

# Truthmakers

**1. Introduction:** Here is a plausible claim:

**TRUTHMAKER** For every true claim there is something or other that—just by existing—makes that claim true. This thing is called a ‘truthmaker’.

For instance, the claim <Barack Obama exists> seems true. The idea behind TRUTHMAKER is that there must be some THING in the world which MAKES that claim true (i.e., a ‘truthmaker’). In this case, the truthmaker seems obvious: It is just the man himself, the actual man, Barack Obama. In short, <Barack Obama exists> is true IN VIRTUE OF the existence of the actual man, Barack Obama.

The main motivation for truthmaker theory is intuition: It seems that truths cannot just be “free-floating” things, totally detached from reality. Rather, truths must in some way CORRESPOND TO, or LINE UP WITH, reality. If reality IS a certain way, then <Obama exists> will be true. But, if it ISN’T a certain way, then that proposition will be false.

There are many versions of truthmaker theory, but the most popular version makes all of the following claims:

(1) **The truthmaking relation is between states of affairs and abstract propositions.**

The claim <The peak of Mt. Everest is 29,029 feet above sea level>. This is true. Now, the thing that MAKES it true (i.e., its truthmaker) is the actual mountain, Mt. Everest, and its property of being 29,029 feet above sea level.

Whenever we talk of an object’s having of a property, we typically call this a **state of affairs**. For instance, ‘the ball’s being red’, ‘Obama’s being president’, and ‘the water’s being frozen’ are all states of affairs. In each case, we refer to some actual thing instantiating some actual property; and this is what states of affairs are.

But, what is the claim, <The peak of Mt. Everest is 29,029 feet above sea level>? Well, it doesn’t seem to be a *linguistic* entity (i.e., some part of human language), nor does it seem to be a *mental* entity (i.e., some product of human thought), for surely that claim would be true regardless of whether or not humans ever existed. Philosophers typically say that the claim is a **proposition**. Propositions, as we have seen, are abstract objects which assert something and have TRUTH VALUES (that is, they have the property of ‘being true’ or else they have the property of ‘being false’).

So, truthmaker theorists say that the truthmaking relation is one between actual states of affairs (e.g., the actual mountain, Mt. Everest, and its having of the property of being 29,029 ft. tall) and an abstract, true proposition (e.g., <The peak of Mt. Everest is 29,029 feet above sea level>).

(2) **All truths have truthmakers.** Truthmaker theory is not the claim that only SOME truths have truthmakers. Rather, ALL of them do. This is **Truthmaker Maximalism**. Maximalism makes things difficult. For, while it is easy to see how Obama makes <Obama exists> true, finding truthmakers for following claims is quite difficult:

<2+2=4>

<All bachelors are unmarried>

<All ravens are black>

<I will skip class tomorrow>

<Unicorns could have existed>

<Watson is Sherlock's sidekick>

(3) **The truthmaker relation is a necessitation relation.** When objects exist, they NECESSARILY make certain truths true. For instance, if Barack Obama exists, then it MUST be the case that <Barack Obama exists> comes out true. In short, there is no way that he could exist without making this proposition true. This is **Truthmaker Necessitarianism**.

It would be quite odd if Necessitarianism were false. For, to deny Necessitarianism is to claim that it IS POSSIBLE for a truthmaker to exist but NOT make a certain truth true. For instance, to say that Lassie doesn't NECESSARILY make <A dog exists> true is to say that Lassie COULD exist while <A dog exists> is FALSE! That seems wrong.

(4) **A thing in the world can make multiple truths true.** Because the man, Barack Obama exists, it turns out that the proposition <Barack Obama exists> is true. But, he ALSO makes other truths true. For instance, <A man exists> is true in virtue of his existence; as are <A human exists>, <A mammal exists>, and so on.

(5) **A truth can have many truthmakers.** We have just said that Barack Obama is a truthmaker for <A man exists>. But, so is Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Any individual man in the universe, in fact, is a truthmaker for the claim <A man exists>.

**2. The Problem of Negatives:** We have already seen that absences and nothings cause trouble for philosophers. They cause perhaps the *most* trouble for truthmaker theorists.

