IMMANENT REALISM AND STATES OF AFFAIRS

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1 Introduction

This chapter considers a central aspect of the relationship between immanent realism and states of affairs. Immanent realism, or Aristotelian realism, is the view that properties are universals, and that universals are somehow present 'in' their instances. In Scholastic terms, they are *universalia in rebus*. They contrast with transcendent universals, the universals of transcendent or Platonic realism, which 'transcend' their instances (*universalia ante rem*). If, like me, you are attracted to both realism about universals and naturalism (the doctrine that every entity exists in space and/or time), immanent realism is appealing, since it pulls universals out of 'Plato's heaven' and brings them 'down to earth'. A question worth asking is *how* they are brought down to earth, as it were. I call it the *hosting question*. This is a special case of the general issue of what it is for a universal to be instantiated.

One traditional answer is that they are hosted by being constituents of 'bundles of universals' (see chapter 14, this volume). In this chapter, I shall explore the answer that they are hosted by being constituents of the *states of affairs* that result from their instantiations. I shall pay particular attention to two competing specific answers found in David Armstrong's middle period (late 1970's to late 1990's). For as well as being quite accessible, Armstrong of this period is, by far, the most important contemporary author on both immanent universals and states of affairs.

'Universal' is a well-known term. Roughly, a universal is a property or relation construed as a 'one over many' which is shared by the things that instantiate it (its instances). The notion of a 'state of affairs' is perhaps less familiar. In the most general sense, a state of affairs can be said to exist "if and only if a particular […] has a property or, instead, a relation holds between two or more particulars" (Armstrong 1997: 1).[1] For instance, *the tomato's being red* and *John's loving Sam* are states of affairs.

The plan for the chapter is as follows. First, in section 2, I contrast immanent universals with transcendent universals, and consider whether they are concrete or abstract.

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[1] Strictly speaking, a *first-order* state of affairs. Second-order states of affairs are when first-order states of affairs have properties or stand in relations (e.g. *the tomato's being blighted causing it to be discarded*), or when first-order properties and relations have properties or stand in relations (e.g. *redness being a colour*); and similarly for higher orders. As is common in the literature, this chapter deals only with first-order states of affairs.

This is an important matter: if they are abstract, they are not really brought down to earth from Plato's heaven, and hence the hosting question is a non-issue for them. Next, in section 3, I introduce the notion of states of affairs and the main relevant features of them. This leads to distinguishing two kinds of 'compositional' states of affairs, which, roughly, correspond to two versions of immanent realism in Armstrong. Then, in section 4, I present and discuss Armstrong's first version, showing that it lacks a coherent formulation; and finally, in section 5, I sketch his second version and suggest that (an extension of) it might answer the hosting question.

2 Abstract versus concrete universals

Traditionally, immanent universals are construed as concrete (spatiotemporal), unlike the abstract (non-spatiotemporal) universals of transcendent or Platonic realism. Due to transcendent universals being abstracta, transcendent realism is committed to a two-realm ontology: the abstract realm of universals and the concrete realm of particulars. A Platonic universal, when instantiated, is abstract even though the particulars instantiating it are concrete. Since Platonic universals are abstracta, they are unacceptable to naturalists, such as Armstrong. But perhaps less obviously, it makes the instantiation of a universal by concrete particulars rather mysterious: it has to bridge a chasm between two profoundly different realms, the world of abstracta and the world of concreta (Vallicella 2016a). This *bridging* seems mysterious because instantiation is neither internal nor intentional. Cases of internal relations bridging these realms (e.g., *being a member of* holding between Socrates and his singleton {Socrates}) seem unproblematic. So do cases of intentional relations crossing the chasm (e.g., *thinking of* holding between Socrates and the number 4). Plato himself spoke of instantiation involving the particulars as 'copies' of the Forms. This rather obscure 'copy theory' of instantiation was probably a result of his idiosyncratic view that Forms characterize themselves (Red is red, Large is large, etc.), so that they are able to resemble particulars. In any event, in the tradition of transcendent realism following Plato, it seems no one has provided an illuminating account of instantiation. In short, transcendent realism as traditionally understood faces a bridging problem owing to the abstractness of its universals, which immanent realism does not; conversely, immanent realism has a hosting problem, which transcendent realism is free from.

