SELF-RELATING INTERNALISM: REPLY TO VALLICELLA

1. Introduction

William Vallicella (2020) puts forward three thoughtful and sophisticated objections to self-relating internalism, my theory of the unity of states of affairs (2008, 2018). On this theory, a state of affairs is unified in virtue of a formal constituent relation, U*, relating itself to the other constituents of the state of affairs. In other words, according to self-relating internalism, the unity of a state of affairs is due to the fact that U* is related to its relata by itself. For example, the state of affairs a's having F, or F(a), is assayed as U*(U*, F, a). This solution to the problem of unity explains the difference between a state of affairs and the sum of its constituents: in a's being F—which when assayed is identical to U*(U*, F, a,)—U* relates (itself to) F and a, whereas in the sum [U*, F, a] it is does not relate. This difference between U* as active in the state of affairs and inert in the sum is at the heart of Vallicella's first and second objections. His first objection is that there can be no constituent of a state of affairs with the required unifying power given the need for 'ontological analysis', or at least that such an entity is mysterious. I shall argue that this objection, which it is helpful to discuss at some length, is in part begging the question, and in part invoking unsupported assumptions about how to understand metaphysical theories in general and self-relating internalism in particular. His second objection is that self-relating internalism violates the principle of the Indiscernibility of Identicals. I respond that this fails to appreciate the unimportance in metaphysics of either abundant properties or relational properties, or both. His final objection is that my explanation of the unity of states of affairs is viciously circular. I counter by showing that the argument of this objection is invalid or at least not sound.

2. Vallicella's first objection: U* cannot be a constituent of states of affairs, or at least it is unintelligible how it can

Vallicella's first objection is a disjunction: U* cannot be a constituent of states of affairs or it is unintelligible how it can. I shall argue that the first 'ontological' disjunct of this two-pronged charge is question begging; and that the second 'epistemological' disjunct invokes an unsupported meta-metaphysical thesis that 'ontological analysis' is the only way of understanding U*. To begin with, Vallicella instructively distinguishes between a privative

and a positive sense of being 'self-relating'. The former is just that when U* is actually related to its relata, this is not by another relation. The latter is the claim that U* is related to its relata by itself. The privative sense suffices to block Bradley's regress, but it does nothing to explain or ground the unity of states of affairs. As Vallicella notes (p. 171), it is the positive sense that I have in mind. I would add that further terminological clarification is needed, since the notion of 'ontological analysis' is likewise ambiguous. It can mean either the (making of a) list of the constituents/parts of a whole, or it can mean the intellectual analysis of a whole. Vallicella invokes the second meaning repeatedly and insists that, roughly, an ontological constituent, such as U*, is intelligible just when it is included in an ontological analysis – call this the Analytic Thesis (AT). The adverb 'at least' in his first, disjunctive objection might appear to suggest that he considers the second disjunct to be subsidiary to the first one, but in fact this seems not to be the case. Indeed, having clarified the basic distinction between the privative and positive at the outset of his critique, Vallicella immediately proceeds to objecting that ontological analysis cannot make self-relating in the positive sense intelligible:

> All ontological analysis can do is to enumerate the constituents of a state of affairs, or, more generally, the parts of a whole. Analytic understanding proceeds by resolving a given whole into its parts, and ultimately into simple parts. But there is more to a (nonmereological) whole than its parts. There is the unity in virtue of which the parts are parts of a whole. The whole is one entity; the parts are many entities. (p. 171)

He maintains that what I am doing is just that: trying to identify the unity of a whole (state of affairs) with a part of it. But since U* is a constituent of the state of affairs, 'the attempt to understand synthesis analytically is doomed to failure' (ibid.). For 'no proper part of a whole is its unity, and this for the simple reason that the unity is the unity of all the parts' (p. 172). However, one can say that,

> the unity of the parts, which is distinct from any part, and from all of them, is brought about by a special part, the unifier. But then that special part, without ceasing to be a proper part, would have to exercise a synthesizing function. This synthesizing is what eludes analytic understanding. Simply to posit that the unifier U* has the ability to synthesize is […] a kind of

deus ex machina move. Leaving God out of it, Meinertsen's U* is a *principium ex machina*. (pp. 171–172)

