

# Does the World Contain States of Affairs? Yes

Daniel Nolan. Draft.

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We appear to talk about states of entities and of systems all of the time. Talk of states is commonplace in ordinary talk about the world: we naturally talk about the state of our clothes, or the state of the economy, or the state of the floor in a child's bedroom. Almost any area of inquiry helps itself to talk of states. Computer programming is all about how to ensure that computers in one state transition into another. A major part of chemistry seems to concern how one state of a system leads to another via a series of chemical reactions. Psychology would be transformed if we refused to believe in psychological states. Economists are asked to comment on the state of the economy, or sections of the economy. And so on.

Despite the fact that this talk is everywhere, in everyday talk and in many areas of inquiry, there is some temptation to be suspicious of taking it at face value. It is an appealing thought to some that while the world may contain coffee cups and tables, it does not contain in addition a *state* of a particular coffee cup being on a particular table. Perhaps this state talk is best understood as indirect talk about (e.g.) coffee cups and tables, and only apparently about another kind of entity, a state? Or perhaps it is indirect talk not just about coffee cups and the like, but also properties and relations of entities like coffee cups? Or despite appearances, is it all a mistake?

In this paper I argue we should resist that temptation, and recognise states as real parts of the world just as much as “things” like coffee cups and properties like shapes are. Entities like these are sometimes called “facts”, and sometimes “states of affairs”. Calling them “facts” in particular is a contested usage, since that expression also gets used for true propositions. It seems to me that “states of affairs” is the least misleading general expression for the kind of beings I am arguing for here: the word “state” suggests the question “state of what”, while some states are not obviously states of any single thing (the state of the coffee cup being on the table is a state that involves two things, but is it a state of a single thing, e.g. a cup-table *system*, or perhaps a whole of which the cup and table are parts? Maybe, but systems and cup-table aggregates are more controversial entities than cups or tables: and particular *systems* rather look like states of affairs themselves.) “State of affairs” has the advantage that

“affairs” looks like a rather non-specific noun and has at least the tendency to defuse the question of *which* entity (or entities) a state is “of”. Despite “state of affairs” being perhaps the best term for the kind of entity I am concerned with, in this paper I will normally just talk of “states” for brevity.

In some philosophical projects, "state" and "state of affairs" are used to tag quite specific kinds of postulated entities. Here, I am using the expressions a little more broadly: so situations, circumstances, scenarios, and other such entities are all things I am happy to count as states of affairs. At least, that is, if we think that they are found in the world rather than are mental entities or non-spatio-temporal entities that only have some sort of representational relation to the world: if a scenario is merely a kind of mental content or description of entities in the world, they would not be states in the sense I am trying to convey.

The main style of argument in this paper for recognition of states as genuine entities will be by pointing out how states seem to play an important explanatory role in theories that are both successful, and which we already accept. One way such arguments work is to appeal to pre-existing beliefs of an audience: if you think theory X is basically correct, and theory X implies that there are states, then a commitment you already have provides you with a reason to believe there are states. Another way is through an “inference to the best explanation”: whether or not you initially accept theory X, if you become convinced that theory X is a good theory of something, and it implies that there are states, that gives you reason to adopt theory X, and the belief that there are states. Provided, at least, that the theory is “good” in the right sort of way. (I’ll leave aside the interesting question what “inference to the best explanation” has to do with *explanation*, if anything. The expression “inference to the best explanation” has a life of its own, at this point.)

Both kinds of argument can be resisted. Pointing out that things you already believe imply something should sometimes lead you to revise the things you initially believed, rather than just take on the implied commitment. A theory can be apparently good, but only apparently, or have an equally good or better rival: if X is a good theory of something that implies that there are states, but we notice that Y is a better theory of that thing but does not imply that there are states, then choosing X and belief in states no longer seems a sensible response to the fact that X is a good theory. However, almost every philosophical argument can be resisted by someone with sufficient motivation: the point is not to force acceptance, but to make a sufficiently appealing case that a theory seems preferable to the alternatives. (Or at least that’s my aim, here.)

## States, Events and Tropes

To help get clear on what I am defending, and to lay some building blocks for the defence, it will be useful to compare states to some other supposed entities discussed in metaphysics. Consider events. Talk about events seems even more ubiquitous than talk of states. Matches lighting, games of football, plane flights, walks in the park, and so on: and again, talking about events is not just part of our commonsense ways of describing the world, but is ubiquitous in science and other areas of inquiry. (Imagine history without mention of any historical events, for example! No battles, elections, coronations, mysterious deaths... or any changes at all.)

