

Précis of *Metaphysics of States of Affairs*

The main goal of *Metaphysics of States of Affairs* (2018) is to provide a detailed metaphysics of Armstrongian states of affairs. I call this theory or approach (an) ‘Armstrongian state of affairs ontology’, ‘my state of affairs ontology’ or, more generally and optimistically, simply ‘state of affairs ontology’ without the eponym or possessive. States of affairs in this sense are concrete and contingent complexes that are instantiations of concrete properties and relations by concrete particulars. Whereas Armstrong in *A World of States of Affairs* (1997) pays a lot of attention to how his theory can illuminate a wide range of independent metaphysical issues, I focus on the constituents of states of affairs and the problem of how they are unified. This is widely recognised to be a serious problem for states of affairs ontology, since states of affairs are non-mereological complexes. I defend at some length a novel solution to the problem, on which states of affairs are unified by a self-relating relation, which is a constituent of any state of affairs. Like Armstrong (*ibid.*), I consider properties and relations to be divided into ‘first class’ (roughly: sparse) on the one hand and ‘second and third class’ (roughly: abundant) on the other, with the former being universals (Armstrong 1978). I also agree with him that all and only properties and relations in states of affairs are universals but, unlike him, I abstain from calling particulars possessing abundant properties ‘second-class states of affairs’.¹

In Chapter. 1, I introduce my book’s project. This includes making explicit or defining accompanying (meta-)metaphysical assumptions, methodological principles, scope and restrictions of the book, and so on. Armstrongian state of affairs ontology is, of course, a naturalist orientated metaphysics – but I understand naturalism in a more modest sense than Armstrong himself: I do not, for instance, agree with his grand claim that the spacetime world is all that exists. To my mind, it is an open question whether there are *abstracta* – provided that they are not constituents of states of affairs. I do, however, subscribe to a kind of naturalistic composition principle, which I, for want of a better term, call the Principle of Homogenous Spatiotemporal Composition: no complex can have both concrete and abstract constituents. The biggest methodological claim I espouse is perhaps Lewis’s Razor, that is, the version of Ockham’s Razor put forward by Lewis in his (1973) that it is the number of ontological types,

¹ A further point of general resemblance is that the state of affairs ontology I develop is quite congenial to logical atomism, though it does share more with Wittgenstein’s version of logical atomism than with Russell’s and Armstrong’s (cf. Simons 2003).

as opposed to ontological tokens, that cuts ice in metaphysics. Having described these background assumptions, I am also in a position to introduce two major issues at play throughout most of book. The first is the main problem of states of affairs ontology, namely, the problem of unity, which Chaps. 9–10 focus on. The second is the main ontological role for state of affairs, namely, that of being truthmakers.

Part I of the book includes Chaps. 2–4. The first of these, ‘The Main Role for State of Affairs Ontology, and Its two Rivals’, is on truthmaking. I outline two major approaches to truthmaking: maximalism and minimalism, as well as the compromise between them which I term ‘intermedianism’. Roughly, maximalism is the view that any truth is made true by something that exists. I defend this view against the deflationist minimalism on which a truth is true because of the way things are, not because of a truthmaker. Maximalism faces big challenges with irreducibly negative truths, but fortunately this is not an issue I need to go into, so I can conclude from the principles of maximalist truthmaking that atomic states of affairs can be truthmakers for molecular truths. Given Lewis’s Razor and the fact that I already endorse atomic states of affairs, I happily reject molecular states of affairs.

I use this conception of truthmaking to define my notion of ‘ontological reduction’, which I call truthmaking reducibility (TM-reducibility), and which I make frequent use of in the book.² It is my counterpart of Armstrong’s notion of supervenience (1997, *passim*). Roughly, entities that are expressed by propositions are TM-reducible if they are not included in the truthmakers of these truths. Roughly again, these correspond to Armstrong’s supervenient entities or, equivalently, his second- and third-class entities. Importantly, molecular ‘states of affairs’ are TM-reducible, as are the corresponding complex properties, as well as non-external relations. Note that this does not imply that TM-reducible entities are not real, only that they do not exist at the level of truthmakers, an issue I shall return to in my reply to William Vallicella below. Compare how Armstrong emphasises that supervenient entities are not unreal, only that they are ‘no addition of being’ (*ibid.*). Unlike Armstrong’s notion of supervenience, however, TM-reducibility is not associated with a counterpart of his idea of ‘symmetrical supervenience’ and that symmetrically supervenient entities are identical. TM-reducibility is a one-way street.

