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# A Neo-Armstrongian Defense of States of Affairs: A Reply to Vallicella

**Abstract:** Vallicella's influential work makes a case that, when formulated broadly, as a problem about unity, Bradley's challenge to Armstrongian states of affairs is practically insurmountable. He argues that traditional relational and non-relational responses to Bradley are inadequate, and many in the current metaphysical debate on this issue have come to agree. In this paper, I argue that such a conclusion is too hasty. Firstly, the problem of unity as applied to Armstrongian states of affairs is not clearly defined; in fact, it has taken a number of different forms each of which need to be carefully distinguished and further supported. Secondly, once we formulate the problem in more neutral terms, as a request for a characterization of the way that particulars, universals, and states of affairs stand to one another, it can be adequately addressed by an Armstrongian about states of affairs. I propose the desiderata for an adequate characterization and present a neo-Armstrongian defense of states of affairs that meets those desiderata. The latter relies on an important distinction between different notions of fundamentality and existential dependence.

**Keywords:** state of affairs, the unity problem, Bradley's regress, David Armstrong, William Vallicella, fundamentality

## Introduction

In the contemporary metaphysical debate, especially after Armstrong's (1978, 1989, 1997) influential work on universals, and, more recently, Vallicella's (2000, 2002) articles on states of affairs and Bradley's regress, it has become common to view the unity problem as a debilitating problem for states of affairs.[1]

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**1** By states of affairs, in this paper, I understand Armstrongian states of affairs, i. e. states of affairs that obtain. Perhaps it would be better to refer to them as *facts*, but for the sake of consistency with Armstrong's and Vallicella's terminology I will stick with "states of affairs".

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But what exactly is the problem and is it indeed as serious as we are led to believe? Philosophers have not been sufficiently clear on this issue.

Vallicella's outline of the problem starts with the assumption that we have good *prima facie* reasons to postulate states of affairs; he takes Armstrong's ontology of particulars and immanent universals, together with his truthmaker argument, to provide those reasons.

Armstrong's truthmaker argument for states of affairs[2] rests on the assumption that all truths require an ontological ground, i. e. something in the world that makes them true. He then proceeds to ask after the truth-maker of truths concerning particulars having properties. What makes it true that this chalk is white, or more generally, that "*a* is *F*"? It cannot be made true by *a* all by itself, construed as what he calls a "thin particular" (since *a* does not include all its properties); nor by a universal *F* by itself; nor by a pair (*a*, *F*), since both *a* and *F* could exist without it being the case that *a* is *F*. Thus, according to Armstrong, the correct truthmaker and ontological ground for such truths has to be the state of affairs *a's being F*.

But exactly how should such states of affairs be conceived? The problem, for Vallicella *and* for Armstrong, stems from the contingent nature of the union of particular and a universal within the state of affairs:

> [A] state of affairs or fact [...] is more than its primary constituents since they can exist without it existing. Even if *a* and *F-ness* cannot exist except in some state of affairs or other, there is nothing in the nature of *a* and nothing in the nature of F-ness to require that they combine with each other to form *a's being F*. So something more is needed to connect them. The problem is to specify the nature of this connector or unifier of a fact's constituents. What could it be? (Vallicella 2000, 238).

Vallicella (2000) immediately proceeds to survey and reject the proposals that take the connector of states of affairs to be: (1) internal to the state of affairs; (2) the state of affairs itself; and argues in favor of (3), a special sort of external unifier which he construes as having "a contingent power of self-determination" (akin to God or transcendental consciousness).

In what follows, I will argue that such radical ontological concoctions are not necessary to save Armstrongian states of affairs. I first show that the problem of unity itself is ill-defined and that its various formulations need further support before they can be taken as a genuine challenge to states of affairs. I then formulate in more neutral terms the proper question that the proponent of Armstrongian states of affairs needs to address. This is the question about characterizing adequately how particulars, universals, and states of

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**2** See Armstrong (1997, 115–116) for the brief statement of it.

affairs stand to one another. I propose the desiderata for an adequate answer to this question, and I show what one sort of neo-Armstrongian answer to this question might look like. The proposal will rely upon a careful distinction between different senses of fundamentality and different ways in which entities can be existentially dependent upon one another.

## States of Affairs and the Problems of Unity

Let's begin by examining closely Vallicella's way of articulating the problem of unity for states of affairs. His discussion is particularly important for the following reasons: firstly, it has had quite an influence on the recent debate; secondly, it conveniently captures in one place a cluster of problems that are frequently run together as "the problem of unity"[3]; and thirdly, it illustrates well how metaphysicians in this debate tend to seamlessly move from one version of the problem to the other, thus leaving an impression that we are dealing with one intractable problem, rather than many tractable ones.

