

Truthmaking – Explanation by Things

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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). Fetridge’s truthmaker principle (“For every sentence which is true there must be some explanation of why it is true”) is to be rejected, or, at least, does not help motivate truthmaking theory.

David Liggins, *Truthmakers and Explanation*, is right that the ‘truth supervenes on being’ account of truthmaking is too weak to fulfill the cheater-catching rôle of truthmaker theory and that McFetridge’s version of maximalism is better suited for the task:

E For every sentence which is true there must be some explanation of why it is true.

But this does not provide us with a grounding of truth in reality: the explanation of why “*p*” is true will simply be “because *p*”. It is of no help to require that the explanation “must talk about the world” or “mention how some entities in our ontology stand” – because in many cases “because *p*” will do just that.

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-categorical 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.

David Liggins, *Truthmakers and the Groundedness of Truth*, is right that (E) does not support truthmaker maximalism 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.

Truthmaker maximalism does not explain the truth asymmetry. Rodriguez-Pereyra claims that TA "*p*" is true because *p*; but it is not the case that: *p* because "*p*" is true.

is explained by the grounding asymmetry:

GA "*p*" is true because *o* grounds "*p*"; but it is not the case that: *o* grounds "*p*" because "*p*" is true.

which he claims to be an "instance" of

RA *a* has the property of being *R*-related to *b* because *a* stands in relation *R* to *b*; but it is not the case that: *a* stands in relation *R* to *b* because *a* has the property of being *R*-related to *b*.

But, as Liggins points out, (GA) is an instance (and an existential generalisation) of (RA) only if to be true is to be grounded in something.

Truthmaker theory explains the nature of truth (not: truths). It holds that

1. truth is a derelativisation of a relation of truthmaking;
2. truth is not brute.

This explanatory role of truthmaker theory provides a strong argument for maximalism. Non-maximalist truthmaker theory is committed to the claim that there are two ways for something to be true, and has the difficult task to explain why these are two ways for something to be *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.

Don't say "Humphrey possibly wins" because there is a possible winning counterpart, but say because of the (winning) counterpart.

Consider

- (1) Sam is a dog.
- (2) "Sam is a dog." is true.
- (3) "Sam is a dog." is made true by Sam.
- (4) "Sam is a dog." has a truthmaker.
- (5) (1) because (3).
- (6) (2) because (3).
- (7) (2) because (4).
- (8) (2) because of Sam.

Liggins thinks that truthmaker theorists who think that the truthmaking relation is explanatory are committed to (6) or (7) ((6) is an instance of (E) above). Schnieder thinks they are committed to (5). But in fact they are committed only to (8).

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.

Main line: it is always a mistake to reify absences because, once reified, they're no longer absent.

Even once we've given up on truthmaker necessitarianism, we still face an explanatory task: why do these black dogs (which happen to be all the dogs) make it true that all dogs are black while these black dogs (or their counterparts) which live in a world where they are accompanied by a white dog do not make it true that all dogs are black?

Answer: they're being all there are is something about they're being a certain way, even though it's not something about they're being such-and-such.

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 the following principle:

(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).

Not just is truthmaker theory explanatory, but nothing else is.

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? [â] 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). $a\hat{\Delta}\Box$ 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 $a\hat{\Delta}\Box$ s being F . The something more must be $a\hat{\Delta}\Box$ s being $F\hat{\Delta}\Box$ and this is a state of affairs.” (Armstrong 1989: 88)