Chapter. 3, ‘A Partial Look at Trope Theory’, is the first of two chapters devoted to an important challenger to state of affairs ontology. (It is ‘partial’, since it ignores a big part of

² For a criticism of this notion, see the commentary by De Rizzo & Schnieder in this book symposium, as well as Zhao (2021).

trope theory, viz. its treatment of the problem of universals, for the simple reason that the book generally brackets this problem.), I argue that tropes fail as a rival of states of affairs. For trope theory in its basic bundle version, I consider Keith Campbell's theory in particular. It is a predicament for it to explain what is meant by its claim that tropes are simple yet at the same time both have a nature and a particularity. Donald Mertz has criticised this at length, and in line with his criticism, I show that trope theory cannot substantiate the claim without leading to insurmountable difficulties. I also argue that two other, seemingly more promising versions of trope theory, C. B. Martin's substance attribute version and Peter Simons's nuclear theory, fail as competitors of state of affairs ontology for their own reasons.

Chapter. 4, 'A Partial Look at Moderate Realism', examines Donald Mertz's 'moderate realism'; and like the previous chapter, it is only a 'partial' discussion, and for the same reason. Moderate realism is in many respects quite similar to trope theory. Its properties and relations are also particularized; Mertz calls them 'relation instances'. As this term suggests, Mertz considers properties to be just a special case of relations, a view I think is mistaken. Despite this, however, moderate realism it is *prima facie* superior to trope theory in the present context, due to how clearly it acknowledges and addresses the problem of unity. In fact, very tellingly, Mertz interchangeably calls relation instances 'unit attributes'. He claims that they are unified complexes – they are, he says, 'non-composite wholes'. This sounds very much like a contradiction in terms, but Mertz insists that it is merely analogous to how a circle is 'simple in its continuity'. As it happens, the only independent argument Mertz puts forward for a 'non-composite whole' not being a *contradictio in adjecto* is this circle analogy, so the best non-question-begging argument against Mertz is to rebut the analogy. In line with earlier criticism by Vallicella (2004), I attempt to do this.

Part II includes Chaps. 5–8. The first of these, 'Bare Particulars', has as its chief goal an investigation of particulars *qua* particulars in states of affairs, and its principal thesis is that they are bare particulars. Ordinary objects – molecules and mountains, trees and tigers, tables and chairs, as well as persons like you and I – are 'thick particulars', i.e. particulars 'with' their non-relational properties. In contrast, 'thin particulars' are these objects considered 'without' their non-relational properties. Roughly, the concept of bare particulars is the more theoretical counterpart of thin particulars in this sense. I identify the thick particular with the instantiation of the conjunction of the properties instantiated by the thin particular (bare particular). Equivalently, the thick particular is identical to a conjunction of atomic states of affairs. In state of affairs ontology, then, thick particulars are TM-reducible. Recall that this does not mean that they are unreal, similarly to how Armstrong's supervenient entities are not

unreal. Bare particulars have at times been quickly dismissed as self-contradictory or absurd entities. But even extant views that take them seriously can be shown to be unsatisfactory. Instead, I propose and defend the thesis that the bareness of bare particulars is that they instantiate, as opposed to include their properties. Further, I argue that that they always do that (or necessarily do it, if one prefers a modal formulation).

Chapter. 6, ‘Properties’, has as its main purpose the investigation of which kinds of property are constituents of states of affairs. I argue for my ‘logically atomist’ view that negative, disjunctive, and conjunctive properties are TM-reducible. Equivalently, negative, disjunctive and conjunctive states of affairs are TM-reducible. Armstrong’s tripartite division of entities into first-, second- and third-class entities is particularly relevant for properties. On my terminology, first-class properties are TM-irreducible, while second- and third-class ones are not. Armstrong, however, believes that conjunctive properties are first class. He thinks that, firstly, there could be synergy and, secondly, that there could be complexity ‘all the way down’, and that both possibilities require conjunctive properties. D. H. Mellor has countered both of these claims with what he calls ‘Ramsey’s test’ for the existence of universals; and he explains these alleged phenomena well without conjunctive properties. For this and other reasons, I conclude that, Armstrong’s argument does not warrant a rejection of my view that conjunctive properties are TM-reducible.