Vallicella first objects to states of affairs being unified by some relation internal[4] to the state of affairs. He seems to think that those that appeal to relations or relation-like entities to provide an ontological ground of unity of states of affairs are immediately faced with a variant of Bradley's regress argument. He explains his objection as follows:

> The core idea is that once you analyze a fact into its constituents, you destroy its unity and will never be able to reconstitute it by adding constituents. A fact is a contingent *unity* of constituents, and this contingent unity can never be explained analytically by attempting to ground the unity in a special unifying constituent. Ontological analysis reaches a limit here. Unity eludes understanding, understanding which proceeds by moving from whole to part, from complex to simple. Thus the unity of *a's being F* cannot be explained by saying that the connector EX (exemplification) connects *a* and *F*-ness, for the unity of *a*, *F*-ness and EX is just as much in need of explanation as the unity of *a* and *F*-ness. [...] Bradley's point is essentially that for *x* and *y* to be related by dyadic relation R, there must be a distinct triadic relation R* to relate *x*, *y*, and R. And so on into a regress both infinite and vicious. It is clear that the argument applies not only to relational facts ordinarily so-called but also to monadic ones since if an individual has a property, and properties are universals, the individual is in some sense or other "related" to the property. Thus for *a*

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**3** For other similar statements of the problem see Simons (1994), Maurin (2010), Wieland and Betti (2008), Meinertsen (2008), and Orilia (2006), to name just a few.

**4** Note that the sense of "internal" here is different than the customary one. Vallicella simply means to indicate that the relation is a constituent of state of affairs, not that it is internal in the sense of supervening on the natures of the relata that it relates.

and F-ness to be related by the dyadic exemplification relation EX, there must be a distinct triadic exemplification relation EX⋆ to relate *a*, F-ness, and EX, etc. What Bradley wants to conclude is that "a relational way of thought – any one that moves by the machinery of terms and relations – must give appearance and not truth. [...] Now we needn't acquiesce in the conclusion; we may take the regress to show merely that the unity of a fact's primary constituents cannot be explained by any further constituent. (Vallicella 2000, 239).

Right from the start, Vallicella runs together a number of issues:

1) *The Problem of Analysis*. Initially, Vallicella seems to think that Bradley's regress has to do with the *ontological analysis* of facts, an analysis the carrying out of which is indeed somehow capable of *destroying* the unity of facts.[5] But Vallicella doesn't say enough about the precise notion of "ontological analysis" that he has in mind: is it something that minds do, or is it a mind-independent process?

If "analysis" is supposed to refer to a process that *we* carry out, then, it seems, it should not be attributed the power to destroy the unity of an entity whose existence is assumed to be mind-independent. (It is, of course, possible to think of states of affairs as mind-dependent entities, such as thoughts, in which case "analysis" may very well be able to destroy its unity. However, this understanding of state of affairs is certainly *not* the one that Armstrong was defending and does not seem to be the chosen aim of Vallicella's attacks.) If, on the other hand, "analysis" is meant to refer to some kind of mind-independent process of ontological separation, then more needs to be said about it, for it would certainly appear to carry a lot of ontological power.

It might be replied that Vallicella is merely trying to present the gist of what he takes to be Bradley's objection, with some of Bradley's own idealist overtones coloring the wording of it. Even so, it is important to be cautious and not conflate the issue of how *we* analyze and understand the unity of the complex (by, perhaps, as Vallicella suggests, moving from the complex to the simple) with the issue of what provides the ontological ground of the unity of the complex, independently from our understanding of it.

2) *The Explanatory Problem*. When Vallicella states that "the unity of *a's being F* cannot be explained by saying that the connector EX connects *a* and *F-ness* for the unity of *a*, *F-ness* and EX is just as much in need of explanation as the unity of *a* and *F-ness*," it seems as if he is thinking of the unity problem as being primarily of explanatory nature. What *explains* the unity of state of affair's constituents? – this seems to be the main question at issue. An

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**5** This echoes Russell in *Principles of Mathematics*: "A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when *analysis* has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition" (Russell 1903, 50, italics mine).

appeal to relations of exemplification won't do, according to Vallicella, for the unity of exemplification relation with *a* and *F* is just as much in need of an explanation. This then, presumably, leads us to an infinite vicious explanatory regress of further exemplification relations.

But from this description of the problem, it is not at all clear what generates the regress. Why is it insufficient to explain the unity of a state of affairs in terms of an exemplification relation that relates *a* and *F*? Couldn't the proponent of such a relation simply claim that *that is* what exemplification relations do? Namely, such relations relate universals and particulars in states of affairs. What might possibly be wrong with such an explanation?

It might be that Vallicella's dissatisfaction has to do with a more general mistrust of relations. If this is right, the statement of the problem of unity of states of affairs as an explanatory problem does not get to the heart of what is troubling Vallicella any more than the problem of analysis did. It is rather a symptom of a deeper problem regarding the ontology of relations.