I agree with this characterisation of U* that it, a 'special part', is exercising a 'synthesising function'. In that sense, U* is radically different from other relations. Hence, it is not on a par with the other constituents of a the whole (state of affairs) listed in its ontological analysis. Vallicella is quite right that it therefore cannot be understood analytically: by definition, the synthesising power of U* is not elucidated by its featuring in an enumeration of constituents in an ontological analysis. Yet, this would be a problem for me only if ontological analysis were the be all and end all of understanding U*, i.e. if AT were true of it. One could probably be forgiven for thinking it is, since U* is after all a constituent of states of affairs and there appears to be no obvious alternative to AT for understanding constituents. But the synthesising power of U* ('how it works', its role or its function) arguably is *not* a constituent—a point I shall return to later in this section. And even if it were, or even if there were no distinction between a constituent and its function in the first place, I am not aware of any independent argument for AT. I therefore reject this principle with a clean conscience. That said, I appreciate that, for proponents of AT, the positing of U* must feel like a kind of *deus ex machina* or a *principium ex machina* move. Insofar as U* is an inference to the best explanation, however, this is not really a problem for me, as Vallicella seems to acknowledge (p. 177).

Still, it is interesting to note that Vallicella *could* have used AT in an argument for the first disjunct of his objection (i.e. that U* cannot unify). Such an argument might look like this:

(1) If U* unifies, then it is intelligible how it works [assumption].
(2) How a constituent works is intelligible if and only if this working is shown by ontological analysis [AT].
(3) How U* works is not shown by ontological analysis [correct observation].
Therefore,
(4) It is not intelligible how U* works [(2), (3)].
Therefore,
(5) U* does not unify. [(1), (4)].

This is clearly a valid argument. But is it also sound? Arguably not. True, assumption (3) is correct, as Vallicella is at pains to stress. But while (2) is also asserted as true—assumed here

for the sake of argument—(1) seems false as it stands. (1) would probably be true in certain 'idealistic' contexts of equivalence between the intelligible and the real/true, but such contexts are markedly contrary to the realist, Armstrongian background assumptions of self-relating internalism. In any case, given that (2) *is* false, I maintain that the argument is unsound even if (1) were true.

To his credit, however, Vallicella appears to offer some support, independently of AT, for his claim that U* is unintelligible. He reasons that, on self-relating internalism, if states of affairs exist, U* of course also exists; but if so, it must either (i) be found in perception or (ii) be able to be singled out in thought. As to (i), he is not in doubt that it cannot be perceived:

> If I see that a book is on a table, then I see a book, a table, and possibly also the relation referred to by 'on.' What I don't see, however, is the referent of 'is': the *being* of the book's being on the table. Since I don't see the *being* of the book's being on the table, I do not see U*. I cannot single it out in perception. (p. 172)

Now, the claim that U* cannot be perceived is intimately related to the more general view that states of affairs cannot be perceived. Evaluation of these tenets are quite a vexed issue, but I fortunately did not have to go into them in my book. For the same reason, I shall not do it here, though I note that I am inclined to agree with Vallicella on this point, certainly with regard to the specific claim that the unifying constituent of states of affairs, U*, is not perceivable. But it is at any rate more important to find out if U* can be 'singled out in thought', as Vallicella calls it. He insists that it cannot be that either. In his argument for this, he first clarifies the sense in which the material constituents of a state of affairs are independent of it. If S = Fa, then a and F are what he calls 'weakly separable' of S in the sense that they can exist without S existing, provided a instantiates other properties and F is instantiated elsewhere. By contrast, U* is not weakly independent of S. If it is the actual unifier of S, then it cannot exist independently of it and its material constituents, a and F—though it can of course exist independently of them provided it is instantiated elsewhere (it is an immanent universal amongst others). As he puts it, 'as the active ingredient in S, [U*] is inseparable from a, from F, and from S' (ibid.). So, U* cannot be 'singled out in thought'. It might even appear that U* is a contradictory and hence impossible entity: as a constituent of the state of affairs, it is weakly separable from it; as a unifier of S, it is not weakly separable from it. Vallicella, in words if not in spirit, does not go that far, though. Instead, he just, once again, draws the decidedly more

modest conclusion 'that it is unintelligible how a (proper) part of a state of affairs [U*] could serve as its unifier' (p. 173).