Some of our talk about events concerns *general* events: events that occur over and over, like the morning sunrise or the Olympic Games. I will focus, for the moment, on *particular* events, such as the sunrise this very morning, or the 2000 Olympic Games. It is possible to deny the existence of particular events, perhaps by trying to reconstruct our apparent commitment to them entirely in terms of things and perhaps their properties. But on the face of it that project looks quixotic. Why even be tempted to deny that there are long walks on the beach or particular screenings of movies, or performances of songs? Perhaps we could capture much of what we believe about the world by talking only of people walking on beaches and never of the walks they take; or of theatres showing movies but no movie-showings. But finding a way to cast a theory of the world that never commits to events can look more like a pathological search for euphemism than hard-headed austerity.

The way some people think about events, events essentially involve *changes*: the death of a monarch is an event, but a continuation of a reign is less obviously an event. An event may not involve much change – very slow motion may constitute an event, and a steel bucket rusting away may be one drawn-out event, even if not very much happens in any ten-minute period of that event. I am not sure our ordinary word “event” is so limited: it does not seem to be a stretch to talk about static setups as involving boring events, and even a non-occurrence can sometimes be described as an event. (A dog not barking, for example.) Nevertheless, let us suppose, for the time being, that events only occur when there are changes. Some theorists want to distinguish *events* from *processes* – and while there are sometimes reasons to distinguish processes from other things, I am using the term “event” generously enough to cover both here. (So, e.g. a given baking of a cake is an event in my sense, even if it is interrupted before a cake is produced.)

Events are apparently different entities from the objects that feature in them or the properties and relations those objects have: the event of writing a letter is different both from the letter produced, and the properties of the letter such as being five paragraphs in length. In the next section I will argue that our recognition of the existence of events gives us a reason to recognise states too, but some analogies should already be clear.

Another variety of entity that is sometimes postulated are *property-instances*, or as they are sometimes called *tropes*. These are the particular features things have, as opposed to the general features that are shared. The blue of *my* shirt, that can fade or be dyed away, as opposed to that general shade of blue, that will still be found elsewhere no matter what happens to my shirt. We often talk about the properties and relations of people as if they are specific – my anger can fade without anger itself disappearing from the world, and the particular relation I stand in to each of my brothers came into existence only a few decades ago, even though brotherhood in general has been around much longer. Typical property instances seem different both from entities like my shirt or my brother, and also different from general properties and relations, though tropes do seem to be found in the world – we talk of *seeing* the shade of my shirt, for example, which would be difficult if it were not to be found where my shirt is. The existence of property instances is a little more controversial than the existence of events, but those who already believe in them should be predisposed to think that there are entities to be found in our world other than things like shirts and general properties like a particular shade of blue.

### **Arguments for the Existence of States**

One kind of argument for the existence of states takes advantage of the connections between states, on the one hand, and events and tropes, on the other. Given how I have characterised states of affairs, both events and tropes look like good candidates to be examples of states. It is natural to see events as a special kind of state – the kind that involves a change. Or to put it the other way around, it is natural to see the changes as a special case of a more general class of circumstances or scenarios – and that more general class is naturally identified as the states of affairs. Likewise, tropes occur when particular objects stand in properties or relations – and an object's having a property, (e.g. a stovetop's being hot or an economy's being in recession) looks like an excellent candidate to be a state of affairs in the sense introduced. Many people already believe that events exist (I suspect it is only philosophers, and perhaps some bored teenagers, who think that nothing ever happens.) Anyone who has seen the

blueness of their favourite shirt fade in the wash might be inclined to think that there is such an entity as the blueness of the shirt, distinct from the general property of blue which the shirt had and then lost, but which never faded, and so, if particularised properties are just states, might also be inclined to be convinced that their shirt was in one state, and is now in another. My own view is that both events and tropes should be counted as states, and we get a pleasing unification of a disparate bunch of entities if we think that there is a general category that is talked about in different ways. So in this way our recognition of e.g. events should lead us to recognise the existence of states of affairs.