3) *The so-called "Bradley Problem" about Relations*. This is the problem that is most frequently associated with Bradley's regress arguments in *Appearance and Reality* (1893). The actual arguments given by Bradley, however, require careful exegesis[6] and are far from compelling.[7] Many contemporary philosophers offer what they take to be a *Bradley-inspired* argument against relational unity of a state of affairs. Vallicella puts this argument briefly as follows: "for *x* and *y* to be related by dyadic relation R, there must be a distinct triadic relation R* to relate *x*, *y*, and R" (Vallicella 2000, 239), and so on *ad infinitum*. The same problem, according to Vallicella, also arises for monadic relational unities of *a*, *F*, and relation of exemplification *EX*. For *a*, *F*, and *EX* to be related, a distinct triadic relation *EX\** is invoked to relate them, and so on *ad infinitum*. The conclusion that Vallicella draws from this is that "a unity of fact's primary constituents cannot be explained by any further constituent" (Vallicella 2000, 240).

But such conclusion seems rather quick and unsubstantiated since it is far from clear what exactly generates the vicious regress of relations described by Vallicella. Can it be that Vallicella has simply assumed that relations cannot

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**6** For a detailed reconstruction and analysis of Bradley's original regress arguments as well as criticisms of the Bradleyean underpinnings of contemporary attacks on relations see Perovic (2014).

**7** As it is argued in Perovic (2014), Bradley's original regress arguments are brought forth against a relational unity of a bundle of qualities, and they rely upon a number of unsubstantiated assumptions about relations. These are: i) that independent relations cannot relate their relata; ii) that internal relations are grounded in *parts* of qualities that they relate; and iii) that relations must fulfill a dual role – they must be able to *differentiate* as well as *relate* their relata.

relate and thus that the original relation R in *aRb*, and likewise the relation of exemplification *EX* in *Fa*, are incapable of relating their relata?

If this diagnosis is correct, then the appealingly simple solution, suggested by Blanshard (1983, 215), Grossman (1992, 55–56), and Alexander (1920, 249, 256) is at hand. Reject the background assumption of inaptness of relations to relate their relata and insist that it is simply the job of relations to relate. This would solve *The Bradley Problem about Relations* and the vicious regress would lose its footing.

According to Vallicella (among others), however, this kind of reply is not viable. Vallicella responds to Blanshard by distinguishing two senses of the thesis that "it is the job of a relation to relate" and argues that neither of these two senses can solve *The Bradley Problem*. He argues that the statement "it is the job of a relation to relate" can be taken to mean either: i) that the very being (the "job") of a given relation is "exhausted" by its relating just those terms it actually relates; or ii) that there are no unexemplified relations, i. e. that a relation cannot but relate some relata or other.

I believe that Vallicella is correct to claim that i) is in tension with the notion that a relation is a universal. Universals are meant to be entities which are capable of *multiple* instantiation. Relations which are by their very nature exceedingly discriminating – to the point of being able to be instantiated only by a specific pair (or n-tuple) of particulars – would in effect behave like tropes, rather than genuine universals. This is why realists about universals would do better to avoid them.

On the other hand, Vallicella takes it that ii) does not come close to solving *The Bradley Problem*. He writes: "if a relation does not necessarily have the terms that it has, if it is a contingent fact that R relates *a* and *b*, Bradley's problem legitimately arises: what is the ontological ground of the difference between *aRb* and the mere sum, a + R + b? If further relations are introduced to connect R to its terms, a vicious infinite regress ensues." (Vallicella, 240).

But at this point, Vallicella's Bradley-inspired unity problem appears to have shifted its topic again. It is now no longer a problem about relations as unifiers of states of affairs but a problem about finding an ontological ground of the unity present in states of affairs and absent in mereological sums. I will refer to this new problem as "the mereological problem of unity".

4) *The Mereological Problem of Unity* takes the form of the following questions: What is the ontological ground of the difference between a sum $a + R + b$ and the unified state of affairs *aRb*? What is the ontological ground of the difference between the sum $a + F$ and the unified state of affairs *Fa*?[8]

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**8** For an interesting discussion of this problem see Orilia (2004).

Now, although this way of stating the problem is widespread, it is far from evenhanded – it can be accused of a mereological bias and of begging the question against the proponent of states of affairs and instantiated universals. The mereological bias is displayed in the very fact that the sum or an aggregate of entities is taken to be ontologically unproblematic and a given, while the states of affairs are taken to be suspect entities in need of a special unifying constituent. Take for instance a proponent of states of affairs who is suspicious of mereological sums; he might very well want to pose the same question, but with the stress on sums: what is the difference between a state of affairs *a being F* and the mereological sum of *a* and *Fness*? What sort of entity might the mereological sum $a + F$ be? What kinds of properties does such an entity have?

