

Why Philosophers Need Truthmakers

by Peter Gibson

Verificationism was a well-known attempt by empiricist philosophers in the 1920s to set up a principle which would weed the waffle out of philosophy, by revealing that many plausible statements were actually meaningless. The idea was to set up a criterion for being meaningful, which was by having (in some way) a connection to actual experience. If some claim failed this test, it could be swept aside, even though it might appear to have made a genuine claim. The sentence 'God is love' was offered as an example of a widely used sentence which actually meant nothing. It is a familiar fact that verificationism failed to achieve its goals, because counterexamples were constructed to their principle, and the verification principle itself seemed to be meaningful, without being verifiable. The clearest problem, I would say, is that fanciful speculations, such as those concerning what happened before the Big Bang, are clearly perfectly meaningful, even if there is no chance at all of verification. A huge range of English statements are in fact thoroughly meaningful, despite having no good connection to actual experience.

Philosophers have given up dismissing widely expressed ideas as being 'meaningless', but in the process they have also given up on a rather good project, which was to weed the waffle out of philosophy. I want to suggest in this talk that this tough approach to bad philosophy would have been more successful if they had focused on truth, rather than on meaning. Achieving meaning is a very modest goal, often managed by tiny infants and parrots, but achieving truth is much more demanding, and cries out for a rigorous test, if we could devise one. It seems to me that the modern concept of a 'truthmaker' is just what is needed for this role. I do not say that there is a full and finished theory of truthmakers available, which can immediately take on the task of sifting out philosophical waffle, but I do say that all philosophers should take truthmaking seriously, and look for ways to clarify the idea, and deal with its problems. I certainly think that the occasional casual dismissals of truthmaking found in the literature are absurd.

I will first sketch the theory, then address the relatively minor problems of the nature of truth itself, the nature of the bearers of truth, and how we should characterise truthmakers in general. We need to get through those quickly, in order to tackle the two biggest issues, which are how to characterise the truthmaking relationship, and how to deal with the difficult cases of truths which have very elusive truthmakers.

If I say 'I am sitting', and I am indeed sitting, then I hope we can agree that what I said is true. If I then stand up and say 'I am sitting', then my statement has become false. The truth value of my sentence tracks my physical position. If I ask why my sentence is true, or what makes it true, then citing that physical position is the only possible answer. We can add that, given the meaning of the English sentence 'I am sitting', plus my sedentary position, the sentence *has* to be true. That is, the truth is necessitated by how things are. This is the simple idea that the sentence has a 'truthmaker'. The Truthmaker theory proposes to universalise this observation, and makes two bold claims: 1) that sentences can *only* be true if they have truthmakers (i.e. that *all* true sentences have truthmakers), and 2) that the truth of every sentence is necessitated by its truthmaker. If you agree about the sentence 'I am sitting', but disagree about the big bold theory, then the obvious challenge you face is why a theory which is obviously correct for a simple observation sentence could turn out to be false for other types of sentence. It would seem odd that there are two fundamentally different ways for sentences to be true.

A second potential reaction on first hearing the proposal is to say that it is correct, but that it doesn't say very much. Indeed, it does not say very much – only that if you assert the truth of something, you had better believe that there is something which makes it true. If you admit that there is no such thing then the proposal says you should probably back off – but then that is a fairly normal principle applied in law courts. You are, of course, entitled to say 'this seems to be true, even though I have no idea what makes it true', but the truthmaker principle says if you are going to maintain that truth then you must believe that *something* makes it true, even though you don't know what the truthmaker is. What you are no longer permitted to say is 'this is true, even though nothing whatever makes it true'. I like the principle because it at least offers readily acceptable grounds for rejecting truths of folklore and media consensus which have no sort of basis at all, and it also motivates a philosophical project to fully specify the truthmakers of the human conceptual scheme. Truthmaking is probably best understood as a principle of meta-philosophy, rather than of immediate philosophical enquiry. The theory starts to say more if you become more specific about how truthmaking works. If you proposed that the only truthmakers there could possibly be are found a) in God's will, or b) in eternal platonic ideas, or c) in physical material, or d) in subjective experience, then you would have four dramatically different philosophies which all obeyed the truthmaker principle.

