

Truthmakers

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from Chapter 1: Truthmaker and *Making True*

A thing, just by existing, can make a claim true. Thus Aristotle:

[I]f there is a man, the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, and reciprocally—since if the statement whereby we say that there is a man is true, there is a man. And whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing's existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement's being true: it is because the actual thing exists or does not that the statement is called true or false. (*Categories* 14^b15–22; 1984: 22)

Some claims are true because a thing exists. Truthmaker says that this is so for every true claim. That is, Truthmaker says that for every true claim there is something or other that—just by existing—makes that claim true. In other words, Truthmaker says that every truth has a 'truthmaker'. This chapter presents the central motivations for Truthmaker and begins to explore the *making true* relation.

Bertrand Russell endorses Truthmaker throughout *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, insisting that each truth is made true by a 'fact'. J. L. Austin likewise embraces Truthmaker, saying: 'When a statement is true, there is, *of course*, a state of affairs which makes it true' (1979: 123). More recently, a growing number of philosophers have been insisting that, for each truth, there is something that makes it true. These include, among many others, William P. Alston (1996: 52), Kit Fine (1982: 69), E. J. Lowe (1998: 245), C. B. Martin (see Armstrong 1989a), and, most adamantly and prolifically, David Armstrong (e.g., 1997 and 2004).

Truthmaker and closely related theses have been widely endorsed and nowadays seem to be gaining new momentum. Yet even Armstrong confesses: 'The truth-maker principle seems to me to be fairly obvious once attention is drawn to it, but I do not know how to argue for it further' (1989b: 89). Elsewhere, Armstrong follows up the claim that he has no argument for Truthmaker with: 'My hope is that philosophers of realist inclinations will be immediately attracted to the idea that a truth, any truth, should depend for its truth [on] something 'outside' it, in virtue of which it is true' (2004: 7).

Similarly, David Lewis defends a related thesis by simply assuming Truthmaker as a starting-point and then scaling it back in light of various objections (Lewis 2001). Elsewhere, Lewis just asserts without argument that Truthmaker aims to preserve something 'right and important and underappreciated. What's right, roughly speaking, is that truths must have *things* as their subject matter' (1999a: 206).

No one gives much of an argument for Truthmaker. Instead, Truthmaker's main support comes from something like the brute intuition that what is true depends in a non-trivial way on what there is or the world or things or being. Truthmaker's defenders then maintain that Truthmaker is the best way to articulate that dependence.¹ This is Truthmaker's primary motivation. ...

Truthmaker does not require that each truth have just one truthmaker or each truthmaker just one truth. For example, Truthmaker allows that Aristotle himself made it true not only that Aristotle exists, but also that a human exists. And Truthmaker allows that *that a human exists* was made true not only by Aristotle, but also by Plato. Along similar lines, Truthmaker does not say that truthmakers must somehow 'mirror the structure' of what they make true. For example, although it makes no sense to say that Aristotle was 'disjunctive', he made it true that either Aristotle exists or a kangaroo exists.

Suppose, somewhat controversially, that a truth can 'correspond' to something that does not mirror its structure. More to the point, suppose that each truth does indeed correspond to something, which something is thereby that truth's truthmaker. This suggests a connection between Truthmaker and the 'correspondence theory of truth'. In fact, some philosophers take Truthmaker just to be the correspondence theory. Here is John Bigelow: 'The hallowed path from language to universals has been by way of the *correspondence theory of truth*: the doctrine that whenever something is true, there must be something in the world which makes it true. I will call this the Truthmaker axiom' (1988: 122). ...

Necessitarianism says that a truthmaker necessitates that which it makes true. That is, necessitarianism says that, for all x and all p , x is a truthmaker for p only if x 's mere existence is metaphysically sufficient for p 's truth. Necessitarianism's defenders include David Armstrong (2003: 12; 2004: 6–7), Kit Fine (1982: 69), John F. Fox (1987: 189), George Molnar (2000: 84), and Barry Smith (1999: 276). Understood as a necessary condition for *making true*, necessitarianism is now truthmaker orthodoxy.² ...

In fact, necessitarianism is the only widely endorsed claim among truthmaker theorists that begins to take Truthmaker from a rough idea—the idea that every truth is 'made true' by something—to a clearly formulated thesis. Moreover, as we shall see in later chapters, truthmaker theorists actually charge a view with cheating just in case that view is committed to truths that are not necessitated by what exists. Without necessitarianism, the cheater-catching business, as it has actually been run, is bankrupt.