Admittedly, this line of questioning is not terribly productive as it merely attempts to shift the explanatory burden from the proponent of states of affairs to the proponent of mereological sums. But there is, however, a deeper objection to be found nearby. That is, one might well accept a liberal ontology of mereological sums of particulars such as $a + b$ (e. g. the Eiffel Tower and Neptune), but reject – or at least question – the thesis that particulars and universals can be mereologically summed to make $a + F$ or $a + R + b$. Armstrongian properties and relations may simply not be the kinds of entities that can be involved in a mereological sum. Namely, if an Armstrongian universal cannot exist without being exemplified in some state of affairs or other, if it is existentially dependent on being exemplified by particular(s), what does the summing of it amount to?[9]

To put it more broadly: what does it mean to sum entities that *ex hypothesi* cannot enjoy independent existence from one another? Unless we have a clear understanding of this question, Vallicella's mereological problem of unity does not clearly apply to an Armstrongian about universals and states of affairs.

It also won't do to recast the mereological problem of unity by appealing to a list or a set $\{a, b, R\}$ instead of a mereological sum. An appeal to contrast a set/ a grouping/a list of entities with the state of affairs keeps repeating the same errors: it simply assumes, without any supporting arguments, that the lists/sets/ groupings are ontologically unproblematic and an ontological given; and it assumes without justification that the immanent realist's particulars and universals *can* be listed/grouped. Note that the worry here has nothing to do with language, but with *ontology* that is so readily assumed to correspond to our talk of lists/sets/groupings of entities. And the ontology that seems to be

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**9** There are yet further concerns. Take the particular *a*. When it is mereologically summed with *b* and R to make $a + R + b$, is it summed with all its properties or just with some of them? Is it a bare particular that is being summed or is it an Armstrongian "thin particular" (assuming that there is a difference between the two)?

presupposed is that of particulars and universals that can enjoy an independent existence outside of states of affairs.

5) *The Problem of the Existence of a specific State of Affairs*. Some realists may not take issue with Vallicella's mereological statement of the unity problem. In fact, they may wish to take up the problem on just those terms and respond to Vallicella by pointing out that the difference between a mereological sum $a + R + b$ and the state of affairs $aRb$ is to be found in different *roles* that relation $R$ assumes in them. They may argue, taking a cue from Russell,[10] that relations have a dual nature – that they can occur as terms as well as relating relations. Thus, for such a realist, the fundamental difference between the sum and the state of affairs has to do with whether the main relation is occurring in its relating role or not; when it is, we have a state of affairs, when it is not, we have a sum.

To this kind of argument, Vallicella has a rejoinder. He claims that what he is after is not a general difference between a fact-unity and a sum-unity, but "the existence of fact-unity in *particular cases*" (Vallicella 200:242; italics mine). He explains:

> What I am calling the unity problem... is a problem about the *existence* of particular facts. For a fact cannot exist unless its constituents are *actually* unified. So the unity problem is precisely this: What makes it the case that a number of constituents of the right kinds – constituents which are connectable so as to form a fact but need not be connected to exist – are *actually* connected so as to form an actual or existing fact? (Vallicella 2000, 242).

This statement of the problem, however, makes it look as though the unity problem has to do with what *causes* the states of affairs to spring into existence. The assumption Vallicella makes is that we ought to be perplexed by the existence of a given state of affairs $aRb$ because relation $R$ and particulars $a$ and $b$ can exist independently of the existence of *this* particular state of affairs.

But why should we be perplexed? The assumed recombinability of $a$, $b$, and $R$ does not entail that they are "free-floaters" that exist altogether independently from states of affairs and that need to be somehow muscled into such states of affairs. It is also not the case that if a relation $R$ is relating its relata in $aRb$, that

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**10** See, for example, Russell (1912, 128) for a description of two different ways in which a relation of loving can occur in a complex. Namely, it can occur as a relating relation in a fact *Desdemona loves Cassio*, but it can also occur just as a term or an "object" in the belief-fact *Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio*. In the belief-fact, it is the relation of *believing* that is in its relating role, not the relation *loves*, which merely occurs as one of the terms of the believing relation. Now, one would be correct to point out that relation *loves* features in complexes/facts (and not in aggregates) in both of these examples and this is indeed the way in which Russell's examples are importantly dissimilar from the case that I have in mind here.

it is in any sense "causing" or "bringing about" the existence of this state of affairs. What brings it about that the earth orbits the sun has something to do with gravitational fields involved in the formation of the solar systems. The relation "orbits" did not bring about the state of affairs of its relating the earth to the sun. The question of what grounds the unity of a state of affairs is not the question of what causes that state of affairs. The metaphysical ground of unity is not the place to look to answer questions about what causes a state of affairs and why a given state of affairs exists as opposed to some other. Vallicella's talk of "making the case", "bringing about", "actually connecting", as well as his appeal to agents who need to "insert the plug into a socket", "glue the boards together" (*ibid*. 242–243), or act as "existence-makers" do little to dispel the worry that he has conflated very importantly distinct issues.

Admittedly, Vallicella at one point denies that he is conflating the ontological and the causal questions. The problem, he claims, has to do with the contingent nature of the unity of particulars and universals in states of affairs – there is nothing in the *natures* of *a* and *F-ness* to require that they come together, so, he insists, something else must *bring them together*. But the worry remains that his notion of "bringing together" runs together the very issues he is in earnest to keep separate.