An even more straightforward argument than the argument just presented from events, property instances, and the rest, is an argument that was implicit in my opening remarks. Beliefs we already have seem to imply that there are states: you can open the newspaper for information about the state of the economy, most competent cooks can update you about the state of a cake mix they are preparing, an engineer inspecting an old bridge can authoritatively report on the state of that bridge, and so on. Many of these beliefs are ones we take to be very well supported by our evidence about the world and by legitimate expertise: an engineer making predictions about a bridge, for example, has a long tradition of careful observation and experiment behind her, and humans have got pretty good at our theory of bridges over the years. (You might have noticed we can build large and elaborate bridges, and most bridges that are built well according to engineering standards stay up pretty reliably.)

If we believe a theory that implies that there are states, and we have excellent reasons for believing that theory, then we should conclude that there are states. And when we have many excellent theories in different areas all telling us that there are states, the case is even stronger. Seen in this light, disbelieving in states can seem like disbelieving in cakes or bridges: there *are* potential philosophical positions that reject the existence of such things, but we would want to see a pretty spectacular argument before we should be persuaded.

As well as these apparently commonplace encounters with states of affairs, many successful scientific inquiries focus a lot of attention on entities that, on examination, appear to be states. Trying to do psychology while ignoring mental states is very difficult. Economists concern themselves with predicting and explaining economic circumstances: and the economy itself is plausibly understood as a large and complex state in which we collectively find ourselves. (Talk of economic "conditions" is more common than talk of economic states: but when talking about particular conditions, as opposed to general types of conditions, I think "condition" talk is naturally interpreted as being about states of

affairs in the sense I am employing here.)

States even appear in what seem to be our most fundamental scientific inquiries. Pictures of the world drawn from physics suggest that the entire natural world is nothing but a collection of states of matter and energy (or perhaps matter and energy *plus* the states they are in). Quantum mechanics is up to its neck in talk of states and systems: the fundamental target of theorising often looks to be the attempt to properly describe the evolution of a state-space (where a state-space is, at least at first blush, the mathematical description of a complex state, or perhaps a collection of states). If all these theories apparently about states and systems have excellent powers to predict the outcomes of very precise experiments and enable the construction of new and powerful apparatus, that strongly suggests these theories are onto something. Since these theories are best understood as being about states, that should make us confident that the states they describe exist (or perhaps states somewhat like the ones they describe, if we think our current theories are probably still wrong about some of the details).

Those who are suspicious of states of affairs are typically not sceptics across the board, and typically do not reject either commonsense entities like cakes or bridges, nor scientific entities like minds or economies (unless those themselves are states), nor subatomic particles, objects with mass, and so on. Nor do they reject wholesale the expertise of cooks or bridge builders, or economists or psychologists, or chemists and physicists. In response to the argument just outlined, they are likely to say one of two things. They are likely either to say that ordinary "state" talk does not imply that states exist or that the world contains states of affairs, or alternatively that while existing beliefs and theories would, if true, require there to be states of affairs, there are close rival theories that would perform just as well for prediction and understanding, but lack this commitment to states of affairs.

Either response to these arguments from common sense and science will agree that there is something importantly right about a lot of ordinary state talk. So those who reject the existence of states will reject the charge that they should be lumped in with wholesale sceptics about our ability to get much about the world right, either through everyday evidence gathering like reading a newspaper or keeping an eye on some cake mix, or through more specialised scientific means.

The two possible responses to the widespread use of state talk in well-confirmed theories deserve separate treatment. I will call the first response, that sentences apparently talking of states do not really require states of affairs, a "linguistic" response, since it relies on a hypothesis about the functioning of

certain parts of language. The second response, that our theories do tell us there are states of affairs but they are wrong about that, I will call the "revisionary" response, since the truth would require revision. (Though some who favour this response may think that outside philosophy we should carry on as we have been - perhaps an untrue theory committed to states might have some worthwhile advantages the true theories would lack, for example.)

My response to the linguistic response will be the focus of the next section of this paper. Before turning to arguments about the language of states, however, it is worth saying something briefly about the revisionary response. What is wrong with holding that our ordinary talk about states is false?

