

## Response to Fraser MacBride

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The standard view of relations is one in which they come equipped with a ‘sense’ or ‘direction’. It is for this reason that, on the view, we may distinguish between a relation – such as *loves* – and its converse – *being loved*, with the one holding in one direction and the other holding in the opposite direction. In my paper ‘Neutral Relations’ (NR), I criticized the standard view on the grounds that it led to a proliferation of relational states. For it would appear to require us to distinguish between the state of Antony loving Cleopatra and the state of Cleopatra being loved by Antony on account of a difference in their relational component. And yet one is inclined to think there is no difference in the states themselves but merely in how they might be described.

In NR, I was therefore led to consider whether one might be able to develop an alternative account of relations in which the element of ‘sense’ or ‘direction’ was lacking. Whereas the standard view would grant the existence of both a relation and its converse, the alternative view would only acknowledge the existence of a single ‘directionless’ or ‘neutral’ relation – occupying the middle ground, so to speak, between the one relation and the other. The previous problem over the proliferation of relational states would not then arise, since the distinction between a relation and its converse by which the different relational states were to be distinguished could no longer be made.

I developed two accounts of neutral relations – the ‘positionalist’ and the ‘anti-positionalist’. According to the positionalist account, each relation comes equipped with a number of argument positions. Thus the neutral relation of loving would be equipped with two such positions, one for the lover and the other for the beloved. The relation itself would be neutral between the standard relations of *loving* and *being loved*; and the difference between Antony loving Cleopatra and Cleopatra loving Antony would consist in the relation holding when Antony occupied the position for the lover and Cleopatra the position for the beloved and its holding when their positions were reversed.

According to the anti-positionalist account, on the other hand, a neutral relation may be completed in a number of ways but there is no intrinsic feature by which the different completions might be distinguished. Rather, the completions will stand in various relationships of substitution to one another – the state of

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Antony's loving Cleopatra will result from the state of Cleopatra's loving Antony, for example, by substituting Antony for Cleopatra and Cleopatra for Antony – and it is in terms of such relative facts that the manner of application of a relation and the structure of its completions is ultimately to be understood.

Fraser MacBride's paper is a deep and searching treatment of the topic of neutral relations. He very clearly explains the motivation for wanting a theory of neutral relations, providing much more than my own paper by way of philosophical and historical context, and he subjects the available theories to a number of interesting and difficult challenges. Although he is critical of my own anti-positional line, he shows a keen appreciation of the problems it was meant to solve and of the considerations that led me to adopt it.

I should like to take up two main issues from his paper – one concerning the question of symmetric relations and of whether the positionalist can provide an adequate account of them and the other concerning the question of 'solitary' relational states and of whether the anti-positional can provide an adequate account of how their relata are related.

Let us first consider the question of symmetric relations. I criticized the positional account on the basis of a new proliferation problem. For consider a symmetric relation, such as the relation of *being next to*. This presumably possesses two argument-positions – call them 'nex' and 'nix'. Suppose now that Bob is next to Carol. There would then appear to be two corresponding states, one in which Bob occupies the nex position and Carol the nix position and other in which Bob occupies the nix position and Carol the nex position. Yet surely the very same kind of intuition which led us to suppose that there is one amatory state corresponding to the fact that Antony loved Cleopatra should lead us to suppose that there is one adjacency state corresponding to the fact that Bob was next to Carol (cf. MacBride, pp. 37–38).

There was a response to this criticism of the positional account that I briefly considered. It was that we should allow an argument position to be occupied by more than one object. Given this possibility, we might then suppose that the neutral adjacency relation comes equipped with a single argument position – call it 'niex'. There would then be only one adjacency state involving Bob and Carol – the one in which they both occupy that single position – and so the new proliferation problem would not arise.

In answer to this response, I attempted to argue that the possibility of multiple occupancy could not be used to account for other kinds of symmetry (NR, fn. 10).<sup>1</sup> For consider the relation R that holds of *a, b, c, d* when *a, b, c, d* are arranged

<sup>1</sup> MacBride (pp. 43–44) takes the relation I consider to be 'cyclic' rather than 'symmetric'. In the general sense entertained on p. 3 of NR (rather than p. 17), it *is* symmetric since there will be a strict equivalence between the relation holding of *a, b, c, d* and its holding of the 'permutation' *b, c, d, a*; and, given that it is symmetric in this sense, there will be a related problem over accounting for the identity of the corresponding states.

in a circle in that very order. I supposed that the corresponding neutral relation **R** would contain at most four argument-positions  $\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$  – some of which might be the same if one were to allow multiple occupancy – and that the ‘argument-places’ of **R** should be aligned with the positions of **R** in the sense that **R**’s holding of  $a, b, c, d$  should imply that there is an **R**-state in which  $a$  occupies  $\alpha, b \beta, c \gamma$ , and  $d \delta$ . I was then able to show that the positionalist would lose the distinction between **R**’s holding of  $a, b, c, d$  and its holding of  $a, c, b, d$  since, in either case, it would be necessary for each object to occupy each position.