However, at least two influential philosophers maintain that immanent universals are *not* concrete. If they are right, then immanent realism does not really bring universals down

to earth from Plato's heaven, and its universals do not encounter the hosting question. (Of course, we can still ask the corresponding general question of what it is for such universals to be instantiated.) One proponent of immanent universals, E. J. Lowe (2006), argues that they are not concrete, and *eo ipso* he is committed to their being abstract. He does not, however, seem to acknowledge this commitment. In contrast, another proponent of immanent universals, Reinhardt Grossmann (1983, 1992), is explicit and unabashed that they are abstract. Grossmann rejects concrete universals as part of a general criticism of naturalism (1992: 12–13, 22–29), whereas Lowe's discussion is relevant to our purposes in this chapter.

Lowe's argument focuses on an issue for immanent realism that arises when reflecting of its notion of 'instance'. The instance of a universal is the particular that instantiates it. As mentioned, an immanent universal exists 'in' its instances. This intimacy between an immanent universal and its particular instances is encapsulated in the so-called 'principle of instantiation'. Here is a formulation of this principle:

> (PI) For each *n*-adic universal U, there exist at least *n* particulars such that they
> are U. (Armstrong 1978a: 137)

An immanent universal is nothing without its instances, so to speak. By itself, however, this principle tells us nothing about *how* an immanent is 'in' its instances. According to the concretist approach, on which concrete immanent universals are hosted by concrete states of affairs, the way in which a universal is 'in' its instances is rather literal. Roughly, a universal is 'in' its instances both in the sense that (i) it is a constituent of them and in the sense that (ii) it is co-located with them. Now, the first sense can only really be presented when the notion of a state of affairs has been explained, which is not until the following section. But the second sense may be introduced at this point. An immanent universal is co-located with its instances, as it is *wholly* present 'in' each of them. For example, the redness of our tomato is co-located with each red tomato (of the same shade of red), and indeed with every other particular that is red (of that shade), since all of the universal is 'in' each instance. The description 'wholly present' is important: it is not the case that a *part* of the universal is in each of its instances, the way a scattered particular is, say, a sail covering a group of people, to use Plato's example from the *Parmenides* (131e–c). Such a universal (scattered particular) only has parts, each of which is co-located with a part of the instance: one part of it (part of the sail) is where one particular (person) is; another part of it is where another particular (person) is; and so on. An immanent universal is wholly located in different places (if its

instances are). This distinctive locatedness of immanent universals is known as 'multiple location'.

This is a highly controversial issue, and understandably so: multiple location is radically different from the locatedness of particulars familiar to us pre-theoretically. It is precisely multiple location that Lowe (2006: 99) singles out in his argument against concrete universals. Lowe objects that, since the universal is wholly located in each of its instances, it appears that the location of any one of its instances must coincide spatially with the universal. But if so, two instances, say, two flowers instantiating the same shade of red, must be co-located, despite *ex hypothesi* being in different locations.

Now, proponents of concrete universals have responded to this objection that it smacks of being a category mistake, due to its applying the exact same principles that hold for locatedness of particulars to universals, two entirely different categories of entity (Armstrong 1988; Meinertsen 2018: 123–124). But Lowe is unconvinced by this type of reply:

> [I]t needs to be explained to us *how* they can behave so differently, despite genuinely being located in space and time. And I have never yet come across a satisfactory explanation of this purported fact. As it stands, then, it seems to be nothing more than a piece of unsupported dogma. (Lowe 2006: 99)

For this reason (and another, which we need not go into), Lowe formulates and endorses what he calls a 'weak' notion of immanence, the 'strong' one in his view being the one requiring multiple location. This weak notion is simply adherence to the principle of instantiation. The resultant view, Lowe says, implies that a universal instantiated by concrete particulars "must have particular instances which exist 'in' space and time, but it doesn't imply that the universal itself must literally exist 'in' space and time" (2006: 99).