Our examination of necessitarianism begins with a look at one of its apparent implications, an implication regarding the primary bearers of truth. Truthmaker itself seems to be neutral with respect to those primary bearers. *Qua* truthmaker theorist, so it seems, one could take them to be abstract propositions or beliefs or sentence tokens or what have you. But if

¹ Not everyone agrees that Truthmaker is the best way to articulate that dependence. Ch. 4 examines a competing articulation. [namely, Truth Supervenes on Being]

² There are heretics. Consider Bertrand Russell. He was a truthmaker theorist whose views on modality guarantee that he would have rejected necessitarianism (see Russell 1985: 96–7).

necessitarianism really is part and parcel of Truthmaker, Truthmaker arguably delivers a direct argument for abstract propositions.³

That argument begins with:

(2) At least one electron exists.

When it comes to truthmakers for (2), we have an embarrassment of riches. Each and every electron does the trick. Thus electron *E* does the trick. Given necessitarianism, truthmakers necessitate their respective truths. So, in every world in which *E* exists, (2) is true.⁴

(2) is true in every world in which *E* exists. So (2) is true in *W*, which contains only *E* (and whatever *E* necessitates). *W* is bereft of language and believers. So, in *W*, (2) itself is neither a linguistic item nor a belief. It seems that that truth could only be an abstract proposition. In this way, Truthmaker combined with necessitarianism seems to lead directly to abstract propositions. ...

Here is [an] argument for necessitarianism. Recall:

(2) At least one electron exists.

Electron *E*'s making (2) true is a paradigm case of truthmaking. And surely—so this argument goes—*E* necessitates (2). For suppose, for *reductio*, that it did not. That is, suppose that, possibly, *E* exists and (2) fails to be true. This implies that, possibly, *E* exists and (2) is false. But that implication is absurd; it is absurd to say both that an electron exists and also that it is false that at least one electron exists. So *E* necessitates (2). And, given that *E*'s making (2) true is a paradigmatic case of truthmaking, the result here generalizes. Therefore, necessitarianism is true. ...

from Chapter 3: Negative Existentials

Truthmaker says that each truth has a truthmaker. So Truthmaker implies that, for each truth, there is some entity or other whose mere existence necessitates that truth. Moreover, Truthmaker implies that each truth is in some way about the positively existing entity that is its truthmaker. And, finally, Truthmaker implies that a truthmaker cannot be constituted by suspicious properties. This chapter argues that these implications cause trouble for Truthmaker when it comes to negative existentials and universal generalizations.

This chapter focuses mainly on negative existentials, which assert that something fails to exist. For example:

³ I shall say that propositions are 'abstract' if they have no spatial location and cannot be identified with sentences (or other linguistic items) or beliefs. And I shall assume that abstract propositions exist necessarily.

⁴ I assume that electrons are *essentially* electrons. (If *E* is possibly a proton, then it is possible for *E* to exist but (2) be false.) Those who reject this assumption can replace (2) with, for example, *that at least one thing that is possibly an electron exists*.

(1) Hobbits do not exist.

We shall also consider universal generalizations, such as:

(2) All ravens are black.

(2) might seem to be easily handled by Truthmaker: (2) is jointly made true by the state of affairs of this raven's being black, and that raven's being black and so on, for each and every raven. Similarly, one might suggest that (2) is made true by the 'sum' of these states of affairs. But none of this will do. For it is possible for all those states of affairs to exist and (2) to be false, since it is possible that all our black ravens exist and a white one besides.⁵

Spooked by (1) and (2), timid truthmaker theorists might say that such truths do not need truthmakers (see, e.g., Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984: 315 and Smith 1999: 285). Their idea is not that negative existentials are counterexamples to Truthmaker, and therefore that Truthmaker is false. They aim, instead, to propose a friendly amendment to Truthmaker. But there are four reasons that Truthmaker's advocates should not amend it to exempt negative existentials (or universal generalizations).⁶

First, suppose we came up with plausible truthmakers for each and every true negative existential. Then, I think, truthmaker theorists would embrace full-blown Truthmaker, which demands truthmakers for all truths, including true negative existentials. This suggests that the only reason to scale back Truthmaker to exempt negative existentials is that there do not seem to be truthmakers for negative existentials. ...

Second, Truthmaker is driven by the intuition or insight or conviction or idea that 'a truth, any truth' depends on being. This intuition does not exempt negative existentials. One might reply that negative existential truths are about *what does not exist*. Therefore, so this reply goes, it is intuitive that they—and they alone—do not depend for their truth on *what exists*. But I deny that if we set aside the intuition that 'a truth, any truth' depends on being, we are left with the equally compelling intuition that all truths *except negative existentials* depend on being.

That is, I deny that we have the gerrymandered intuition that truths about *what exists* and *what was* and *what will be* and *what should be* and *what could be* and *what would be* and *what might be* and *what must be* and even *how existing things are not* all depend on being—but truths about *what does not exist* do not so depend. So Truthmaker amended to exempt only negative existentials not only runs counter to the intuition that is Truthmaker's primary

⁵ Negative existentials and universal generalizations are not the only truths that create particular difficulties for Truthmaker. Also problematic are truths that deny an object is a certain way (see Russell 1985: 74; 1919: 1–6).

