

A Companion to David Lewis

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Counterparts of States of Affairs¹

DAVID LEWIS

Counterpart theory affords an especially flexible form of essentialism. By considering the very same thing under different, equally legitimate counterpart relations, we can endow it with different essences and different potentialities. By endowing ordinary things with peculiar essences, we could provide truthmakers for intrinsic predications (Lewis, 2003). By endowing the entire world with peculiar essences, we could provide truthmakers for negative existential propositions (Rosen and Lewis, 2003). Thus we avoid the need for states of affairs or nontransferable tropes as truthmakers. And a good thing too, I used to think, because these alleged entities are involved in *prima facie* mysterious necessary connections between distinct existences.

But the same technique for endowing things with tailor-made essences by suitable choice of a counterpart relation can be applied also to states of affairs themselves or to tropes. When we do, we render the necessary connections unmysterious. So I've come around to thinking that a theory of states of affairs or tropes, assisted by flexible counterpart theory, is after all another entirely satisfactory way to provide truthmakers.

States of affairs are somehow constructed from particular things and the properties they instantiate. A familiar argument says that this construction must be neither mereological nor set-theoretical: else the state of affairs will exist if the thing and the property do, never mind whether the thing instantiates the property, so the state of affairs is not a truthmaker for the proposition that the thing instantiates the property. If so, the need for some third novel sort of construction is a further drawback of a theory of states of affairs. However, that familiar argument rests on a thesis of mereological or set-theoretical essentialism. If essences can be tailor-made to suit our purposes, we need not be saddled with *any* unwelcome sort of essentialism.

The thesis of mereological essentialism says that it is essential to something that it has exactly the parts that it actually has; and conversely that it is essential to the parts that they compose exactly the mereological sum that they actually do. So if a train, say the 15:40 from Paddington yesterday, consists of two carriages, DMBS1234 and DTS6789, then we have a puzzle. The sum DMBS1234 + DTS6789 seems to be necessarily composed of DMBS1234 and DTS6789; yet the train

could very easily have been composed of different carriages, since carriages are interchangeable and are routinely taken out of service for repairs; and yet the train *is* the sum! Counterpart theory to the rescue. There's one legitimate counterpart relation that validates mereological essentialism: it obeys the rule that the counterpart of a sum is the sum of the counterparts of the parts; so for instance the counterpart of DMBS1234 + DTS6789 is the sum of the counterparts of the carriages DMBS1234 and DTS6789, never mind whether those counterpart carriages are coupled together into a train. And there's another equally legitimate counterpart relation on which the counterpart of yesterday's 15:40 from Paddington is yesterday's 15:40 from (the counterpart of) Paddington, never mind what carriages it consists of. The train *is* the sum. Yet if we call it a sum, that tends to evoke the first of these counterpart relations, while if we call it a train, that tends to evoke the second. We could put it this way: this one thing qua sum has one essence, the same thing qua train has another. Qua sum it essentially consists of just these carriages, qua train not.

Much the same can be said of a mereologically constructed state of affairs: a thing-plus-property sum such that the thing instantiates the property. It is the state of affairs Fa of a 's having F ; it is the sum $a + F$. Calling this one thing a sum evokes one counterpart relation, one that validates mereological essentialism. Calling the same thing a state of affairs evokes another counterpart relation, one that doesn't validate mereological essentialism, but does obey the rule that any counterpart of a state of affairs must be a state of affairs. (Unlike the train-counterpart relation, it does validate one direction of mereological essentialism. If Fa is mereologically composed of F and a , any state-of-affairs counterpart of Fa must be mereologically composed of F – or perhaps a counterpart of F – and a counterpart of a .) Here in this world we have one thing which is Fa and $a + F$. Off in some other world we have a counterpart a' of a , and we again have property F (or maybe we have a counterpart of F); but a' doesn't instantiate F , so the sum $a' + F$ is not a state of affairs. Our thisworldly state of affairs/sum has $a' + F$ for a sum-counterpart, but not for a state-of-affairs-counterpart. Qua sum, it is essentially the sum of a and F , but not essentially a state of affairs, and therefore unfit to serve as a truthmaker for the proposition that a has F . Qua state of affairs, this same entity *is* essentially a state of affairs, and therefore a truthmaker for the proposition that a has F .