In this way, Lowe 'softens' immanent realism, ridding it of the difficulties of multiple location. However, due to its commitment to abstracta, Lowe's (and Grossmann's) position is unpalatable to metaphysicians of a naturalist bent. Thus, naturalists had better stick to immanence in the strong sense and deal with the location consequences, as it were (for discussion of the location of properties, see chapter 13, this volume). Moreover, even if naturalism is false and we were to accept abstract immanent universals, we would still need

to address the bridging challenge, just like proponents of transcendent universals – a fact which neither Lowe nor Grossmann seem to acknowledge.

3 States of affairs

As it stands, the above definition of a state of affairs as a particular's having a property or two or more particulars' standing in a relation is so underspecified that it compatible with a wide variety of usages of the term 'state of affairs'. Fortunately, they fall into two broad categories. Within the first category, the word 'state of affairs' is used for abstract (non-concrete), proposition-like states of affairs, sometimes called 'propositional facts' (see Betti 2015: chs. 4–6). On some theories, e.g., Chisholm's (1970; 1971), these entities are barely distinguishable from propositions; on other theories, notably Reinach's (1982[1911]), they are more clearly distinguished from propositions, but still abstract (see Meinertsen 2022).

Within the second category, the word 'state of affairs' expresses the idea of a *compositional state of affairs*. These entities are complexes consisting of particulars and properties or relations, and perhaps something that binds them together. States of affairs in this sense are mostly construed as concrete and worldly entities, as much part of the terrestrial world as tables and chairs and plants and animals. For example, the states of affairs of the *tomato's being red* or *John's being next to Sam* are concrete entities alongside their constituent particulars (the tomato, John and Sam). Russell (1972[1918]), Wittgenstein (1961[1921]), Bergmann (1967) and Armstrong (1997) are classic advocates of this conception of states of affairs.

Let us call this the 'concretist' view of compositional states of affairs. Alternatively, proponents of compositional states of affairs may construe them in an 'abstractist' fashion. This is a rather rare view: to my knowledge, the only (well-known) philosopher to defend it is Grossmann (1983, 1992). As mentioned, Grossmann also considers immanent universals to be abstract, so his states of affairs (which he calls 'facts') involving concrete particulars like our tomato are ontologically hybrid complexes. While Grossmann's states of affairs are abstract, just like propositional states of affairs, they can be the 'hosts' of abstract immanent universals, precisely because they are compositional: they can have them as constituents. In any case, in effect, this is Grossmann's answer to the general question of what it is for an immanent universal to be instantiated. Unfortunately for Grossmann, abstract compositional states of affairs do not survive William Vallicella's devastating objection to them (Vallicella 2016a: 127–128).

Concrete compositional states of affairs (henceforth just 'states of affairs') are *non-mereological* complexes, in two separate senses. First, unlike the parts of a mereological sum, the constituents of a state of affairs can co-exist without the state of affairs existing. To illustrate, consider the constituents of *a's being F*: *a* might instantiate another universal and F might be instantiated elsewhere. Second, the same constituents can make up distinct states of affairs. For example, if R is a non-symmetrical relation, *a's having R to b* and *b's having R to a* are distinct states of affairs. That is, the *arrangement* of the constituents of a states of affairs is important. Specifically, it is vital to the identity conditions of states of affairs:

(SI) For all states of affairs s, $s_1 = s_2$ if and only if s_1 and s_2 have the same constituents and these constituents are arranged in the same way.[2]

Being non-mereological complexes, states of affairs face what has been called 'the problem of complexity': the problem of how the *many* parts or constituents of a complex give rise to *one* unified entity, the complex or whole (Mertz 1996: 16). In the context of states of affairs ontology, this problem is often known as 'the problem of unity' or 'the unity problem'. Roughly, it is the question of what is necessary and sufficient for some particulars and universals to make up a certain state of affairs, as opposed to not making one up.[3]

An intuitive way of answering this question is to posit as a constituent of a state of affairs a unifying *relation* that ties together its components, i.e., links together the particular and universal. We might call such a conception of states of affairs *relationalism*. On my own view, which I call 'relational internalism', this relation is internal or intrinsic to the state of affairs in the sense of being a constituent of it. This relation contrasts with a non-constituent unifier, which is external or extrinsic to the state of affairs; for example, (a relation to) God in the state of affairs ontology of Vallicella (2002: ch. 7). Well-known contemporary examples of relational internalism are the state of affairs ontology of Bergmann (1967) and Grossmann (1983; 1992), where the unifying relation is known as 'the fundamental tie' and 'nexus of exemplification', respectively.