⁶ The first three of these reasons are variations on three reasons that Truthmaker should not be curtailed to exempt necessary truths (Ch. 2, §II).

motivation, but also fails to be motivated by any other compelling intuition about truth's dependence on being.

Third, suppose that truth is correspondence. Then it is analytic that each negative existential truth, in virtue of being true, corresponds to something. And so, unless they can explain why that to which a negative existential corresponds fails to make that negative existential true, truthmaker theorists should say that true negative existentials have truthmakers. Obviously, this third reason has no purchase on truthmaker theorists who reject the correspondence theory of truth.

Fourth, suppose that there is a sorcerer bent on keeping glass *G* from shattering. Suppose that if *G* were struck, the sorcerer would change *G*'s microstructure so that it would not shatter (the example is from Lewis 1999*b*: 138). Then the following dispositional conditional is false:

(3) If glass *G* were struck, then *G* would shatter.

Conversely, if (3) is true, then there is no such sorcerer. That is, (3) entails that there is no sorcerer who, were *G* to be struck, would change *G*'s microstructure so that it would not shatter.

If (3) has a truthmaker, then that truthmaker, by its mere existence, necessitates the truth of (3). That truthmaker thereby necessitates the truth of every claim that (3) entails. And so if (3) has a truthmaker, there is something that, by its mere existence, necessitates the truth of *that there is no sorcerer who would keep G from shattering, were G to be struck*. Conversely, if nothing at all thus necessitates negative existentials, then (3) has no truthmaker, and, more generally, neither do any other dispositional conditionals. ...

Truthmaker theorists should say that negative existential truths have truthmakers. Moreover, they should say something about what those truthmakers are like. For there are many true negative existentials, none of which seems at first glance to have a truthmaker. And truthmaker theorists who say absolutely nothing about what the truthmakers for negative existentials are like have no principled objection to the cheater who follows suit. This is the cheater who says: 'I cannot tell you what the truthmakers for claims about the past [or counterfactuals or...] are like—and I know that given my ontology it looks for all the world like they lack truthmakers—but I do not cheat because I still say that each has a truthmaker.' ...

Being such that there are no hobbits is not primitive. But truthmaker theorists have to proffer at least one 'negative existential' and primitive property, a property such as *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*. This is because *being such that there is nothing more in the universe* fails to supervene on the 'positive' properties exemplified by the universe and its denizens. (It fails for the same reason that *being such that there are no hobbits* fails thus to supervene.) So some 'non-positive' property, some property or other along the lines of *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*, is not locally

supervenient at all. And, as we saw above, a property that fails to be thus supervenient is primitive. So I conclude that not only does Truthmaker commit us to some property or other along the lines of *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*, it says that at least one such property is primitive or fundamental or irreducible.

If there is a property of *being such that there are no hobbits*, it is analysed in terms of, or reduced to, other properties, including *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*. Likewise, the property of *being such that there are no non-black ravens* would be analysed, at least in part, in terms of a property like *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*. And so on for other ‘negative existential properties’. They would all be analysed, at least in part, in terms of (some property or other along the lines of) *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*.

Those who postulate properties like *being such that there are no hobbits* are led to postulate *being such that there is nothing more in the universe*. But now we have a new potential truthmaker for *that hobbits do not exist*: the ‘totality’ state of affairs of *the universe’s both having the positive intrinsic character it has and also having the property of being such that there is nothing more in the universe*. Given the totality state, we no longer need the state of *the universe’s being such that there are no hobbits*.

Since we no longer need the state of *the universe’s being such that there are no hobbits*, we should get rid of that state. ... When it comes to being the truthmaker for *that hobbits do not exist*, the totality state supplants *the universe’s being such that there are no hobbits*. ... And the totality state supplants not only *the universe’s being such that there are no hobbits*, but also *the universe’s being such that there are no non-black ravens*. More generally, the totality state seems to be a truthmaker for all negative existential and general truths. ...

Suppose that the totality state were the truthmaker for negative existential truths. Then the primitive property of *being such that there is nothing more in the universe* would not be suspicious. But I object that it *is* suspicious. ...

When it comes to resisting cheaters, I suppose that it is better to have postulated exactly one conjured- up- to- meet- the- demands- of- Truthmaker- but- otherwise- undreamt- of property than to have postulated many. But the truthmaker theorist who postulates even one such property cannot say that all such special properties are suspicious, which makes it difficult to resist other such properties in a principled way. ...

That there are not plausible truthmakers for negative existential truths is a reason to reject Truthmaker. Moreover, that Truthmaker demands that negative existential truths have truthmakers in the first place is itself a reason to reject Truthmaker. For it is implausible that a claim asserting that a thing *fails to exist* is made true by—and so is appropriately about—some other, *existing* thing. So I say that negative existentials do not have truthmakers, and that Truthmaker is therefore false. ...