent times Frege provides a good model of the reference theory. The subject of a sentence refers to what Frege calls an 'Object'. Similarly the referent of a predicate is a 'Concept'. If however it could be shown that subjects too might refer to concepts, then the distinction between subject and predicate would lapse. Take the sentence 'The concept of wisdom is difficult to explain'. Apparently we are referring to a concept as the subject of the sentence. Frege however has consistently to deny this, for otherwise his theory would break down. According

to Frege, the phrase 'concept of wisdom' does not refer to the concept of wisdom, but to an object. This is very curious; if we can refer to Banaras Hindu University by the phrase 'Banaras Hindu University', why should we be debarred from referring to the concept of wisdom by the phrase 'the concept of wisdom'? That predicates are not concepts, can also be brought out in another manner. If predicates were concepts we could always substitute a concept for a predicate in a sentence in accordance with the Leibnizian law. For example, 'Sītā is unhappy' could be rewritten as 'Sītā, the concept of unhappiness'. This paraphrase however, far from being illuminating, produces nonsense.

Coming nearer home we find the Nyāya philosopher advocating a form of the reference theory. The subject-predicate model is taken as the paradigm of all sentences, as indeed is done in every shade of Indian thought. Both the constituents of a sentence, in fact any linguistic unit at all (*pada*), are referring expressions. The world contains as many things as there are meaningful units (*padas*) to refer to them. Everything is a referent, a *padārtha*. The subject of any predication refers to the category of *dravya* or substance, while predicates refer to *guṇa* and *karma*, quality and action. According to the Nyāya way of looking at things, a *dravya* has, or possesses, a *guṇa* or a *karma*. The latter, though belonging to the *dravya*, are entities in their own right. *Dravya* is one sort of thing, *guṇa* is another. The fun begins when we ask how one thing can be predicated of another. A quality is ascribed to a substance, but how is the nature of this ascription to be made intelligible? If the two belong to different categories, how are they to be brought together? The Nyāya posits a peculiar relation of 'inness' or 'belonging' between *dravya* and *guṇa*. The quality is *in* the substance. This relation is called *samavāya* which is defined as that which generates the notion of 'inness' (*ihapratyayahetu*). The notion of course needs further refinement. Any kind of 'inness', for example, the letter being *in* my pocket, would not do. Ultimately the notion is incapable of further conceptual clarification, but can only be ostensively defined. That is to say, in order to explain the relation of *samavāya* the best one could do is to say that it is that relation which is exemplified in the situation of the substance-quality complex, and that it cannot be explicated any further. However that may be, according to

Nyāya samavāya is itself the referent of a linguistic particle and, as such, is one more padārtha, one more thing. Predication is thus not the simple affair of a conjunction of two sorts of entities, but involves three distinct padārthas, viz. dravya, guṇa, and samavāya in between them. When two things are brought together, they create a new situation which did not obtain when they were in isolation. Their togetherness is as much an aspect of the new situation as are the two terms themselves. By themselves one would not belong to the other. Nor can any one of them, taken singly, explain predication. This impasse is an echo of the hoary paradox formulated by Antisthenes, the Cynic. In the sentence 'A is B', if B is identical with A, nothing is being said about A, and the sentence is vacuous. If on the other hand B is different from A, then the sentence says that A is what it is not, and is therefore a contradiction. The Nyāya method of evading the paradox is to posit the relation of samavāya as making intelligible the nature of the 'is' in the sentence 'A is B'. It is a tertium quid, something that mediates between two different things, and is not a sign of identity at all. 'A is B' is not to be equated with 'A is the same as B'.

The acceptance of samavāya as a third term makes the situation highly complicated, and lays the Nyāya wide open to some very serious criticism. S'āṅkara has no difficulty in demolishing the house of cards built on samavāya. He points out that if a guṇa, being a new sort of entity, requires intervention of a third entity to make it relevant to its substrate, samavāya itself, being another distinct entity, stands in the same predicament. We have to bring in still something else in order to relate the relation itself to each of relata, and this clearly leads to an infinite regress. Bradley makes substantially the same point. It seems to me that both the sides in this debate, viz. the Nyāya and his critic, are extremely confused. To take up the charge of infinite regress first. As a good Indian, I will not refer to S'āṅkara, but only to Bradley, and try to show how the infinite regress argument is misconceived, and does not affect the Nyāya position at all. The confusion is to think that a relation functions in the same way as a quality does. If they belong to different categories, as the Nyāya believes, then the attempt to confute this categorial distinction is to commit a 'category mistake'. From the fact that a quality needs being related to what it qualifies, it does not

follow that the relation too should stand in similar need. To say that every happy child comes from a happy family is not to say that a happy family must be imbedded in another happy family, as though a happy child and a happy family belong to the same category. If A depends on B, that does not by itself entail that B should depend on something else. To take a hypothetical example : Suppose that in a philosophers' conference every participant refers to Kālidāsa. We are perplexed and seek an explanation. Then we come to know that they are imitating a particular philosopher, having great prestige, who refers to Kālidāsa. Our perplexity should end here, and we should not go on to ask whom this philosopher is imitating. He may be a great creative genius who was the first to point out the profound implications of Kālidāsa for philosophy. Even if we generalize the situation, and formulate the principle that every philosopher imitates somebody, even then no infinite regress is generated. To say that every number has a successor immediately leads to an infinite number series, but an infinite series is not an infinite regress. The latter is vicious, but an infinite sequence is innocuous. If an infinite sequence too were to be vicious then the whole body of mathematical truths would crumble. How then do we distinguish between a benign sequence and a vicious regress? The latter, I believe, arises when we say, not merely that every number has a successor, but make the much stronger statement that to know any one number we require to know its successor. The latter statement is palpably false. Each number is finite, and though it might have a successor, its knowledge does not depend on knowing the successor. Similarly 'every man imitates somebody' does not by itself lead to a vicious regress, unless we go on to say that to know that a person is an imitator we have to know whom he is imitating. Only in the latter case is there a vicious circle or an infinite regress. In the context of the Nyāya, the critic might well be right that a relation itself depends on other relations – the Nyāya would not concede even this—but even then a relation might still be independently understood in its functioning. Because every man has a father it does not follow that a man has to climb the paternal shoulders every time he sneezes. It seems that two different questions are involved here, viz. how a relation relates and how the relation itself is related, and the answer to one need not be the same as that to the other.