MacBride objects to my argument on the grounds that ‘there is no reason to suppose that because ‘ $a$ ’ is listed first in (i) [ $Rabcd$ ] but fourth in (ii) [ $Rbcda$ ], that (i) represents  $a$  occupying one argument position whereas (ii) represents  $a$  occupying a different argument position’. But my argument does not exactly presuppose this; what it presupposes is that  $a$  will occupy one position  $\alpha$  on account of (i) and a *possibly identical* position  $\gamma$  on account of (ii). Indeed, it is hard to see what role the positions of **R** might be playing unless they were aligned in the way I had supposed with the different argument-places of **R**.

In any case, MacBride’s objection has made me see that the supposition of alignment is not really necessary to the argument (however plausible that supposition might be). For we may reasonably assume, in its place, that there is no difference between the positions of **R** in their ability to be occupied. If, for example, **R** had two positions  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  which could be occupied by  $a, b$  and  $c, d$ , then it should also be possible for the two positions  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  to be occupied by  $c, d$  and  $a, b$ . Now there should be three possible **R**-states for the distinct objects  $a, b, c, d$  (represented respectively by:  $Rabcd, Rabdc$ , and  $Racdb$ ). But it is readily shown that the possibilities for filling the positions of **R** can never be exactly three (whatever the number of positions might be and even allowing for an object to occupy more than one position).<sup>2</sup>

Let us now turn to the difficulties for anti-positionalism. MacBride raises two principal objections to this view, both having to do with its explanatory shortcomings. The first concerns the question of how ‘the anti-positionalist is to account for the differential application of non-symmetrical relations’ (pp. 48–49). To do this, he will appeal to the fact that, from among the completions to which the relations give rise, some – but not others – will be co-mannered complete. This, in its turn, will be explained in terms of the substitutive relationships between the different completions. ‘But how is the anti-positionalist to account for the

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, MacBride’s example (p. 42) of the relation of  $x, y$  *playing tug-of-war with*  $u, v$  also has exactly three completions in four objects; and so a similar counting argument may be used in this case as well. His actual argument makes implicit appeal to the alignment supposition above and so is no better, in this respect, than my original argument. Whether it relies upon a different or more robust intuition concerning the identity of states is harder to say, though it is certainly helpful to be able to appeal to a case that is more closely analogous to the original examples of symmetry.

differential application of substitution?’ Unless he takes the relation of substitution to be inherently directional, he must again provide an explanation of this relation in terms of substitution. And either this is the very same relation of substitution – and we have a case of circularity, or it is a different, more fundamental, relation – and we have a regress.

I am not sure that the further explanatory demand that MacBride raises is legitimate. We are attempting to explain the fact that a relation has ‘differential application’, i.e. applies in different ways to the very same objects. It is to be noted that the proposed explanans does not *assume* that the relation of substitution has differential application. If it did, then this would be a clear case of circularity – at least if it was our intention that the explanation should have general application. For in applying it to the case of substitution, we would be assuming the very fact that was to be explained. But although the explanation employs the relation of substitution and even makes various assumptions about its behavior, it makes no assumption – one way or the other – about its differential application.

What is true is that there is a sense in which the explanans *presupposes* the differential application of the relation of substitution. For the explanation could not do the work it is meant to do unless the relation did have differential application. The question therefore arises as to whether a presupposition of differential application also leads to a legitimate demand for further explanation.

I do not think it does. Indeed, if it did, then it is hard to see how a satisfactory explanation of differential application could be given, whatever one’s theory of relations. For any satisfactory explanation is likely to appeal to some non-symmetric relationship between the given relation and the states to which it gives rise or the objects to which it applies. On the standard view, for example, differential application will be explained in terms of a given relation *being exemplified* (or *completed*) by certain objects in a certain order while, on a positionalist view, it will be explained in terms of the relation *being exemplified* (or *completed*) by certain objects in certain positions. But the differential application of these relations will then be presupposed by the explanation; and so, if MacBride were right in thinking that this presupposition leads to a further explanatory demand, there would be the same threat of circularity or regress as there was for the anti-positionalist.

An analogy may help to bring the point home. Suppose one is attempting to explain the fact that words have meanings. Then no satisfactory explanation should *assume* that any given word has a meaning. But any explanation will *presuppose* that some words have meanings; for the explanation will be given in words and so could not do the work it is meant to do unless those words have meaning. However, this presupposition does not lead to any further explanatory demand in regard to the words actually used in the explanation. And similarly, it seems to me, in the case of differential application.