If we prefer to construct states of affairs set-theoretically, say as thing–property ordered pairs such that the thing instantiates the property, exactly the same treatment applies. We have one legitimate counterpart relation that validates both directions of set-theoretical essentialism: any counterpart of the pair of a and F is a pair of a counterpart of a and a counterpart of F , and conversely, never mind whether the thing instantiates the property. The pair qua pair is essentially the pair of a and F , but not essentially a state of affairs, and therefore unfit to serve as a truthmaker. We have another legitimate counterpart relation which validates only one direction of set-theoretical essentialism, but under which any counterpart of a state of affairs must be a state of affairs. The state-of-affairs-counterpart of Fa must be a pair-counterpart of the pair of a and F , but a pair-counterpart of the pair is a state-of-affairs-counterpart of Fa only if it is a state of affairs – that is, only if its first term instantiates its second. The state of affairs qua state of affairs is essentially a state of affairs, and so is a truthmaker for the proposition that a has F . The very same thing qua pair is not.

Suppose there really is some other kind of construction, neither mereological nor set-theoretical – symbolize it by $*$. We could say that a state of affairs Fa is a $*$ -structure ($a * F$) such that a instantiates F . It's plausible that, despite our new kind of construction, the situation is the same again. Qua $*$ -structure, ($a * F$) is essentially $*$ -constructed from a and F , but not essentially a state of affairs (unless for some reason $*$ -construction only works when the first term instantiates the second). Qua state of affairs, Fa is essentially a state of affairs, and (if it has essentially the $*$ -constituents a and F) it is a suitable truthmaker for the proposition that a has F . And yet ($a * F$) is the very same thing as Fa .

Another sort of entity said to be associated with predications is a trope. This time, construction goes in the other direction: ordinary things and properties are constructed out of tropes, not *vice versa*. Nevertheless, it is well known that if we want tropes to serve as truthmakers for predications, they have to be *non-transferable* tropes. Let thing *a* have property *F*; let *t* be *a*'s *F*-ness trope. If *t* could exist apart from *F*, *t* might exist even if *a* lacked *F*, or even if *a* did not exist at all. (Non-transferability might mean that *t* is inseparable from the rest of the trope-bundle that constitutes *a*, or it might mean that *t* is inseparable from the particular substrate of that bundle. Let us leave that question open.) And non-separability is another *prima facie* mysterious necessary connection.

Counterpart theory to the rescue again. If essences in general can be tailor-made by suitable choice of a counterpart relation, essences of tropes can be tailor-made. For purposes of truthmaking, we would of course want an *F*-ness trope to be essentially an *F*-ness trope; it had better not have counterparts that are *G*-ness tropes instead. Likewise, we would want *a*'s *F*-ness trope to be essentially *a*'s; its counterparts should belong to counterparts of *a*. Perhaps for other purposes we'd want a counterpart relation that worked differently – as it might be, one that gives more weight to the place of a trope in the wider world. But as usual we can have multiple counterpart relations, evoked by different ways of referring to the same entity and by other features of conversational context.

Conclusion. If we help ourselves to the flexibility of counterpart theory, ordinary things can serve as truthmakers. States of affairs or tropes are not needed for purposes of truthmaking (whatever other purposes they may serve). But also, if we help ourselves to the flexibility of counterpart theory, the principal difficulties that stand in the way of using mereologically or set-theoretically constructed states of affairs, or tropes, as truthmakers vanish. The requisite necessary connections lose their mystery; and we no longer need an unfamiliar new kind of construction that is neither mereological nor set-theoretical.

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Note

1 Draft, December 14, 2000, transcribed by Anthony Fisher, September 2014.

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