There are many forms a revisionary response might take. But a common structure will include a suggestion of what form the truth in the area might take, either in detail or at least a sketch of the kind of thing; together with some reasons to think that the alternative, so described, will be adequate for our theoretical purposes - and ideally some motivations to prefer the revisionary alternative. Arguments against specific revisionary responses will often depend on the details of how this structure is filled in, of course. But there are a few general suspicions that any revisionary suggestion will face. One is whether they can adequately specify the candidate to be the literal truth in the area of our talk about states. Such a specification would preferably be systematic - if they can only gesture at an alternative in a few specific cases, that should not give us much confidence that alternatives to theories postulating states will be appealing across the board. And it should be adequate for all, or most, of the purposes that we invoked states for in the first place. It remains to be seen whether either of these desired features for an alternative can be achieved.

Suppose, however, we get to the stage where a well-worked-out alternative to theories committed to states has been presented to us, or at least adequately gestured towards, by a revisionist, and we become convinced, by one means or another, that the alternative is adequate to the purposes for which we had our original beliefs and theories about states. There would still be one more objection to face. The fact is that the theories and beliefs that *have* succeeded up until now are those that tell us there are states of affairs. (This, at least, is not in dispute between me and the revisionist as I have characterised them.) In general, I think, the theories that have an *actual* track record of success and a history of surviving testing should be preferred to theories that are in other respects equally good (e.g. they both accommodate the evidence so far) but which have not yet passed the test of being actually relied upon and tested. Even if some systematic theory that did not postulate states can be cooked up by a

sufficiently ingenious philosopher that manages to accommodate our predictions and explanations so far, we would want to see some additional advantages to it before switching.

This methodological principle is not uncontroversial: though one reason I think it is plausible is that it is often possible to cook up rival explanatory schemes for evidence we have but disagree with our current opinions in some respects: and if they had to be taken equally seriously we run the risk that we will have to give up nearly all of our beliefs one by one, due to the availability of alternative theories that reject those particular beliefs but do rather well at predicting and explaining our evidence. This seems to me particularly true when we are choosing between philosophical theories: a theory where tables are just Ideas in the mind of God might predict and explain our course of experience with tables fairly well, but even if I were convinced that it did okay at matching my current predictions and explanations, that would not incline me to even suspend judgement about whether tables are non-mental entities in a physical world.

Preferring the commitments of our actually successful theories until an alternative can be shown not just to be a rival but an improvement should not be so important a force to lead to stagnation. Revolutions in our ways of thinking are possible: the germ theory of disease overturned a lot of common sense beliefs and medical doctrines, but it should have been accepted (about many diseases) even despite this. Revisionists who accept that their candidate for the truth should be an *improvement* on our current state-laden theories may still wish to make that case. So debate with revisionists will no doubt continue: but at the moment I think revisionists still face heavy theoretical burdens that they need to do more to discharge.

### **Understanding State Talk**

Let us then move from considering the revisionist to considering the "linguistic response" to the apparent ubiquity of states of affairs posited by successful and well-tested theories. This response does not ask us to revise our commitment to theories that apparently postulate states: it is *true* that e.g. a certain politician was surprised in a state of undress, or that the economy is in a better state now than it was in 2009. It is just that we misunderstand these claims if we think they are telling us that there are a special kind of entity, states of affairs (of clothing arrangement in the first case, of economic activity or of economic actors in the second). Instead, this talk is about nothing more than politicians and clothing, economic actors and perhaps their activities, and so on: somehow, talk apparently about



states is really only about entities other than states of affairs: and so even if the claims are true, and we genuinely believe them, it would be a mistake to infer from them that there are the states of affairs they apparently describe.

The linguistic response and the revisionary response can sometimes resemble each other closely: one way to construct a revisionary alternative is to offer a mapping from state talk to sentences that apparently do not talk about states, and the most standard way to flesh out a linguistic response is to provide a systematic map from sentences apparently about states to sentences that are apparently not. Some opponents of states of affairs are not even clear which they intend - merely telling us that they think state talk can be "paraphrased away" without being clear about the status of the paraphrase.

I should distinguish the linguistic response from another kind of response, which is gaining in popularity and can be seen as hostile to states of affairs even though, in my view, it falls neither into the revisionary or linguistic camps. This is the view that while sentences apparently about states of affairs are true, and are indeed about states of affairs (contra the linguistic response), there are not states of affairs *in reality*, or states of affairs are not *truthmakers* for claims about states, or that states of affairs are not *fundamental*. While I am personally tempted by the view that some states of affairs are indeed fundamental, my task today is to argue that states of affairs exist – once that is conceded, we can have a further debate about how metaphysically deep this discovery is.