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[2] Identity conditions for states of affairs of this kind are sometimes known as 'structural'. It is noteworthy that Grossmann, despite not subscribing to states of affairs in the present sense, puts forward what, in effect, amounts to (SI) for the category of entities he calls *structures* (1983: 242).

[3] A different approach to the problem of unity, which appears to be Armstrong's own (see e.g., 1989: 88), sees it as a problem which states of affairs *solve*, rather than a problem *for* them. As such it is closely related to the problem of what makes true contingent truths and the positing of states of affairs as truthmakers for such truths. For a discussion of this approach, see Maurin (2015).

Which relation might do the unifying on relational internalism? Perhaps, it is the relation of instantiation, i.e., the relation that holds between a particular and the universal it instantiates. However, this view – and indeed any view that construes instantiation as a relation – is associated with one or more issues known as 'the problem of instantiation'. Of these, the most well-known is that the view leads to Bradley's regress. One of many versions of this regress is this: if instantiation, R_1, relates the particular and universal in a state of affairs, it surely must be related to them by a further relation, R_2. This new relation in turn seems to require a third relation, R_3, to relate it to *its* relata, and so on to infinity. This regress is widely held to be vicious, and hence the view that the unifying link in a state of affairs is the instantiation relation is often held to be a non-starter.

In contrast, on *non-relationalism*, states of affairs are not unified by a relation, neither inside nor outside them. Initially, in his 1978 book, Armstrong defends a version of immanent realism which he calls 'non-relational realism', on which a particular's instantiation of a universal does not involve a relation between the particular and universal. On what he calls 'relational realism', by contrast, this relationship does involve a relation. In the present context, I shall take it that these versions of realism pair up with the two approaches to the unity of states of affairs in a straightforward way (and that the terms for them can be used interchangeably). That is, I shall assume that

> (NR) Non-relational realism is true if and only if non-relationalism about states of affairs is true.

Conversely, I shall assume that

> (RR) Relational realism is true if and only if relationalism about states of affairs is true.

Given the outcome of the two preceding sections, then, we can now specify the hosting question as this: are immanent universals constituents of relationalist or non-relationalist states of affairs? Equivalently, is relational realism or non-relational realism true? Let us first look at the latter option.

4 Non-relational realism

Armstrong insists that his version of immanent realism be a *non*-relational immanent realism (1978a: 107). As mentioned, by this he means that the relationship of instantiation between particular and universal should not be construed as a relation. Instead, he contends, it should be conceived as a "more intimate union […] than mere relation" (1978a: 107).

What could the desired "more intimate than mere relation" relationship between particular and universal be, according to Armstrong?[4] In a somewhat witty passage, he adduces Scotus's formal distinction and his example of "the simultaneous unity and distinguishability of the members of the Holy Trinity" (1978a: 110), suggesting that a relatable analogy may be the relationship between size and shape. He claims that: "Size and shape are inseparable […] yet they are not related [by an external relation]. At the same time they are distinguishable, and particular size and shape vary independently" (1978a: 110). This is a thought-provoking analogy. Size and shape are indeed analogous to particular and universal in the sense that while the determinable size and shape of an object necessarily go together – no object can have a shape without also having a size (that is, they are "inseparable") – the *determinate* sizes are independent of the *determinate* shapes of the object (that is, they "vary independently").

Is Armstrong's analogy reasonable? In general, I think that for an analogy to be reasonable, the analogue, i.e., the analogous thing, should not be too dissimilar to the 'topic', i.e., the thing claimed to be analogous to the analogue (see Meinertsen 2015). In this particular case, then, the shape/size relationship should not be too dissimilar to the particular/universal relationship. Unfortunately for Armstrong, however, the analogue he puts forward is highly dissimilar to the topic. For the analogue concerns a relationship between entities of the *same* ontological kind or category (properties), whereas the topic concerns a relationship between entities of *different* ontological kinds or categories (particulars and universals). So, his analogy is not reasonable.

