Truthmakers

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) **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>

(2) **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., it’s truthmaker) is the actual mountain, Mt. Everest, and it’s 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>).

(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 certain truths true. This is **Truthmaker Necessitarianism.**

It would be quite odd if Necessitarianism were not true. For, the denial of Necessitarianism is to claim that it IS POSSIBLE for a truthmaker to not make a certain truth true. But, in that case, it would be possible for, say, Lassie to 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 are Johnny Depp, and Brad Pitt. Any individual man in the universe, in fact, is a truthmaker for the claim <A man exists>.

**The Entailment Principle:** What about ‘necessary’ truths (i.e., truths which could not possibly have been false)? Here is a puzzle:

The following argument seems valid:

1. T is a truthmaker for proposition P.
2. P entails Q. (that is, If proposition P is true, then proposition Q is true.)
3. Therefore, T is also a truthmaker for proposition Q.
For instance:

1. Lassie is a truthmaker for the proposition <A dog exists>.
2. But, if <A dog exists> is true, then <A mammal exists> is true.
3. Therefore, Lassie is also a truthmaker for the proposition <A mammal exists>.

But, if the arguments above are valid, then unfortunately so is this one:

1. Lassie is a truthmaker for the proposition <A dog exists>.
2. But, if <A dog exists> is true, then <2+2=4> is true.
3. Therefore, Lassie is also a truthmaker for the proposition <2+2=4>.

Side Note: Premise (2) might seem false, but 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. For instance, 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 the 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. Again, “If P, then Q” is only violated when P is true and Q is false.

The proposition <2+2=4> is called a **necessary truth** (that is, there is no possible way that it could be false), so there is NO possible interpretation of premise (2) in our argument above where that premise comes out false.
It turns out that Lassie makes $2+2=4$ true. And this is generalizable. It turns out that we can replace Lassie with ANYTHING, and replace $2+2=4$ with ANY necessary truth. For instance, Obama is the truthmaker for $\text{<All triangles have 3 sides>}$, Mt. Everest is the truthmaker for $\text{<All bachelors are unmarried>}$, and so on.

That seems mistaken. Here is another worry:

The universe makes $\text{<Mt. Everest exists>}$ 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 $\text{<Obama exists>}$ 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 $\text{<Obama exists>}$ 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 $2+2=4$ true, but say that we should only be concerned with MINIMAL, RELEVANT truthmakers.

**Side Note on Presentism:** Recall that Presentists about time believe that only the present EXISTS. A famous objection against that view is that it cannot provide truthmakers for true statements about the past. For instance, $\text{<Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865>}$ seems true. But, what MAKES it true if the past does not exist? Presentism has no simple answer.