MacBride's second objection to anti-positionalism is concerned with how the anti-positionalist might explain how *loves*, for example, applies to 'Antony and Cleopatra one way, rather than another' given that 'other completions of *loves* do not exist'. He cannot appeal to its being co-mannered with some other actual completion, since no other actual completion exists, and nor can he plausibly appeal to its being co-mannered with a merely possible completion, without implausibly grounding 'what is actually the case in terms of what is possibly so'.

MacBride seems to assume that if different completions were in fact available, then one might appeal to them in providing such an explanation. Thus he considers the possibility that 'what makes it the case that ... *loves* applies to Antony and Cleopatra one way, rather than another, is the fact that the actual completion of *loves* by Antony and Cleopatra (*Antony's loving Cleopatra*) is co-mannered completed with another exemplar completion (*Abelard's loving Eloise*)'. But such an explanation is clearly incomplete since it rests upon assuming that the exemplar completion of *Abelard's loving Eloise* is also the completion of *loving* by Abelard and Eloise in the given manner; and so the question arises as to how this further fact is to be explained. If one is to avoid a regress, then one must be willing to accept as explanatorily basic, as not in need of further explanation, that certain completions might be a completion of the relation in the given manner. It is because the manner is the manner that it is that the completion of the relation will be the completion in this manner; and so no further explanation of this fact will be required.

There are two ways in which such a view might be made out. Under the first, there will be a 'privileged' exemplar of the manner and there will be no account of what the manner is except in terms of the privileged exemplar. It is, of course, implausible that there is a privileged exemplar of this sort (something analogous to the standard meter stick) and such a view would lead, in any case, to the kind of difficulty that MacBride raises – for should the exemplar not be actual then *loves* applying to Antony and Cleopatra in a given manner would rest upon the actual completion of *loves* by Antony and Cleopatra being co-mannered with a merely possible completion.

Under the alternative view, there is no privileged exemplar. One must indeed account for what the manner is in terms of an exemplar, but nothing forces one to choose any particular exemplar over another.<sup>3</sup> One is free to explain how *loves* applies to Antony and Cleopatra in a given manner in terms of the completion of *loving* by Antony and Cleopatra being co-mannered with a given exemplar, should one choose to account for that manner in terms of the exemplar. But one can also account for the manner in terms of the completion of *loves* by Antony and Cleopatra; and no further explanation of how *loves* applies in the manner it does is then required.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the discussion of the 'essentialist manifold' in 'Senses of Essence', pp. 66–9.

If I am right, then MacBride's objections to anti-positionalism are not as analogous to the two familiar objections to the resemblance theory of universals as he thinks (pp. 24–25). Suppose one attempts to account for a given thing's being red in terms of its resemblance 'to an exemplar red thing'. Then according to the first of the familiar objections, 'instead of avoiding universals, the resemblance nominalist presupposes at least one universal, viz. resemblance.' But here an explanatorily problematic feature of the explanandum, viz. its appeal to a universal, is clearly reduplicated in the explanans whereas, under the corresponding objection to the anti-positionalism, there is no clear reduplication of an explanatorily problematic feature. According to the second of the familiar objections, 'it is possible for there to be only one square object' and 'what makes a square thing square cannot therefore be constituted by its resemblance to other square things'. But here there is something that clearly stands in need of explanation and yet cannot be explained whereas, under the corresponding objection to anti-positionalism, it is not clear that anything does stand in need of explanation.

There are some objections to anti-positionalism that are perhaps more analogous to the familiar objections to the resemblance theory. For instead of asking what accounts for the differential application of a relation or its applying in one way rather than another, we can simply ask: what accounts for the fact, say, that Antony loves Cleopatra?<sup>4</sup> If this fact calls for explanation in terms of the behavior of the neutral relation, then it looks as if we are at the beginning of a regress if we give such an explanation and that we might not even be in a position to give an explanation if no other completions of the relation are available.

One possible response, to which I am not inclined, is that what accounts for the fact that Antony loves Cleopatra is that a certain state of affairs obtains. It is of course in virtue of this state of affairs being the state that it is that its obtaining will account for Antony's loving Cleopatra. But the state of affairs being the state that it is will itself be no part of what accounts for Antony's loving Cleopatra. Appeal to anything relational in the explanans is thereby removed.

Another response, to which I am more inclined, is that the fact that Antony loves Cleopatra does not stand in need of explanation. We have here a basic relational fact (at least in the relevant respect). What does need to be explained is the identity between the fact that Antony loves Cleopatra and the fact that Cleopatra is loved by Antony. There is a single fact here but it is not one that we can state in a way that is neutral between the two given formulations. The bias in how we signify the relation is inevitable, at least in the kind of language that we commonly use, and all that we can sensibly do is to explain why the apparent bias in the statement of the facts is not a bias in the facts themselves.

<sup>4</sup> It is conceivable to me that MacBride had a question of this sort in mind.