To grasp the truthmaking principle it is important to distinguish it from the correspondence theory of truth, to which it obviously bears similarities. Both discuss truth in terms of some sort of truth bearers (such as

propositions), and some features of reality to which they refer, such as facts or states of affairs. The most important difference between the two ideas is that the correspondence theory offers an account of the *nature* of truth, or even a *definition* of it, but the truthmaker principle does not. The correspondence theory says that truth *is* the relation of correspondence between the truthbearer and whatever it refers to. The truthmaker principle is neutral about the actual nature of truth, and it is quite common to treat truth as a primitive concept within the theory. When something is a 'primitive' in a philosophical theory, that either means that the concept is self-evident to most of us, but cannot be explained further, or it means that the concept is a placeholder which is only understood in terms of its rules and behaviour. Many truthmaker theorists see truth as a self-evident primitive. The 'axiomatic theory of truth' treats it as a mere placeholder which is only understood through the rules for its behaviour. Truthmaking might also accept a minimal linguistic account of truth, or even the pragmatic theory.

A second important distinction between truthmaking and correspondence is that truthmaking is a one-way relation and correspondence is a two-way relation. This implies that correspondence is a one-to-one relation, but that creates a problem. Suppose I am looking at a crowd of people, and the crowd contains two of my friends, and I say "I have a friend in that crowd". It seems that the correspondence theory says that I have uttered two truths, because truth is correspondence, and there are two correspondences in the situation, in which my sentence corresponds first to friend-1, and second to friend-2. The truthmaker view is that I have uttered a single truth, because the sentence has a truthmaker. Luckily it has two truthmakers, but they both do the same job, of making my sentence true. One truth can have several truthmakers, and one truthmaker can make several truths. In this example, the flexibility of truthmaking seems to give a better account than the strictness of correspondence.

The correspondence theory has two further notorious problems, concerning the correspondence relation, and the relatum at the reality end of the relation (usually called the 'fact'). For the relation to qualify as 'correspondence' there must be ingredients of the truthbearer which match up with ingredients of the fact. Without such a mapping of ingredients the theory doesn't seem to say any more than that the sentence is 'true'. Russell gave the example of 'Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio', and said that if your theory includes the two relations 'believes' and 'loves', with each relation having a 'direction', then a map of the sentence fits a map of the facts (if the sentence is true). This is called the 'congruence' account of the correspondence theory of truth. The theory seems to work well for Russell's example, since there is a fairly clear correspondence between sentence and reality, and you can say that the sentence is true if all the elements of the congruence get a tick. If I say 'the sun looks circular' there is also a correspondence with the object, the quality, and their mutual relation. However, other examples don't look so good. It seems a good theory for true statements about specific structured facts, but even then there may be more structure in the sentence than in the fact, if I talk about electrons, or less structure in the sentence than in the fact, if I make a simple remark about the European economy. It gets worse if the fact doesn't seem to have a structure, or doesn't contain clear objects or relations. General truths, negative truths, vague truths and fictional truths are much harder than the Othello example to fit into the correspondence theory, and much of Russell's career was devoted to battling with such problems. Even more drastically, we might object that there can't be a correspondence between a proposition and a part of reality, because they are two entirely different types of thing.

The third problem for correspondence, apart from the problem of one sentence being several truths, and the problem with clarifying the correspondence relation, is how we should understand what a 'fact' is. The two problems here are vagueness, and potential circularity. The question 'how many facts are there in this room?' reveals the first difficulty, especially if we permit negative facts, disjunctive facts ('this *or* that'), and conjunctive facts ('this *and* that'). The only solution seems to be identifying the fact with what the sentence is about, but that leads to the circularity problem, because what the sentence is about only becomes a fact if the sentence is true, but that begs the very question we are trying to answer (of what 'true' means).