The infinite regress argument is thus not a knock-down argument. A philosopher might try to best his opponent, not with the help of any logical stick, but only with a solid, hard bamboo stick.

So far we have been considering the charge of infinite regress brought against the Nyāya. Coming back to the Naiyāyika himself, we find him no less muddled in his argument than his critic. Indeed he invites the criticism by thinking that relations are some sort of entities, on par with substance and qualities, and have an ontological status of their own. He compounds his confusion by thinking that while qualities require an explanation, relations do not. If a relation can relate, so can a quality characterize, without further complications having to be introduced. The Nyāya fails to perceive that if a quality cannot characterize a thing independently, introduction of a relation is not an improvement on the situation. If 'a quality characterizing a thing' is unintelligible, 'a quality being related to thing' is no less so. The appeal to relation, which is meant to provide an explanation of 'having a predicate', fails to fulfil that purpose. If characterization is not self-explanatory, intervention of a relation will not make it more evident. The misfortunes of the Nyāya are due to the fact that it reduces qualitative predicates to relational predicates. Being related is one mode of how things are, being characterized is another, and one cannot be supposed to be more basic than the other. If qualitative predicates cannot function in their own right, neither can the relational predicates do, the original predicament remaining unaltered. Why should the Nyāya presume that relations are somehow more privileged than qualities? It is the initial step in the argument that has been fallacious.

But we may now discern an even more basic mistake that the Nyāya makes. The real original sin it has committed is the reification of predicates. It regards a predicate itself as a referring expression, and what it refers to is then ontologized as belonging to a separate category by itself. But adjectives are not nouns. If predicates too were only names, then all that a sentence amounts to would be a mere listing of names, which can never make up a meaningful assertion. Subjects are names by virtue of their logical role in a sentence, hence predicates cannot be names, neither of qualities nor of anything else. I am not denying here the existence of qualities and other such abstract entities. The

point I want to make is that there do not have to be abstract entities, and that the argument adduced to prove their existence fails. Even if qualities did exist, that fact would not explain the essential nature of predication. The words that apparently function as names of abstract entities can be rewritten in such a way that their putative naming function is taken away without loss of meaning. A sentence like 'Honesty is the best policy' can be paraphrased as 'Honest people best succeed in their vocation', where an abstract noun takes its rightful place as an adjective. Such sentences are 'systematically misleading', but they are not false or nonsensical insofar as they could be rephrased into true or meaningful sentences. The logician is wary of such pitfalls in language. 'There is a possibility', for example, is never existentially quantified as 'There is an x such that x is a possibility.' That does not mean however that there are no real possibilities in the world, but only that its phrasing is misleading, tempting us to make bogus inferences.

If predicates are not names, what then does predication consist in? If the reference theory of predication breaks down, we have to look in another direction in order to explain its nature and function. The most promising line here is also the least exciting. All that we seem capable of saying about predication is the trivial statement that predicates are in some sense *about* the subject, in a sense in which the subject is not *about* anything else. Its triviality need not deter us, since philosophical truths, arrived at in howsoever torturous a manner, ultimately tend to be something very simple and obvious. We come to see not something profound and obscure, but what had always, been clearly before us, only we did not care to see it. The obscurity lies in our asking the wrong question, viz. what sort of *entities* are the predicates? What do the predicates *refer* to? So we have to retrace our steps and go to the very roots of the mischief, and say that predicates are not entities at all. When we predicate we say something *about* the subject. This account is however vague and requires further amendment. What is it for the predicate to be *about* the subject? Take the sentence 'Rama is running.' A straightforward analysis would confirm that Rama is the subject of the sentence, about whom we are saying that he is running. But there could be another way of looking at the sentence. Suppose

that a child, not familiar with the English language, asks : " What is ' *running* ' ? I do not understand the word ". Then, instead of a lengthy verbal explanation, I might attempt an ostensive definition. I might point to Rama and say " Look ! That is what ' *running* ' is ". If this is a plausible account of one of the contexts in which the sentence could have been uttered, then the sentence is, in an important sense, not about Rama, but about ' *running* '. Here it would be natural to think that we have said something about ' *running* '. We have explained what ' *running* ' is. Is Rama then the predicate of the sentence ? This is absurd, and so we have to tighten the rules of the use of ' about ', in order to explicate the meaning of predication. I do not know how precisely this is to be done, but make bold to offer some tentative suggestion, in terms of set theory. A predicate P is about a subject if and only if the referent of the subject can be said to be included among the things which are P. That is to say, every predicate generates a set, which would contain the referent as one of its members. In this sense a referent does not constitute a set, and cannot therefore include the predicate as one of its members. The referent can certainly contain its parts within itself, but whole-part relationship is not to be confused with that of set-membership. My stomach is contained both in my body as also in the set of stomachs. It is only in the latter sense that we could speak of predication. The ancient dictum that a subject cannot be predicated of anything simply means that the subject is never a set, but can only be a member of a set constituted by the predicate. This shows up the essential asymmetry between the subject and the predicate. This account, I am afraid, is extremely unclear, but so is indeed any contentious issue in philosophy. Once we start seeing things clearly, philosophy would wither away.

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