6) *The Problem of How Relations Relate*. Another prominent question in the debate about unity is: How do relations relate?[11] This question dates back to Bradley (1926, 635) and seems to be, at least in part, what fuels Vallicella's skepticism about relations and their ability to relate.

However, it is important to keep in mind that Bradley's "how" question had to do with relations having to play a dual role that he assigned to them; that is, Bradley thought of relations as having to fulfill *both* the unifying and the difference-making role and he could not understand how one entity – a relation – could possibly fill both. In contemporary debate though, the puzzlement over "how relations relate" stems from a different place. It is often assumed that unless some "account of the nature of relations" adequately *explains* "what makes them apt to unite distinct relata", an appeal to relations as relating entities is somehow illicit.

But is such an assumption justified? If the proponent of the "how relations relate" question is not to be accused of a bias against relations, he needs to offer some preliminary reasons for thinking that an entity whose ontological role is to relate is somehow not up to the task. Without such reasons, the proponent of relating relations can legitimately insist that to ask "how relations relate" in this

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**11** See Simons (1994), Maurin (2010), Meinertsen (2008), and Wieland and Betti (2008) for such framing of the problem.

context is simply out of place. That is, if a realist like Armstrong has introduced universals to fill a resemblance-making role, why can't relations be the entities that ground the relational respects of resemblance between pairs or n-tuples of entities by relating those pairs or n-tuples of entities?

In other words, those that press the "how" question need to make it clear what sort of metaphysical explanation they are after. What might be an adequate explanation of a *nature* of an entity if not a description of its ontological role? To ask further "what is it about the nature of entity X that makes it fulfill its ontological role" sounds like a confused way of requesting a causal explanation of some kind, or as an application of the principle of sufficient reason, which in its own right needs further justification and support.

# An Adequate Neo-Armstrongian Characterization of States of Affairs

Discussion in the previous section has shown the way in which a number of different characterizations of the unity problem for states of affairs can almost seamlessly be run together. Once these different characterizations are carefully separated, and their tacit assumptions made clear, it becomes easier to see which theses an Armstrongian about states of affairs need not acquiesce to. For instance, it would be rather odd for an Armstrongian about universals to agree without hesitation to *The Mereological Problem of Unity*, since this way of stating the problem displays a bias towards mereological sums and no sensitivity to the question about whether thin particulars and instantiated universals are entities apt for being summed. Furthermore, *The Bradley Problem about Relations* and *The Problem of How Relations Relate* both seemed to rest on a certain skepticism about relations' ability to relate their relata, a skepticism that a proponent of immanent universals need not share. Finally, *The Problem about Existence of States of Affairs* seemed concerned about the quasi-causal origins of specific states of affairs, a question whose exact purpose needs to be more clearly defined before it can become mandatory for any proponent of state of affairs.

The point of all this is *not*, however, to conclude that an Armstrongian does not have a serious problem on her hands, but rather that the problem(s) for her should take a somewhat different shape. Instead of asking after unity (which always seems to explicitly or implicitly presuppose the state of disunity as an ontological default), why not take Armstrong at his word and start from the assumption of the world of states of affairs? Under this assumption, the

existence of states of affairs is the ontological default and particulars and universals cannot exist but in some state of affairs or other. The central question for such a view then becomes: *How do particulars, universals, and states of affairs stand to one another?*[12] In other words, assuming that states of affairs are an ontological given, and thus fundamental in some sense, what is their relationship to particulars and universals that constitute them? How should such a relationship be characterized? And what sense, if any, can be made of states of affairs that are fundamental as well as complex?

Thus, an adequate neo-Armstrongian response to the central question must go some way in meeting the following desiderata: 1) it should address the traditional worry that complex entities such as states of affairs cannot be both *fundamental* and *unanalyzable*; 2) it should explain in what sense, if any, particulars and universals are to be considered *constituents* of states of affairs; and 3) it should clarify the type of dependence/independence that holds among the three entities. We will consider these in turn.

## States of Affairs – Unanalyzable Fundamental Complexes

The worry that states of affairs or facts cannot be both fundamental and unanalyzable entities was originally formulated by Bradley within the context of his discussion of Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*. Bradley states his concerns as follows:

> On the one side I am led to think that he defends a strict pluralism, for which nothing is admissible beyond simple terms and external relations. On the other side Mr. Russell seems to assert emphatically, and to use throughout, ideas which such a pluralism surely must repudiate. He throughout stands upon unities which are complex and which cannot be analysed into terms and relations. These two positions to my mind are irreconcilable, since the second, as I understand it, contradicts the first flatly. If there are such unities, and still more, if such unities are fundamental, then pluralism surely is in principle abandoned as false (Bradley 1910, 179).

To understand better the gist of this kind of objection, we need to understand better what is meant here by "pluralism", "analyzability", and "fundamentality".