Armstrong's first attempt at formulating non-relational realism is unconvincing. Not long after this, he embarks on his occasional 'abstractionist' tack of describing particulars and universals as "abstractions" from states of affairs, see e.g., (1983: 84). He does not intend with this locution to imply that they are mere mental entities: "The factors of particularity and universality are really there in states of affairs" (1983: 84). Their ontological status is similar

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[4] Although non-relationalist proponents of states of affairs include a number of philosophers, the clearest formulation of the approach is arguably Armstrong's own. For other non-relationalist conceptions of states of affairs, see Olson (1987) and Hochberg (1999).

to the one in his non-relationalism. Personally, however, I think it sounds odd on a compositional model of states of affairs to have the components be 'abstractions' from what they compose. The bricks of a brick wall are surely not 'abstractions' from it even if, let us assume, they cannot exist separately from it (perhaps they are 'magic' bricks). Indeed, construing particulars and universals as 'abstractions' from states of affairs fits in perfectly with an extant *non*-compositional view of states of affairs (De Rizzo and Schnieder 2023). So, it seems plain that this 'abstractionist' assertion is not an alternative formulation of non-relational realism.

In any case, as we shall see below (in section 5), Armstrong actually rejects non-relational realism in his 1989 book. In 1997, however, he reverts to it. He expresses it using the Fregean notion of unsaturatedness, in effect using this concept as an analogy of the particular/universal relationship. He claims that universals are 'unsaturated' entities that are 'saturated' by particulars: "Frege's copula is the bringing together of a particular or particulars, on the one hand, and "concepts" on the other, by inserting the particulars in the unsaturated structure" (1997: 29). Closely related to this idea of universals as 'unsaturated', he construes the universal as a "gutted state of affairs": "The universal is a gutted state of affairs; it is everything that is left in the state of affairs after the particular particulars involved in the state of affairs have been abstracted away in thought" (1997: 28–29). Specifically, he considers universals to be *state of affairs types* with placeholders ('blanks') ready to be 'saturated' by particulars. More formally, universals are represented as _'s being F, _'s being G, _'s being F & G, _'s standing in R to _, etc., where the blanks are 'saturated' by particulars in states of affairs. This view may be said to correspond to Frege's conception of his *Begriffe* as essentially 'unsaturated' entities.

Armstrong seems to be justified when he says universals on this view are conceived in a "Fregean-Aristotelian" manner as state of affairs types (1997: 202). Unfortunately for Armstrong, however, Fregean unsaturatedness does not provide him with a better analogy than the size/shape relationship. For, once again, the analogue concerns a relationship between entities of the same ontological kind or category ('blanks' of general terms being 'filled' with singular terms – or something to that effect), while the topic concerns a relationship between entities of different ontological kinds or categories (particulars and

universals). Hence, speaking of universals as unsaturated entities saturated by particulars does not provide a coherent formulation of non-relational realism.[5]

5 Relational realism

In his 1978 book, Armstrong is adamant that attempts to posit a unique relation that links the particular and universal *without* leading to Bradley's regress do not succeed. He thinks this is a major point in favour of non-relational realism. In support of his verdict, Armstrong cites, *inter alia*, Bergmann as a proponent of *non*-relational realism (1978a: 110). (He merely takes issue with Bergmann's use of the term 'tie', which he thinks is indicative of the very relational realism that Bergmann – in Armstrong's view – sought to distance himself from.) However, as mentioned in section 3, I consider Bergmann to be a classic relationalist/relational realist. True, the unifying relation he posits, 'the fundamental tie', is very different from ordinary relations; but it is still a relation.[6] It is rather ironic that Armstrong's initial case for non-relational realism in this way misconstrues an important example of relationalism.[7] It is, therefore, pleasing to see Armstrong espouse relational realism in 1989. With a nod to Bergmann and Grossmann, he even formulates it by mentioning 'the fundamental tie' and 'nexus':

> The state of affairs of *a*'s being F exists if and only if *a* instantiates F because these are two ways of talking about the same thing. Similarly, if R is a symmetrical relation, then *a*'s having R to *b* is the same thing as *a* and *b* instantiating R. […] The fundamental tie, or nexus, in a Universals theory is nothing but the bringing together of particulars and universals in states of affairs.[8] (Armstrong 1989: 110)

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[5] For further criticism of the notion of unsaturatedness in connection with particulars and universals, see Simons (1981).