This argument that U* cannot be 'singled out in thought' seems to have some force, and it does seem independent of AT. Given this, someone might now object that at least *something* should be said about the 'mysterious' ways of U*, to make it appear less unintelligible. Perhaps we could appeal to the memorable glue analogy put forward by Reinhardt Grossmann (1992, pp. 55-56), then? Grossmann's claim is that if two boards are glued together, one does not need 'super-glue' to glue the glue to the boards, 'super-duper-glue' to glue the 'super-glue' to the glue, and so on. Rather, the glue is self-relating in the sense that it is not glued to the boards by another. This is analogous to U* being self-relating in the sense that it is not related to its relata by another. But, as Vallicella points out, this is self-relating in the privative sense: 'By 'privative' I simply mean that the self-gluing glue is not glued by another. If the glue and the relation U* were self-gluing and self-relating in a positive sense, then they would be agents of an action' (p. 173). And as pointed out above, it is the positive sense of self-relating that is relevant to our purposes here. Fortunately, I do not think that the falsehood of Grossman's analogy really is a problem for self-relating internalism. For it does not really seem incumbent on me to say anything about the workings of an inference to the best explanation, given that, as I have argued at length (2008, 20018), the alternative explanations fail.

Still, out of politeness, as it were, it is worth reiterating one of the most important characteristics of U*: it has a synthesising power. Unlike Vallicella, I consider it misleading to go further and call U* an 'agent of an action', taking this in a more or less literal sense, since this wrongly implies that U* is an animated, or even person-like, entity.) Its synthesising power is evidenced by the very name of its parent theory: self-relat*ing*. Admittedly, in my book, I failed to make explicit, or at least clearly imply, that I consider the self-relating or synthesising of U* to be an 'activity' (or 'active role') distinct from U* in itself—though I had done this in earlier work (2008, pp. 14-15).[1] This activity (or active role) of U* is not a constituent of the state of affairs, so it is trivially true that it is not shown in an ontological analysis. The specific ontological reason that it is not a constituent of the state of affairs is arguably that it is a relational property, cf. my reply to Vallicella's second objection in the following section. But

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[1] I am ignoring the distinction between 'synthesising', 'self-relating' and 'activity (or active role)' on the one hand, and 'synthesising *power'* on the other, since it does not matter here – though, in other contexts, the general difference between an activity and a power (disposition) is most important.

this reason is incidental to the present response. All that is needed here is that, intuitively, an activity (or active role) of a constituent of a state of affairs is not an additional constituent.

3. Vallicella's second objection: by the Indiscernibility of Identicals, U* is a contradictory entity

As Vallicella points out, the material constituents of a state of affairs are numerically identical in the state of affairs and in the sum of these constituents. But what about U* itself, a formal constituent? Is U* in the state of affairs U*(U*, F, *a*) likewise numerically identical to U* in the sum [U*+ F + *a*]? Whichever it is, trouble is spelled, he claims. Considering first the option that it is, he reasons—correctly, in my view—that it actually follows from the contingency of states of affairs that there is such numerical identity: 'It must be possible that *the* same constituents exist either unified or not unified' (p. 174, original emphasis). However, as he observes, U* in the sum is inert while U* in the state of affairs is active—and being inert and being active are distinct properties. Hence, by the Indiscernibility of Identicals, either (i) U* is inert in both sum and state of affairs or (ii) active in both sum and state of affairs. But if (i), then no state of affairs is constituted; and if (ii), there is no difference between the sum and the state of affairs, which their contingency demands. Either way, no contingent state of affairs is constituted, and U* therefore cannot be identical in the sum and the state of affairs. In short, self-relating internalism is contradictory, that is, in a manner of speaking, U* is a contradictory entity.[2]

      This objection can be retorted to in two related ways. The first one, which I shall merely hint at here, is this. Intuitively, being active and being inert are relational properties. If this does not seem intuitive to you, take instead the more theoretical counterpart features of U* on self-relating internalism, being self-relating and not-being-self-relating. They are explicitly relational. As Vallicella would probably agree, in the context of state of affairs ontology, other things being equal, we should not take abundant properties and relations with ontological seriousness, only sparse ones. (The reason is that the abundant are what I call 'truthmaking reducible', which means that they fail to exist at the level of truthmakers.) Unfortunately for Vallicella, relational properties are abundant (Meinertsen 2020). Given this, we should not take

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[2] Note that, as mentioned, Vallicella also thinks it that it leads to trouble if U* is active in the state of affairs and inert in the sum, i.e. if U* in the state of affairs is non-identical to U* in the sum. It is obvious why he thinks this: by way of argument for it, he just repeats the point that such non-identity is incompatible with the contingency of states of affairs.

them with ontological seriousness. Hence, *a fortiori* we need not be worried by an objection which, like Vallicella's, relies on them. My second riposte also concerns relational properties but appeals to established literature rather than my own metaphysics: even if they were sparse and hence ontologically important, Vallicella's objection would still fail, and by his own lights. For relational properties cannot be included in the domain of the (converse) of the Indiscernibility of Identicals if this principle is taken as true, since as Max Black famously showed (1952), if they are, it is false.