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**12** The phrase "stand to one another" is somewhat unfortunate since to some it may appear to invoke relations. No such thing is intended here, however. Characterizing relationships between entities need not appeal to relations and the formulation of the question is not meant to be partial to relational responses. If anything, the phrase merely reflects how difficult it is to escape relation-invoking phrases altogether.

It is clear that by "pluralism" Bradley cannot be merely referring to a theory that postulates the existence of many entities rather than just one (call it *token pluralism*), for there is no tension with such a view in Russell who explicitly accepts many different entities or "terms".[13] By "pluralism" Bradley also probably does not wish to refer to an ontological view that postulates more than one *type* of entity (call it *type pluralism*). If this were the case, Russell would clearly not have violated such a view, for he accepts two *types* of entity in the *Principles* – *things* and *concepts*.[14] So what might exactly Bradley mean by pluralism and what problem does he find with Russell's commitment to it?

Our clue is Bradley's accusation that Russell "throughout stands upon unities which are complex and which cannot be analysed into terms and relations" while at the same time defending "strict pluralism for which nothing is admissible beyond simple terms and external relations" (Bradley 1910, 179). From this it would seem that Bradley thinks that a pluralist who postulates two fundamental types of entities cannot also admit a third fundamental entity which is complex and constituted out of those simpler entities. It seems as if Bradley's idea of pluralism admits only of multiple *simple* entities. The very notion of a *fundamental complex entity* seems incoherent to him. For how could a fundamental entity be complex – i. e. composed of simpler constituents? And even more troublingly for Bradley, how could a fundamental entity be complex *and* unanalyzable?

To evaluate this type of objection we first need to clarify what is meant here by "analysis". This is exactly what Russell tried to do in his prompt response to Bradley:

> It would seem that everything here turns upon the sense in which such unities cannot be analysed. I do not admit that, in any strict sense, unities are incapable of analysis; on the

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**13** Russell defines "terms" in *Principles* as follows: "Whatever may be called an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition, or can be counted as *one*, I call a *term*. This, then, is the widest word in the philosophical vocabulary. I shall use as synonymous with it the words unit, individual, and entity. The first two emphasize the fact that every term has being, *i. e. is* in some sense. A man, a moment, a number, a class, a relation, a chimera, or anything else that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term; and to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false" (Russell 1903, 43).

**14** An entity, such as Socrates, which can occur in a proposition in only one way, is called a *thing*. In contrast, *concepts* (properties and relations) are capable of what Russell calls "that curious twofold use which is involved in *human* and *humanity*" (Russell 1903, 45). For instance, *humanity* occurs as a predicate in the proposition "Socrates is human", but it occurs as a term in the proposition "humanity belongs to Socrates". From this we can see that Bradley did not fully understand Russell's terminology of the *Principles*, since in his objection to Russell he uses the expression "term" to refer to what Russell calls a "thing".

> contrary, I hold that they are the only objects that can be analysed. What I admit is that no *enumeration* of their constituents will reconstitute them, since any such enumeration gives us a plurality, not a unity. But I do not admit that they are not composed of their constituents; and what is more to the purpose, I do not admit that their constituents cannot be considered truly unless we remember that they are their constituents (Russell 1910, 373).

In *Principles*, Russell argued that propositional unities could not be analyzed, for analysis would destroy the unity of the proposition (Russell 1903, 50–51). In the above quote, however, Russell is using the term "analysis" differently, to designate a process (performed by us) of "discovery of the constituents of the complex" (Russell 1910, 374), so not an actual ontological breaking down of the complex into its constituents. This shift in the understanding of the notion of "analysis" allowed Russell to say that complexes are the only objects that *can* in fact be analyzed, in the sense that only complex entities have constituents that are discoverable.

This part of Russell's reply to Bradley is equally pertinent when questions about unanalyzability of states of affairs arise in contemporary debate. As already stated in the brief discussion of Vallicella's *Problem of Analysis* in section 2, it is crucial to get clear on the notion of *analysis* that objectors to states of affairs have in mind. If by "analysis" is meant something that we do when we attend to a complex entity, then indeed it is not true that states of affairs are unanalyzable. But if what is meant is that states of affairs are complexes that cannot be ontologically broken down into self-subsisting particulars and universals, then an Armstrongian about states of affairs must agree. For what is being stated is the obvious – the world for an Armstrongian is a world of states of affairs, and particulars and universals exist only in states of affairs.[15]

What seems to lie at the heart of the dispute about fundamentality and unanalyzability is really the perception that states of affairs cannot be both complex and fundamental. Whether such a perception is correct will depend on our understanding of complexity and fundamentality. Metaphysicians commonly take complexity of an entity to imply that that entity has constituents. States of affairs are assumed to be constituted out of particulars and universals, and in this sense they are indeed complex entities. But why can't such entities also be fundamental? The objection that insists that entities cannot be fundamental and complex not only seems to associate fundamentality with simplicity,

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15 This, of course, is not to say that particulars cannot lose some universals and gain others, but any change of this sort would carry with it a change of a state of affairs – with one state of affairs being replaced by another.

it also seems to overlook different senses in which an entity can be taken to be fundamental.