Chapter. 7, ‘Relations’, examines the (material) relations in states of affairs. I start out by drawing the standard distinction between internal and into external relations. I expand it by making it tripartite: non-external relations can be divided into internal and ‘grounded relations’.³ It follows from my analysis that only external relations are TM-irreducible, and hence that they are the only kind of (material) relation found in states of affairs. Next up is another basic feature of relations, namely, their direction or sense, an important feature of non-symmetrical relations. I sketch a few aspects of a ‘directionalist’ view of direction, which enables me to provide identity conditions for states of affairs. States of affairs are identical if they have the same constituents, and these constituents are arranged in the same way. I end the chapter by examining reflexive relations, arguing that they are TM-reducible. On the one hand, this investigation of is a bit of an addendum. But, on the other, it is important to be clear what reflexivity is so as to avoid confusing it with the self-relating of the all-important U*-relation, as I stress at a later point (Chap. 10).

³ I now think I should have adhered more to the terminology of the standard distinction and called internal relations ‘strongly internal relations’ and grounded relations ‘weakly internal relations’, as does Johansson (2014).

Chapter. 8, ‘Concrete Universals’, is concerned with the requirement that universals in states of affairs be concrete. This is a general must for a naturalist state of affairs ontology, and it is also a specific demand of the Principle of Spatiotemporal Homogenous Composition when the particulars in states of affairs are concrete. I identify three basic features of concreteness of universals, of which the well-known multiple location is the most important; the two others are a non-mereological part-whole relationship and the possibility of universals’ co-location. I respond briefly to a number of objections to concrete universals, but one of them merits detailed discussion: Douglas Ehring’s ingenious ‘argument from local external relations’ (2002). I try to argue that it fails by committing a kind of category mistake. I finally look at the feature of multiple location for relational universals. To use Leibniz’s famous example of the relation of paternity holding between David and Solomon, this relation is neither in David nor in Solomon, nor somehow in both of them, standing with a leg in each. I briefly consider Armstrong’s three suggestions for the location of relations, of which I think the best one probably is that it is mistaken to ask for their location – again, due to it being a kind of category mistake.

Part III, ‘The Unity of States of Affairs’, include Chaps. 9–10 and is the final part of *Metaphysics of States of Affairs*. In Chap 9, I return to the problem of unity and what constraints it puts on state of affairs ontology if it is to solve it. I give a detailed account of the problem of unity as a species of the problem of complexity, the problem of how *many* constituents can make up *one* entity. The problem of unity is thus identified as the problem of complexity for states of affairs. I subscribe to what I call *relational internalism*, the traditionally dominant approach to solving this problem, on which it is a relation, U, in a state of affairs that unifies it. I distinguish two main versions of relational internalism: naive internalism on which U is related to its relata, and classic internalism on which it is not. The most natural version of naive internalism, common internalism, is the view that U is related to its relata (i.e. the other constituents of the state of affairs) by ‘another’ relation – but this quickly has Bradley’s regress as a consequence. In Sect. 9.2, I identify and make precise to key metaphysical principles underlying common internalism, which make explicit precisely why and how common internalism has this result. In contrast, classic internalism, by denying that U is related to its relata, avoids Bradley’s regress right off the bat – but this denial means that it does not solve the problem of unity at all, at most doing a kind of question-begging handwaving (‘a state of affairs is unified because U unifies it’). How to solve this dilemma? The answer is, I submit, to hold that U relates itself to the constituents of the state of affairs or, to put it alternatively, that it is related to its relata by itself. I call this novel species of relational internalism *self-relating internalism* and its self-relating U-relation U^* . In Chapter. 10, ‘The Unity of States of

Affairs and Bradley's Regress', I present and discuss the sceptre of Bradley's regress in detail, and I look closely at U*'s features. But what exactly is Bradley's regress and why is it vicious, if it is indeed vicious? I develop a version of it, tailored to relational internalism, which I call the 'argument analysis'. One of the desirable features of the argument analysis is that it illustrates how the two key metaphysical principles underlying common internalism are involved in the regress. Of course, this does not by itself answer if Bradley's regress is vicious, but it presents a template for it posing the question. My own view is that, roughly speaking, given that an *explanation* has to come at an end to be successful, Bradley's regress is vicious because it is a never-ending explanation, as it were. Other accounts of its viciousness, for instance in terms of grounding, will probably be analogous to this. Needless to say, U* is a new kid on the block, so I finish the chapter by comparing and contrasting it to other relations.

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