4. Vallicella's third objection: my explanation of state of affairs unity is viciously circular

Vallicella's third objection focuses on the existence conditions of U* and argues from this that my explanation of the unity of states of affairs unity is viciously circular:

> a) A state of affairs exists if and only if its constituents form a unity.
> b) U* is a constituent of states of affairs that explains their unity.
> Therefore
> c) U* is a constituent of states of affairs that explains their existence. (from a, b)
> d) U* cannot exercise its explanatory function unless it exists.
> Therefore
> e) The existence of U* explains the existence of states of affairs.
> But
> f) U* cannot exist except in a state of affairs.
> Therefore
> g) The existence of states of affairs explains the existence of U*
> h) Given the asymmetry of explanation, (e) and (g) are contradictory, and
> Meinertsen's explanation of the existence of states of affairs in terms of U* is
> viciously circular. (p. 175)

Although this is prima facie a good argument, I think that it fails. First and foremost, due to the intensionality of 'explains', (a) and (b) quite simply do not entail (c). In general, if X and Y are co-extensional, as the unity and existence of states of affairs indeed are, then it does not follow that what explains X also explains Y, since the context is intensional. Secondly, suppose instead that (c) had just been assumed rather than put forward as an entailment. The inference from it and (d) to (e) seems valid alright; but this sub-argument is arguably not sound, for (c) is arguably false. Or at least, I see no reason why it should be true. Why should we think that if

U* explains the unity of states of affairs, as it does on my theory[3], it also explains their *existence*? On my theory, the existence of a state of affairs, e.g. the state of affairs U*(U*, F, *a*) is identical to U* relating itself to F and *a*. But U* does not 'explain' this relating, nor does it 'explain' that the state of affairs exists. An 'explanation' of the existence of U*(U*, F, *a*) is not involved at all. Nor should it be: thanks to the contingency of states of affairs, it is not a metaphysical task to explain their existence. When U* relates itself to F and *a* and thereby unifies a's being F, it does not explain *that* it relates itself to F and *a*. In short, (c) is false; and by parity of reasoning, so is (h).

Incidentally, I do not see it as not a drawback of self-relating internalism that it does not explain the existence of states of affairs in this sense, since it should not be assigned with this task in the first place. True, by the Principle of Sufficient Reason, it is probably reasonable to demand an explanation for the existence of each state of affairs, i.e. why in each particular case U* relates itself to the other constituents of the state of affairs. But given that states of affairs (in the present sense) are contingent, this requirement is arguably not met by a metaphysical explanation anyway, but only by a causal one—possibly in conjunction with one or more analytic statements. For example, there is sufficient causal explanation of why U* relates itself to the property of boiling and the pot of water when the water is 100 °C under atmospheric pressure and hence of the existence of this state of affairs. Similarly, there is a sufficient explanation of Xantippe's becoming a widow, i.e. why U* relates itself to becoming a widow and Xantippe, namely, the causal explanations of Socrates's death and his being married to her, in conjunction with the analytic statement that 'becoming a widow' means 'losing a spouse'. In any event, self-relating internalism, which explains the unity of states of affairs, in general as well as in particular cases, need not deal with explanation of the 'existence' of states of affairs, neither in general nor in particular. In short, U* is not self-explanatory, as it were; it is only self-relating. Hence, Vallicella's third argument also fails.

5. Concluding remarks

If what I have argued is correct, Vallicella's three objections to self-relating internalism are unsuccessful. His first criticism, that U* cannot be a constituent of states of affairs or at least that it is unintelligible how it can, is either begging the question or, at best, relying on an unsupported meta-metaphysical thesis about what constitutes understanding of an ontological

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[3] To be precise, the *self-relating* of U* explains the unity of a state of affairs.

constituent. During my rejection of his use of this thesis, I had to invoke my distinction between U* and its activity, which admittedly is inchoate. Future research is required to clarify it. Vallicella's second and third criticisms, which I have devoted less attention to in this paper, do not work either. The first of the two, that U* is a contradictory entity, fails, as it does not, as it were, appreciate the metaphysical limitations of relational properties (shortcomings demonstrated by my own work or by Black's classic case against the Identity of Indiscernibles). The second one, that my explanation of state of affairs unity is viciously circular, fails, since it either commits a *non sequitur* or imposes illegitimate explanatory requirements on U*.[4]

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