There seem to be at least three different senses in which entities can be seen to be fundamental: *constitutive*, *explanatory*, and *existential*. Although some of these types of fundamentality end up picking out the same entities, they need not do so, for they are quite different and ought to be kept separate. To this end, I suggest the following characterizations:

> *Constitutive fundamentality*. An entity *e* is *constitutively* more fundamental than entity *e'* iff *e* is a constituent of *e'*, where constitution is construed broadly, to include mereological *and* non-mereological forms of constitution.

> *Explanatory fundamentality*. An entity *e* is *explanatorily* more fundamental than entity *e'* iff the definition or a characterization of the ontological role of *e'* cannot be done without reference to *e*, whereas *e* is either taken as an explanatory primitive or it can be characterized independently from *e'*.

> *Existential fundamentality*. An entity *e* is *existentially* more fundamental than entity *e'* iff *e'* cannot exist without *e*, whereas *e* can exist without *e'*.

With these distinctions at hand we can see that particulars and universals are *constitutively* more fundamental than Armstrongian states of affairs; tropes are *constitutively* more fundamental than, say, bundles of tropes, and so on. But, at the same time, an immanent realist could perhaps claim that facts or states of affairs are *explanatorily* more fundamental than particulars and universals, for the characterization of the latter invokes their role in the former, while the same is not necessarily the case the other way around. As Armstrong (1997) and (2004) has argued, states of affairs can be characterized via the truthmaking argument – they are the entities that make sentences about having and sharing of properties true. What makes up such entities is a further question and one that may have different answers depending on the type of ontology one embraces (tropes, Wittgenstein's "objects", particulars and abundant universals, or particulars and sparse universals, etc.). For my part, I am not sure that an adequate characterization of states of affairs *can* or indeed *should* be given without reference to particulars and universals. Here, I just wish to hint at the possibility of some such characterization and more generally, to the possibility of cases where *constitutive* and *explanatory* fundamentality might come apart and pick out different entities.

With respect to *existential fundamentality*, however, it seems as if all three – particulars, universals, and states of affairs – are on a par. Neither can exist without the other. Particulars cannot exist but in states of affairs, universals cannot exist uninstantiated and thus in states of affairs, and states of affairs for an immanent realist cannot exist without particulars and universals.

We can now see in what sense states of affairs may be taken to be *fundamental unanalyzable complexes*. They are existentially as fundamental as particulars and universals; they are constitutively complex (and thus *not* fundamental in this sense); and they may even be seen as explanatorily more fundamental than both particulars and universals.[16] If by analysis one has in mind some process of ontological break-down of states of affairs into self-subsisting particulars and universals, then states of affairs are also unanalyzable.

Thus, when Russell responded to Bradley by insisting that constituents of the complex can be "considered truly" without having to consider them as constituents of the complex, while, at the same time, holding on to the characterization of constituents in terms of the way these occur in the complexes, I believe that he would have done well to embrace the distinctions outlined above. A neo-Armstrongian certainly should.

## Dependence of the Constituents of States of Affairs on One Another

Up to this point, I have availed myself freely of a common way of referring to particulars and universals as "constituents" of states of affairs. By this I have simply meant that particulars and universals "make up" states of affairs rather than the other way around. The trouble with an appeal to "constituents" is that for many metaphysicians this term seems to carry the connotations of separateness, existential independence, and inertness. The image seems to be of marbles in a box, or something along those lines. However, particulars,

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**16** In my discussion of fundamentality I have here deliberately left out the notions of *ontological dependence* and *metaphysical explanation*. The main reason is because these are not sufficiently clear and there is no standard take on them. There have been various admirable attempts in characterizing these notions better. For this, see Lowe (2010), Correia (2008), Cameron (2008), Schaffer (2012). Most of the literature on this issue assumes that metaphysical explanation and ontological dependence must go hand in hand, but offer little to no support for such a claim. It is assumed that the nature of metaphysical explanation is such that it ought to follow the chains of ontological dependence, where the latter is frequently characterized in terms of existential dependence and constituency. In its turn then, ontological dependence is characterized as an ontological analog of metaphysical explanation – thus, the "ontologically fundamental" entities would be the ones that seem basic for explanatory purposes. Where the two notions become completely indistinguishable is in loose metaphysical talk of entities *explaining* some phenomena. Due to all of this, I have tried to take some modest steps towards distinguishing what seem to me different senses of fundamentality.

universals, and states of affairs in a neo-Armstrongian view advocated here could not be further from that picture. In fact, it is possible that this very picture has contributed to the assumptions that particulars and universals can be separated out from states of affairs, that relations do not relate and need further relations to relate them to their relata (which has led to some versions of Bradley's regress), or to the assumption that states of affairs are entities that "hold" their constituents together.

