

Ontological explanation: by things, contingent, and not partial

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Abstract

Some recent controversy has concerned the question whether, and if so in what sense, truthmaking is explanatory. Enemies and false friends of truthmaking have argued that weaker truthmaking principles than maximalism may satisfy our demands for explanation. In this talk, I argue that this is mistaken: truth has to be grounded, i.e. explained, and the very concept of truthmaking is one of explanation by things, which has to be distinguished from explanations why some sentences (including sentences ascribing the truth-predicate) are true. Once explanation by things is seen to be at the centre of truthmaking theories, their realist credentials become apparent. We may still, and should ask, however, whether explanations by things or explanations in general must necessitate what they explain. I give reasons to think this is not always the case, and that, in particular, explanations by things may be contingent. They may do their explanatory work under certain circumstances only, without thereby leaving something out.

1. It is a mistake to think that truthmaker theory needs to be motivated by recourse to the thesis that for every true sentence there must be some explanation of why it is true. Opponents of truthmaker theory are right in saying that explanations not citing truthmakers may do this job:

- (1) Sam is a dog.
- (2) "Sam is a dog" is true.
- (3) "Sam is a dog" is made true by Sam.
- (3) because (2), (2) because (1), hence (3) because (1).

Opponents of truthmaker theory forget, however, about two other ways in which truthmaker theory is explanatory. It is an explanatory theory of *truth* and it is *itself* a species of the explanation relation, i.e. explanation by things.

2. Truthmaker theory is an explanatory theory of truth (not: truths), claiming that truth is a derelativisation of a metaphysically prior cross-categorial relation of truthmaking. Opponents of truthmaker theory have to tell us what truth is. Moreover, this explanatory rôle of truthmaker theory provides a strong argument for truthmaker maximalism. Non-maximalist truthmaker theorists are committed to the claim that there are two ways for something to be true, and face the difficult task to explain why these are two ways for something to be *true*.

3. It is a mistake to think that the explanations of truths offered by truthmaker theory are claims to the effect that they have such-and-such truthmakers. Consider:

- (1) Sam is a dog because "Sam is a dog." is made true by Sam.
- (2) "Sam is a dog" is true because it is made true by Sam.
- (3) "Sam is a dog" is true because of Sam.

As opponents of truthmaker theory have pointed out, both (1) and (2) are false. (3), however, is true and provides an explanation of why "Sam is a dog" is true.

4. Explanation by things:

- rationalising: Sam left Maria because of Sally.
- evidential: They must be at home because of the curfew.
- causal₁: The worn-off break explains the accident.
- causal₂: The Russians won at Stalingrad because of the T1 tank.
- essential: Why can't Socrates not smile Platon's smile? Because his smile is of a kind of things that are not transferrable (it's a trope).
- metaphysical: Don't say "Humphrey possibly wins" is true because there is a possible winning counterpart, but say because of the (winning) counterpart.

5. Explanation by things is not just possible, but fundamental: Not just is truthmaker theory (ontologically) explanatory, but nothing else is. That's what's wrong with Kant, Brandom, McDowell and the rest: that they think that explanations necessarily stay within the realm of reason.

6. Which things? Many think that some thing *a* may only explain that *Fa* if *F* is an essential property of *a*. This is why Armstrong thinks that the truthmakers of contingent predications must be states of affairs, i.e. things that are such that they cannot exist without the proposition being true – as opposed to 'mere [mereological] sums'. What reason is given to say that *aRb* is not the sum of its constituents? It is an application of what one may call the "sufficiency argument":

"[That the fact and the sum are different] is well-nigh self-evident...For if the constituents exist, the set and the sum both 'automatically' exist; but the constituents can exist without the fact existing." (Vallicella 2002: 12)

7. This is an application of what Fabrice Correia yesterday called "Non-contingency":

(NC) If $pB\Delta$, then $\Box(\text{if } \Delta, \text{ then } pB\Delta)$

I want to reject this principle, because I want to reject the following "principle of necessarily sufficient reason":

(Nec) An explanation, even of a contingent fact, must necessitate what it explains.

If we accept explanation by things, as truthmaker theorists do, **(Nec)** becomes truthmaker necessitarianism: the view that truthmakers necessitate the truth of what they make true. An argument for the existence of states of affairs is then the consequence. States of affairs, however, are parts (or rather symptoms) of the problem, not parts of its solution. We get explanatory circularity in lieu of an explanatory regress: The difference between the 'mere sum' and the fact is explained by something, i.e. a state of affairs, that is 'non-mereologically composed' out of its constituents. But until we understand the difference between mereological and non-mereological composition, we do not understand the difference between the sum and the fact.

8. Contingent explanations are explanations that 'do their explaining' only under certain circumstances. Contra Armstrong,¹ this does not make them 'partial': they are full explanations, but contingently explanations (and also, perhaps, contingently full explanations).

¹Cf.: "If it is said that the truthmaker for a truth could have failed to make the truth true, then we will surely think that the alleged truthmaker was insufficient by itself and requires to be supplemented in some way. A contingently sufficient truthmaker will be true only in circumstances that obtain in this world. But then these circumstances, whatever they are, must be added to give the full truthmaker." (Armstrong 1997: 116)

"Why do we need to recognize states of affairs? [...] If *a* is *F*, then it is entailed that *a* exists and that the universal *F* exists. However, *a* could exist, and *F* could exist, and yet it fail to be the case that *a* is *F* (*F* is instantiated, but instantiated elsewhere only). *a*'s being *F* involves something more than *a* and *F*. It is no good simply adding the fundamental tie or nexus of instantiation to the sum of *a* and *F*. The existence of *a*, of instantiation, and of *F* does not amount to *a*'s being *F*. The something more must be *a*'s being *F* – and this is a state of affairs." (Armstrong 1989: 88)