These are some of the reasons why the intuitively attractive and common sense correspondence theory of truth has proved a great frustration for analytic philosophers, who dream of rigour and precision. The aim of truthmaker theory is not so much to solve these problems as to evade them, by the simple expedient of making more modest claims. The question of the bearers of truth is worrisome for all students of truth, but I will simply assert that 'propositions' are what bear truth, even if 'proposition' is not a very precise term. It covers what a sentence means (even if expressed in several different ways, or in different languages), and also the contents of non-linguistic thoughts, even in the minds of animals that lack language. I take it as axiomatic that most animals with good sized brains can have both correct and incorrect thoughts, and so any account of truth must embrace that fact.

We saw that facts were a rather elusive component of the correspondence theory, but truthmaker theory will also need some way of characterising the kinds of thing which make a proposition true. They don't

need the kind of structure needed to enter into a precise correspondence relation, so all they need is some sort of existence that is independent of the proposition in question. David Armstrong, whose book on truthmaking is the Old Testament of the subject, suggested calling the truthmakers 'states of affairs', and we can accept this for now. The difficulties of the correspondence theory should make us look ahead to problem cases, such as the truths of maths and logic, or universal truths like the laws of nature, or generalisations, or negative truths, and 'states of affairs' are flexible enough to cover most of those cases, while having enough content to make sense in ordinary conversation.

We now have the framework of truthmaker theory in place. We can treat truth itself as indefinable but intuitively obvious, and say that all true propositions are necessarily made true by some state of affairs. This brings us to the hard part, which is to say what the truthmaker relation is, and then give some account of the tricky cases. An early suggestion for the truthmaker relation was that, since it evidently involves necessity, it might be the relationship of logical entailment. Thus if I am sitting down, then this logically necessitates that 'I am sitting' is true, and if I say 'I am standing' I seem to contradict my actual sedentary state of affairs. However, this proposal seems to be wrong, for the simple reason that people sitting in chairs don't enter into logical relations, which are entirely a matter of the relationships between propositions. One sentence can entail another sentence, but physical objects don't have powers of entailment.

So if logic is not doing the necessitating, then what *is* doing it? I can't answer that question, but it seems to involve the obscure problem of the *content* of propositions. Truthmakers relate to what a proposition is *about*, and that seems to involve the idea of representation. The sentence 'I am sitting' represents the world as being a certain way, which is often called the truth-conditions of the sentence. This seems to be an imaginative picture of the state of affairs when the sentence is true. You might immediately fear another circularity here, if we invoke truth to explain truthmaking, but remember that we are not trying to define truth but are treating it as a given, so we can draw on the concept whenever necessary. We can't be happy with the idea of a 'picture', of course, because much of our talk does not picture anything, but at least we understand the idea that propositions represent things.

But where does the necessitating come into it? Truthmaking is, remember, a one-way relationship. If I observe that I am sitting, and then say 'I am sitting', you might say that I have produced the necessity of the truth, by correctly describing the situation, but that doesn't seem right. I can't impose truth or necessity on my sentence – I can only offer my sentence to reality, and wait to see if reality makes it true. We can only ask what the power of the situation is, that enables it to necessitate a truth, and we might offer locutions such as 'the intrinsic nature' of the situation to do that job.

I personally like two words that bring us close to what we are trying to describe. The first is that my sedentary position 'grounds' the truth of the sentence, which means something like an unspoken reason for the sentence to be true. That word ought at least to appeal to philosophers, who are devoted to understanding the reasons that structure the world. The second word is that the situation 'determines' the truth of the sentence. I like this word because we can say that something is necessitated because it is caused, as when a falling brick necessitates a loud bang, and we might be tempted to say that truthmakers 'cause' truths. However this does not fit mathematics very well, when we say that some equation necessitates specific values for its variables, as when $2x = 4$ necessitates x being 2. The word 'determines' does seem to cover this nicely, and so I am inclined to see physical necessity and mathematical necessity as two different forms of the 'determination' relation. Hence I will say that truthmakers 'determine' the truths of sentences which successfully say something about their states of affairs.