But for a neo-Armstrongian view advocated here, particulars and universals are constituents of states of affairs in a minimal sense of "making up", or existing only within states of affairs. States of affairs are complex entities. The type of dependence that holds between particulars, universals, and states of affairs has been already referred to above as existential. But existential dependence can take two main forms – *generic* and *specific* – and both of these can be either mutual or one-sided.[17]

> *Mutual Generic Existential Dependence* holds between entities *a* and *b* iff *a* cannot exist without some entity or other of the category that *b* belongs to, but it need not specifically be *b*; and the same is the case for *b*.
>
> *One-Sided Generic Existential Dependence* holds between entities *a* and *b* iff *a* cannot exist without some entity or other of the category that *b* belongs to, but the same is not the case with *b*.
>
> *Mutual Specific Existential Dependence* holds between entities *a* and *b* iff *a* cannot exist without *b* and the same is the case with *b*.
>
> *One-Sided Specific Existential Dependence* holds between entities *a* and *b* iff *a* cannot exist without *b* and the same is not the case with *b*.

Thus, the constituents of most states of affairs such as *this chalk being white* exhibit what has been called above – *mutual generic existential dependence*. The particular piece of chalk presumably cannot exist without having some color or other, it is generically existentially dependent upon some color universal. The universal *whiteness* is *generically existentially dependent* on some concrete particular for it cannot exist without inhering in some concrete particular or other, but it need not be the particular piece of chalk *a*.

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**17** I am deliberately avoiding the talk of "direction" here, because direction is usually associated with relations, and the dependence that I have in mind does not involve dependence *relations*. For accounts that invoke relations as unifiers of bundles of tropes and that make the fruitful distinction between *generic* and *specific* relata-specificity of relations see Simons (1994), Maurin (2010), and Weiland and Betti (2008).

However, the state of affairs *of this particular chalk being white* exhibits the strongest kind of dependence on its constitutive particular and universal – namely, it seems to exhibit *one-sided specific existential dependence* on its constituents. The reason why specific states of affairs seem to exhibit such strong existential dependence, is because of a simple fact that any change in a particular or in a universal would bring about a different state of affairs.

Whereas most particulars and universals in states of affairs are generically dependent on one another, it is not the case with all. Particulars may have some universals essentially, in which case they may have a one-sided existential dependence on a universal. This may be the case with an electron's *negative charge*. *Having negative charge* seems to be an essential property of an electron, a property without which it would cease to be an electron.

## The Two-Tier Account of States of Affairs

Throughout this paper, I have interchangeably used the examples of states of affairs involving particulars having properties – of the form *Fa*, as well as the relational cases of particulars standing in external relations to one another – of the form *aRb*. I now need to make clear that the previous descriptions of the types of dependence apply only to the way that particulars and property universals stand to one another in states of affairs. The story is somewhat different with relational universals.

In the genuinely relational cases which involve *external relations* relating *a* and *b*, the answer to the central question described above is simple: *a* and *b* are related by the relation *R*. I have already argued against the question about how relations relate their relata as a case of unsupported skepticism about relations and their ontological role. If we take relations and their relating role seriously, the *how* question should not arise.

Some may find this two-tier treatment of states of affairs unsatisfactory. It is often considered a virtue if a metaphysical theory can give the same account of the same (or relevantly similar) phenomena. My neo-Armstrongian proposal indeed lacks such a virtue but it does so to a lesser degree than it may at first seem. Our symbolism leads us to think that in *Fa* and in *aRb*, the particular *a* is exactly the same. But that is not the case and such an assumption may be part of what has led many to introduce instantiation *relations* in trying to unify *a* and its *Fness*. It may have been thought that the same way that a relation *R* relates its relata *a* and *b* into a state of affairs *aRb*, some relation needs to relate *a* and *F* into a state of affairs *Fa*. However, the two are very different cases – the relata of

the relation $R$ in $aRb$ are themselves states of affairs, i. e. they are particulars with their properties standing in further relation to one another. The case of $Fa$ is different, for the $a$ in question is not a state of affairs. The question of the exact status of this particular is an important one, but I cannot engage that question here (Armstrong talked about them as "thin" but not "bare" particulars). Here, I merely want to note that the difference in the monadic and the dyadic cases seems significant enough to warrant a different treatment.

## Conclusion

In this paper, my aim has been to bring some relief to proponents of Armstrongian states of affairs and dispel the sense that these entities have an insurmountable problem threatening their very existence. I have shown that "the unity problem" for states of affairs need not scare us, for there isn't one but many (I have found six; perhaps there are more), and most of these are not nearly as challenging as it might have been initially thought. A proponent of states of affairs still has work to do in answering what I have called "the central question for states of affairs" – the question about characterizing the way in which particulars, universals, and states of affairs stand to one another. I have formulated the desiderata for an adequate neo-Armstrongian characterization of states of affairs and shown one way that such desiderata might be met. But there are others, and part of the purpose of this paper has been to demonstrate that avenues once thought to be open to realists are still there waiting to be fully explored.

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