Truthmaking is Explanation by Things

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Aims of the talk:

• to explicate what truthmaking by (some of) its friends is taken to be;
• to show that a substantial theory of truthmaking (TT) has to go beyond mere supervenience, rules out so-called ‘wide-base supervenience’ and ‘ontological cheating’ and is most plausibly cast in a maximalist form, holding that every truth is made true;
• to clarify, and defend, the connection between truthmaking and explanation;
• to shed some light on a unjustifiably neglected species of explanation: explanation by things;
• to offer some speculative, and inconclusive thoughts on contingent explanation.

Truthmaking is not just about cheater-catching. Truthmaker theory is an explanatory theory of truth and of truths. As a theory of truth, TT holds that truth is a relational property, derived from and metaphysically posterior to a relation that holds between representational items that are truthbearers and the things in the world that make them true. As a theory of truths, TT holds that the ascription of a truth-predicate is never explanatorily fundamental, but always short-hand for an explanation by things. TT holds:

- relationality to be true is to be made true by something;
- realism the relation $x$ makes $y$ true holds between entities of different categories;
- explanation to be made true by $x$ is to be true because of $x$.

Truthmaking is more than supervenience. Motivated by the alleged ontological costs of TT, many theorists (Künne, Melia, Hornsby, Schnieder) have thought it attractive to provide ‘truthmaking without truthmakers’, as the slogan goes. Why they acknowledge some explanatory gains had by TT, they think these can be had more cheaply, by ‘deflating’ TT to its alleged core, the supervenience of truth on being. Typically, such deflaters take their inspiration from David Lewis (2001: 612) who, casting TT as a theory of how possible worlds differ, took the “strongest [...] clearly acceptable” truthmaking principle to be that truth supervenes on what exists, what does not exist and what fundamental relations are exemplified. Supervenience relations, however, are themselves in need of explanation. If a difference in truth is explained by a difference ‘in being’ among possible worlds, then possible worlds cannot in turn be explained in terms of truth. One way of explaining the truth of representational items ‘at’ worlds is to provide other-worldly truthmakers for modal sentences — modal realism. In his own, modal realist, theory, Lewis (2003) provides truthmakers in the form of ‘qua-objects’, ordinary particulars under contextually restricted counterpart relations.

TT is not about the special status of existential sentences. Formulations of truthmaking (only) in terms of supervenience also distort it in a further important way, turning it into a claim about which sentences are fundamental (cf. Horwich 2008: 273, Cameron 2008: 293, Goff 2010: 49). TT does not (attempt to) reduce ordinary predications to existential statements, nor claim that the latter in some other way special. It just holds that truth-ascriptions are covertly existential.

TT does not explain by citing sentences affirming the existence of truthmakers. It is a mistake to think that TT 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 TT are right in saying that explanations not citing truthmakers may do this job. Consider the explanatory ties between the following four sentences:

1. Sam is a dog.
2. “Sam is a dog” is true.
3. “Sam is a dog” is made true by Sam.

I agree, with Aristotle and both outright opponents and (even somewhat sympathetic) critics of TT that (2)

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On some theories of truthmaking, the truth of (1) depends on whether Sam is essentially a dog. I am concerned in the following with the question whether there are truthmakers, leaving aside the conceptually posterior question what entities these truthmakers are plausibly taken to be.

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As opponents of truthmaker theory have pointed out and I have conceded above, both (5) and (6) are false.

The truthmakers do the explaining themselves. It is a mistake to think that the explanations of truth are claims to the effect that they have such-and-such truthmakers. Consider:

(4) “Sam is a dog” is true because Sam is a dog.

The truthmakers do the explaining themselves. It is a mistake to think that the explanations of truth offered by truthmaker theory are claims to the effect that they have such-and-such truthmakers. Consider:

(5) Sam is a dog because “Sam is a dog” is made true by Sam.

(6) “Sam is a dog” is true because it is made true by Sam.

(7) “Sam is a dog” is true because of Sam.

As opponents of truthmaker theory have pointed out and I have conceded above, both (5) and (6) are false.

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1Fetridge’s truthmaker principle (“For every sentence which is true there must be some explanation of why it is true”, (Fetridge 1990: 42) is to be rejected, or, at least, does not help motivate truthmaking theory.
(7), however, is true and provides an explanation of why “Sam is a dog” is true. Horwich and Schnieder think that TT is committed to (7), Ligginsthinks that truthmaker theorists who think that the truthmaking relation is explanatory are committed to (5) or (6), and Rodriguez Pereyra argues from (6) to the truthmaking principle. But TT is committed only to (7).

**Reply to first criticism: explanation by things is not special.** Explanation by things is a familiar feature of many types of explanation:

- rationalising: Sam left Maria because of Sally.
- evidential: They must be at home because of the light.
- causal: They had an accident because of the worn-off break.
- theoretical: Tritium is unstable because of its extra electron.
- essential: Troperes are non-transferable because of their nature.
- mathematical: 2 is between 1 and 3 because of 1,2,3.
- metaphysical: “Humphrey possibly wins” is true because of his (winning) counterpart.

There is thus nothing special about explanation by things.

**Reply to second criticism: undermining necessitarianism about explanation is not a bad thing.** Which things do the explaining? Many think that some thing a may only explain that F a 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)

This is an application of the truthmaker necessitarianism, the view that “[t]he determining of a truth by a truthmaker is an absolute necessitation” (Armstrong 2004: 5). 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.

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

**Reply to third criticism: explanation is not always conceptual; in fact it never (ultimately) is.** There is, last but not least, a general skepticism about explanation by things. A long-standing tradition, from Kant to Brandom and McDowell holds that explanations necessarily stay within the realm of reason. TT is opposed to that tradition, and derives from this very opposition the right to claim to be a version of the correspondence theory of truth. Not just is truthmaker theory explanatory, but nothing else is: every chain of explanation ultimately bottoms out in some thing.

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1 Cf.: “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)

2 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)