We will examine two sorts of problematic truths. The first is called a '**negative existential**', because it asserts that something does NOT exist:

(1) There are no unicorns.

The second is called a '**universal**' (or sometimes '**general**') truth:

(2) All ravens are black.

Both of these statements assert something about what does NOT exist. At first glance, it may not appear that (2) does this, but it does. To see how, let's take a closer look at (2).

What could its truthmaker be? Intuitively, we might think that the truthmaker for <All ravens are black> is just the set of all actual ravens (which are black). For simplicity, imagine that there are exactly one billion ravens in the world, and all of them are black. Could the truthmaker just be those one billion ravens?

Unfortunately, no. For, recall that truthmaker theorists claim that the truthmaking relation is NECESSITATING. They say that:

If some truthmaker, T, makes P true, then, **necessarily**, if T exists, then P is true.

This means that, if the set of one billion actual ravens makes <All ravens are black> true, then it must do so *in any situation where that set of ravens exists*. But, imagine that tomorrow a white raven is born (and that none of our billion black ravens have died). Tomorrow, our set of one billion ravens would STILL EXIST. This means that <All ravens are black> would still be true! But, that's a mistake! That proposition is clearly false now!

By making a claim about ALL of the ravens, what <All ravens are black> is really saying is something like, <These one billion ravens are black, and these are ALL of the ravens in existence—i.e., **there are no other ravens**>. This last clause is a negative one.

So, (1) and (2) are both negative statements. If they are true (as they appear to be), then they require truthmakers. But, then, there must be some THING in the world that makes each claim true. But, what sort of THING could make a NEGATIVE statement true?

*[Note: We COULD of course, either (a) give up the claim that negative statements are true (such that, e.g., <There are no unicorns> has no truth value), or (b) give up Truthmaker Maximalism (so that, e.g., even though <There are no unicorns> is TRUE, it has no TRUTHMAKER). Option (a) is absurd. Option (b) is more plausible, but still odd, because it treats negative truths as utterly different than positive truths—being, unlike the latter, ungrounded in any part of the world.]*

**Negative Entities?** Could something like *absences* be truthmakers? First note that, for absences to be truthmakers, they must be THINGS. For, truthmaker theory is the view that true propositions are made true by THINGS in the world. Truthmaking is a relation between truth and the world. But, relations need two 'relata' (things that are related).

Sure, if absences (e.g., holes) are THINGS, then the problem is solved easily. The truthmaker for <There are no unicorns>, for instance, would just be the **absence of unicorns**. However, most philosophers are not willing to treat the LACK or ABSENCE of

something as the PRESENCE of something else. Simply put, absences just seem to be nothingness. But, nothing isn't something.

Alternatively, we might think that there are such things as **negative properties**. Perhaps the world has the property of 'unicornlessness', or 'being such that there are no non-black ravens'. But, that seems absurd to most philosophers too. For one thing, such properties are very bizarre. For another, the properties that things have would be multiplied infinitely. Tomatoes would have the property of being not blue. ...and not purple, and not yellow, and not a carrot, and not an alligator, and on and on...

**Totalities?** Perhaps you found it absurd to say that HOLES exist, but found it more plausible to say that hole-LININGS exist—and the nothingness of a hole exists only insofar as the lining around it exists. Well... Perhaps the absence of unicorns is like that? The ABSENCE is not a thing. ...But the stuff AROUND that absence IS a thing.

Some have suggested that the entire WORLD is what makes negative statements like <There are no unicorns> true. The whole of the universe is the lining that surrounds the nothingness that is the lack of unicorns. ← *Most amazing sentence ever?*

Here is the whole universe. Here are all of the things that exist in that universe. And not a single one of them is a unicorn. Voila! <There are no unicorns> is true.

Unfortunately, there is a negative claim in disguise here. Recall the ravens. <There are no purple ravens> is true. You might think that the whole or set of all ravens makes this true. For, here is Raven-1 and it is black, and here is Raven-2 and it is black, and so on. But, at the end, if our list of all the ravens (which are all black) is to entail that there are no purple ravens, we'll need to tack on the claim, *AND THERE ARE NO OTHER RAVENS*. But, this is a negative claim, itself in need of a truthmaker!