[6] More recently, metaphysicians have defended such a relation in novel ways. For example, Betti (2015: 89) maintains that relations are what she calls 'relata-specific', where a relation is relata-specific "if and only if it is in its nature to relate specific relata". This thesis is uncontroversial if relations are tropes (see Maurin 2010). But Betti holds that it also makes sense if they are universals (see Vallicella 2016b and O'Connaill 2020 for objections to this claim).

[7] Incidentally, later on in his career, Bergmann might have agreed with Armstrong – at any rate, he eventually abandoned the fundamental tie (see Tegtmeier 2018).

[8] An alternative interpretation of this passage is that it suggests a view that Armstrong would later formulate as the thesis that there is "no relation of instantiation *over and above* the states of affairs themselves" and that "the instantiation of universals by particulars is just the state of affairs itself" (1997: 118, 119). For this thesis seems to mirror the claim in the quoted passage that instantiation and state of affairs expressions are "two ways of

However, Armstrong did not retain this position: in 1997, we again find him propounding non-relational realism. Perhaps, he was once more mainly motivated by Bradleyan reasons. This would be ironic, since he now proposes a response to Bradley's regress (Armstrong 1997: 118–119). Roughly speaking, he claims that only the first step in the regress requires the postulation of a state of affairs (truthmaker), whereas the following steps are necessitated by this state of affairs. He compares it to the truth regress (let <p> be a contingent truth; it is true that <p> is true; it is true that it is true that <p> is true, and so on *ad infinitum*) and therefore considers it to be just as non-vicious. In the truth regress, there is likewise only one truthmaker required (the one for <p>), with each of the subsequent truths entailed by its existence (1997: 119).

Even if the difficulty of Bradley's regress can be met in this way, relational realism/relationalism faces the challenge posed by the problem of unity. Armstrong seems not to be cognisant of the latter problem and so his 1989 position is not entirely satisfactory. The problem of Bradley's regress (how to avoid it) is *different* from the problem of unity: a regress-blocker is not *eo ipso* a unifier (Vallicella 2004: 163). Relying on Vallicella (2002, 2004, 2016a) in particular, I have addressed this issue in detail and proposed a relationalist solution to it that takes into account the distinction between Bradley's regress and the problem of unity (Meinertsen 2018: chs. 9–10). According to this solution, the unifying relation, call it U*, in the state of affairs of *a's being F* is related to the particular *a* and the universal F in virtue of U* being related to *a* and F as well as itself. It is in the nature of U* to relate itself to the particular and the universal. Hence, the truthmaker for <a is F> is U*'s standing in U* to F and *a*. If this solution is correct, then this self-relating fundamental tie not only solves the problem of unity but also avoids Bradley's regress. Space does not permit us to explore this version of relationalism here in further detail. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that relational realism, at least potentially, answers the hosting question, whereas non-relational realism does not.[9]

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talking about the same thing". I am not sure what exactly this view amounts to; but, like his 'abstractionist' remarks (which were covered in section 4), it appears contrary to a compositional conception of states of affairs.

[9] The later Armstrong (2004 and onwards) would have been unenthusiastic about any attempt at developing relational realism. For in his late period, he abandoned *both* relational *and* non-relational realism, proposing instead a completely different view of the relationship between particulars and universals. On his new position, following Leibniz, he considers all apparently contingent predication to be in reality necessary (Armstrong 2004, 2006). In this new theory, instantiations of universals by particulars are still called 'states of affairs'. However, its view of predication makes it similar to bundle theory (Armstrong 2004: 46; see also Brink and

6 Conclusion

This chapter has considered the question of how immanent universals are hosted by compositional states of affairs. In particular, given the result that immanent universals are concrete, it has explored the view that they are hosted by being constituents of concrete compositional states of affairs. These states of affairs are either relationalist or non-relationalist. Equivalently, either relational realism or non-relational realism is true. I explained how Armstrong, in his middle period, defends first the latter, then the former, and finally the latter again. Unfortunately for Armstrong, his version of non-relationalism is unconvincing, but his relationalism, or rather, a suitably expanded version of it, may be viable.[10]

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Maurin 2005: 18). In fact, I think it is more bundle theory than state of affairs ontology, and hence consider it to fall outside the province of this chapter.

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