

Truthmaking is Explanation by Things

Mittelbaukolloquium des Philosophischen Seminars, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

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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 unjustifiedly 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

- (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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¹On some theories of truthmaking, the truth of (3) 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.

because (1). I also agree with some critics of TT that (1) is, so to say, ‘ok as it stands’. Whether or not (1) is itself in need of an explanation or of a sufficient reason – of a causal or some other kind – is not a question of concern to TT, while it may of course be an interesting question for other types of metaphysical theories.² I thus agree with Daly (2005: 100) “invoking truthmakers for truths does not thereby explain those truths”, and with Liggins (2008: 179,186) that “for every truth, there is something in virtue of which it is true” does not motivate TT because the relevant explanations do not have to be in terms of something’s existing, but could be in terms of something’s being such-and-such. I even agree with the critics that TT that (3), at least in part, because (2) and hence that (3) because (1): Part of what explains that the truthbearer is made true is that it is true at all; it is because the truthbearer has the relational property of being true that Sam may enter into the truthmaking relation with it. So far so good: at least within TT, “there is no explaining the truth of propositions” (Macbride 2005: 134) like (1).

TT does rule out cheating. It has been recently argued (Gallois 2004: 648, Kierland/Monton 2007: 490, Tallant 2009: 423, Sanson/Caplan 2010: 38) that presentists may legitimately dodge the truthmaker requirement by weakening the truthmaking principle to supervenience of truth not on how things are, but rather on how they are, were or will be. Such a restricted principle, however, would explain the (present) truth of some past- or future-tensed sentence by *another* sentence, which does its (present) explaining only if it is (presently) true. No explanation by things is provided: the bulge in the carpet is just moved to another sentence. Jonathan Tallant, for example, has proposed the following ‘cheating’ truthmaker principle: “...a proposition is true if and only if, either: (a) there exists an entity that makes that proposition true; or, (b) there does not exist an entity and that makes the proposition true; or, (c) there could have existed an entity that would make the proposition true; or, (d) there has existed an entity that makes the proposition true...” (2009: 426). This shares the problems of the supervenience formulations, as it does not account for the truth of a proposition in terms of *things* that make – or made, or could make – it true. It has also further problems: What the past events made true and what the future events will make true are not, after all, sentences like “Caesar crossed the rubicon” or “There will be a fox in the garden”, but rather sentences like “Caesar crosses the rubicon” and “There is a fox in the garden”. To make the past- and future-tensed sentences true, we need to incorporate the pastness and futurity into the truthmaker – exactly what the weakening of the truthmaking principle was supposed to avoid. Because truth has to be grounded, the present truth of the past-tensed sentence is in need of a present ground – the past ground of its present-tensed cousin will not do; not just because it is past, but because it is not a ground of *this* truth.

TT motivates maximalism. Non-maximalist truthmaker theorists are committed to the claim that there are (at least) two ways for something to be true, and face the difficult task to explain why these are two ways for something to be *true*. To do without truthmakers for negative (Simons, Parsons), analytic (Rodriguez-Pereyra) or higher-order truths (Mumford) is to endorse an explanatory burden: how, may we legitimately ask such philosophers, do they account for the (at least apparent) fact that we are predicating the same property of them as of humdrum positive, synthetic, first-order truths? It is as if they were claiming that there are two ways of being a brother: one that involves another entity than you (your brother), and another one that does not.

TT explains why it is true; and it explains the ‘Aristotelian insight’. A further worry against the conception of truthmaking as explanation by things concerns the property identity itself. How is to be spelt out? Are we not able to have a full grasp of truth without ever having heard of truthmaking? Can we reductively explain (the nature of) truth in terms of a metaphysically prior relation of truthmaking? The advocate of TT has a ready answer at hand: the property identity in question is not a conceptual analysis, nor a reductive explanation, but a necessary sharing of truthmakers. What makes it true that some truthbearer’s being true is nothing but it’s being made true by some truthmaker is the very same thing that makes it true in the first place: the truthbearer and the truthmaker, bound together by the truthmaking relation. This allows TT to explain, rather than just to state, the so-called ‘Aristotelian insight’:

(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 truths 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.

²Fetridge’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 (5), Liggins thinks 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: Tropes are non-transferrable 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 *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)

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,³ 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.

³Cf.: “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)