The same goes for the suggestion that the entire universe makes <There are no unicorns> true. For, here is Thing-1 and it is, say, a human (a property that is incompatible with being a unicorn), and here is Thing-2 and it is, say, a toothbrush (again, incompatible), and here is Thing-3... And so on. At the end, if the list of all things that exist is to entail that there are no unicorns, we'll need to add, *AND THERE ARE NO OTHER THINGS!* In short, we'll need what is called a **closure clause**; as Porky Pig says, 'That's all folks!' There have been several attempts to ground such a clause.

- (a) **Worldly Properties:** Ross Cameron proposes that the world has a very special kind of property; namely, it has the property of *being all there is*. For any entire world, that world is *essentially worldly*. If that is the case, we get a truthmaker for <...and there are no other things>. Namely, it is the fact that the collection of things in the universe have the property of being all there is!

Problem: Is this plausible? Isn't Cameron just smuggling in negative properties? It seems like having the property of *being all there is* is just to have the property of *being such that there are no other things*. But, that is a negative property.

Second, on this view, *the world's being all there is* makes <There are no unicorns> true; but it is ALSO what makes <All ravens are black> true. Yet, it seems strange to say that these two propositions have the same truthmaker.

- (b) **Wholes as Objects:** Most philosophers think that wholes are grounded in their parts. That is, if there is such a thing as a WHOLE brick wall, it is because its parts (the individual bricks) exist. Jonathan Schaffer proposes that things are the other way around. He says that parts are grounded in their wholes.

He says that wholes are 'fundamental'. The only real entities are whole things, and parts are merely that—they are PARTS of wholes. So, parts are derived from wholes. Further, Schaffer believes that the entire world (read as 'the universe') is a whole—it is THE whole, in fact. There is only one fundamental thing in existence, and it is the world. All other things are mere parts of it, and so not fundamental.

If that is the case, we get a truthmaker for <...and there are no other things>. Namely, it is the WORLD, which is an ontologically fundamental whole.

[*Note: Alternatively, one could hold a Schaffer-like view and say that the set of all ravens is a whole, of which each individual raven is merely a part.*]

**Problem:** Is this even plausible? Saying that parts cannot exist without wholes is like saying that bricks cannot exist without brick walls.

Also, once again <There are no unicorns> and <All ravens are black> (and indeed ALL true negative statements) will have the very same truthmaker.

- (c) **Totality States of Affairs:** David Armstrong proposed that there is another kind of relation between particulars and universals (besides instantiation); namely, the "alling" or "totaling" of a property. When groups of particular objects 'total' or 'all' a property, we get what Armstrong calls a 'totality fact' or 'totality state of affairs'. For instance, <All ravens are black> is true because the set of one billion ravens 'totals' the property of *being a raven*. So, in this case, there exists a totality state of affairs that is *these ravens being all of the ravens*.

Problem: What in the heck is this so-called 'totality relation'!? It looks suspicious.

Most think that proposals (a), (b), and (c) are simply too bizarre to accept. Many end up going the way of rejecting Maximalism, or Truthmaker theory altogether.

## Some Additional Thoughts

[But, are these proposals so bizarre? Aren't they really just saying that wholeness, or allness, or completeness, is somehow fundamentally IN THE WORLD? That is, the world has boundaries, and these boundaries are a primitive feature of its existence. We assume such boundaries every time we make statements like 'Everyone in this room is seated'. When we make such a claim, we stipulate that there is a domain under consideration—namely, ALL AND ONLY THE PEOPLE IN THIS ROOM. Proposals (a), (b), and (c) are only claiming that some fact about the domain of our universe is a primitive feature of it. Question: What do YOU think? What should we think about truth, and truthmaking?]

[Another Problem: The following principle is intuitively true:

**The Entailment Principle:** If X is a truthmaker for proposition, P, and P entails Q (i.e., *<If P, then Q> is true*), then X is also a truthmaker for Q.