There are many ways the linguistic response could be developed, and different versions will look quite different depending in part on the resources they rely upon. An attempt to account for state talk just in terms of ordinary physical objects will look quite different from one that leans heavily on invoking general properties or abstract propositions, for example, or which invokes events but argues that events should not be seen as a kind of state. There is a lot of scope for technical virtuosity in developing these linguistic analyses, and subtle issues can arise in the details. I am glad that people pursue this sort of project from time to time, since it helps us understand the dizzying range of alternatives we potentially have available for systematically accounting for how our talk is connected to reality. However, even without going into the details, a number of serious concerns can be raised for any linguistic response: like the revisionary response, I think these options have a steep uphill battle ahead.

The first is that there is a cost in initial plausibility: the surface of these sentences suggests strongly they are about states, as competent speakers we are initially inclined to judge they are about states, and

a linguistic theory that denies they are about states and holds that competent users are systematically mistaken about what they are talking about has the appearances against it. This can be overcome with good enough evidence, of course, and some of the most impressive human intellectual achievements consist in establishing a theory that the initial appearances are against. But in general, overturning the apparently secure judgements of competent judges requires some impressive reasons.

Second, it has proved very difficult, in this area and others, to offer systematic paraphrases that seem adequate but avoid talk about suspect entities. Some of these difficulties are due to how pervasive and complex state talk can be. Simple sentences like “John was in an agitated state” might just amount to something like “John was agitated”. But we do not just talk about states in simple sentences like this. We compare one state with another; we quantify over states, saying all X states are Y states or that there are some Z states; we talk about relationships between different states; and, in complex enough sentences, we do all of these things at once. Trying to account for our talk about states while treating it as really talk about something else looks, on the face of it, as difficult as trying to account for our mathematical language while treating it as being about something other than numbers, sets, functions, and other mathematical objects. Once the hurdles to systematically understanding state language as really being about something else are appreciated, it looks more and more tempting to think that state talk is what it appears to be at first glance: talk about states of affairs.

It may be that a suitably clever scheme can be constructed so that we can adequately capture what state language is doing in other terms. But until more progress is made on these projects they have a bit of the air of projects designed to understand physical object language as being about something other than physical objects (e.g. the old projects of understanding apparent talk about external objects as talk about sense data). Maybe something along those lines could be achieved, but the prospects do not look bright that it will lead us to reject the face-value reading of either talk about physical objects, in the sense data case, or talk about states, in the current case.

## **Conclusion**

One reaction to metaphysical arguments like this is to dismiss the problems engaged with as uninteresting or unimportant, so in conclusion I should say something about why I think this dispute is worth having. I suspect there are many good answers to the question of why this issue is interesting: after all, different people are interested in different things, so the reason something is interesting to one

person might be different to why it is interesting to another. One is the intrinsic interest - whether there are states of affairs in the world we experience and theorise about is not obvious, and the self-conscious realisation that states exist is as wideranging and as informative as the discovery of ordinary objects or of properties. If we came across people with a strange intellectual tradition or cognitive disorder that meant that it had never dawned on them that there were physical objects, those of them who care about understanding the world would appreciate having this aspect of the world revealed to them. The realisation that states of affairs are real features of our world seems to me of the same order of interest and excitement.

As well as the intrinsic interest of states of affairs, recognition of their reality holds out a lot of promise in philosophy. To name just three metaphysical projects where states of affairs have been thought to be helpful, they are invoked to unify our understanding of different causal relationships (see Menzies 1989's use of "real situations"); they are invoked to explain how objects have properties and what in the world corresponds to our true claims (Armstrong 1997), and appeal to unobtaining states of affairs is one way to try to make sense of our talk of mere possibilities (see, for instance, Plantinga 1976). But a more widespread appreciation of the centrality of states of affairs would shift some of the focus, not just in metaphysics, but in philosophy of representation (both in mind and language), philosophy of science, epistemology, and potentially beyond (there is relatively little discussion of the role of states of affairs in the aesthetics literature, for example, especially outside the metaphysics of aesthetics and art). Understanding better the relationships between states, and between states and other entities, may be the key to unlocking understanding of a lot of the world we find ourselves in. Recognition that states are to be taken seriously is one of the first steps in this process.

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