I am not deluding myself that this fishing for an appropriate vocabulary is solving any deep problems, but I do think finding the right vocabulary is very important for philosophy, because it can be extended into other areas of the subject, where badly chosen vocabulary breaks down. So I will settle for saying that every true proposition is grounded by some state of affairs which determines its truth. To that we can add that because of the grounding relation, the truth can be said to 'depend' on its truthmaker, since removal of the truthmaker deprives the proposition of its truth, and also say that a truth is true 'in virtue of' its truthmaker, which points to the intrinsic nature of the state of affairs. This leads us into thinking that the truthmaker might explain the truth, so that if you asked for an explanation of 'Peter is sitting' you might reply 'well, just look at him!'. I hope you can see that I am trying to fit truthmakers into a network of related concepts, which will give us the tools to think properly about the world.

Let me now turn briefly to the best known problem case for truthmakers, which is negative truths. If you say 'Peter is sitting', I am present to do the truthmaking job. If you say 'Peter is not here', your sentence seems to be about 'here' (wherever that is), but I am not present to do the required necessitating. Lots of truths seem to take this negative form, so without a plausible account of their truthmakers our whole theory is thrown into doubt. Consider one solution. If I say 'Marianne is in Scotland', I believe that to be true, and

to have an unproblematic truthmaker in her presence in Scotland. If I get your agreement that Oxford is not in Scotland, and that people can't be in two places at once, we can infer the truth 'Marianne is not in Oxford'. Might we say that the truthmaker for 'Marianne is not in Oxford' is also her presence in Scotland, on the grounds that the truthmaker for any true proposition will also determine the truth of all of the implications of the first proposition? If we add that logical implication is a necessary relation, we can retain the necessity of the truthmaking. That looks promising until we consider three further truths – that 'Socrates is not in Oxford', that 'my great-great grandchild is not in Oxford', and that 'Bilbo Baggins is not in Oxford' – truths which refer to past, future and fictional persons. These suggest that their truthmakers should be the current state of Oxford, which suggests that the truthmaker for 'Marianne is not in Oxford' should also be Oxford, rather than Scotland. That in turn suggests that the implications of a true proposition need their own truthmakers, and can't sponge off the grounding of the parent truth.

There are two ways to go here. We could treat all negative truths as parasitic on the positive truths, so that positive truths have straightforward truthmakers such as Marianne being in Scotland, and then the negative truths don't really count as 'proper' truths, and are confined to a menial role in our conceptual scheme. Or we could find a way to characterise negative states of affairs to do the job, containing features such as 'absences', which speak of the absence of Marianne and Bilbo Baggins in Oxford. This still has to deal with sentences such as 'there are no hobbits', which seems to make the entire universe its negative state of affairs, but maybe we have to bite that bullet. Personally I rather favour the first approach, although it is quite radical. That is, the primary truths are those which say how the world is, and denials of how the world is count as secondary. Normally the word 'not' is taken to flip truth-values backwards and forwards between True and False, seeing them as symmetrical. The view that negations of the primary truths have a secondary status would break that symmetry. This might point to a logic built on 'true' and 'not-true', rather than on true and false. That's as far as I've got on that one, so the debate remains open.

My conclusion is that truthmaking is a powerful and important idea for philosophy. I started by offering it as a waffle detector that might do a better job than verificationism, but it is clearly not a sharp and rigorous tool, and merely offers a helpful aid in focusing sensible philosophical discussion. What I really like about truthmaking arises from the fact that most truthmakers also possess truthmakers, and so there is hierarchy of truthmaking in our successful theories of reality, which matches the hierarchical structures (such as physics, then chemistry, then biology) that we find in the world. Hence the reason why philosophers need truthmakers is in order to do philosophy properly, and my suspicion is that without a commitment to truthmakers the entire subject collapses into waffle.

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