For instance, Lassie is a truthmaker for the proposition *<A dog exists>*. But, if *<A dog exists>* is true, then this entails that *<A mammal exists>* is also true. Therefore, by The Entailment Principle, Lassie is also a truthmaker for the proposition *<A mammal exists>*.

That seems correct. Unfortunately, we can use this same line of reasoning to show that Lassie is ALSO a truthmaker for any necessary truth, such as *<2+2=4>*. For, as we've said, Lassie is a truthmaker for the proposition *<A dog exists>*. But, if *<A dog exists>* is true, then this entails that *<2+2=4>* is also true. Therefore, Lassie is also a truthmaker for the proposition *<2+2=4>*.

Why is this? The claim that, **If *<A dog exists>* is true, then *<2+2=4>* is true** may seem false to you. But, I assure you it is not. "If ... then" statements (called 'conditionals') only come out false when the antecedent (the 'if' part of the statement) is true and the consequent (the 'then' part of the statement) is false. To illustrate, ask yourself: **In which of these four scenarios did I tell a lie?**

I say to you, "If you come over and help me move my couch on Saturday, then I will buy you some pizza." Translation: If P, then Q

Scenario 1: You DO help me, and I DO buy you pizza (P and Q are both true).

Scenario 2: You DO help me, but I do NOT buy you pizza (P is true, Q is false).

Scenario 3: You do NOT help me, but I DO buy you pizza anyway (P is false, Q is true).

Scenario 4: You do NOT help me, and I do NOT buy you pizza (P and Q are both false).

Now, in which of these four scenarios did I tell a lie, or break my promise to you? It seems that I ONLY told a lie in the scenario where you DID come over to help me, but I did NOT buy you pizza. So, "If P, then Q" is only false when "P" is true and "Q" is false.

Alternatively, think of it this way: **Which of these 4 people are breaking this law?**

Law: "If someone is consuming alcohol, then they are at least 21 years of age."

Scenario 1: Peggy IS consuming alcohol, and IS over 21 (P and Q are both true).

Scenario 2: Sue IS consuming alcohol, but is NOT over 21 (P is true, Q is false).

Scenario 3: Billy is NOT consuming alcohol, but IS over 21 (P is false, Q is true).

Scenario 4: Jean is NOT consuming alcohol, and is NOT over 21 (P and Q are both false).

ONLY SUE is breaking the law. "If P, then Q" is only violated when P is true and Q is false.

The proposition  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  is called a **necessary truth** (that is, there is no possible way that it could be false), so there is NO possible scenario where  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  is false. Therefore, **If  $\langle A \text{ dog exists} \rangle$ , then  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  is always true.** Therefore, by The Entailment Principle, if Lassie is a truthmaker for  $\langle A \text{ dog exists} \rangle$ , she is also a truthmaker for  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$ .

So, Lassie makes  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  true. And this is generalizable. It turns out that we can replace Lassie with ANYTHING, and replace  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  with ANY necessary truth. For instance, Obama is the truthmaker for  $\langle \text{All triangles have 3 sides} \rangle$ , my sock is the truthmaker for  $\langle \text{All bachelors are unmarried} \rangle$ , and so on. That doesn't seem right...

Another Complication: Here is another worry:

The universe makes  $\langle \text{Mt. Everest exists} \rangle$  true.

Think about it: Given the entire UNIVERSE, it follows that any proposition about some part of it is true. So, the universe is a truthmaker for EVERYTHING!

So, truthmaker theorists often make one of these two claims, which both insist that RELEVANCE somehow plays a key role in truthmaker theory:

- (1) **Truthmaker is not MERE logical entailment.** Something more is needed. For instance, it is not enough that Obama's existence entails that  $\langle \text{Obama exists} \rangle$  is true. Obama's existence must also be RELEVANT to that truth. Or, in other words, Obama can only be the truthmaker for the proposition  $\langle \text{Obama exists} \rangle$  if that proposition somehow INVOLVES Obama (i.e., it is ABOUT him).
- (2) **Truthmaker IS entailment, but only relevant truthmakers should concern us.** Others accept that Lassie makes  $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$  true, but say that we should only be concerned with MINIMAL, RELEVANT truthmakers.]