

Précis of *Truth and Ontology*

Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 83 (2011): 184-186

TRENTON MERRICKS

University of Virginia

That Fido is brown is true because Fido is brown. *That the Trojans were conquered* is true because the Trojans were conquered. *That hobbits do not exist* is true because hobbits do not exist. And so on. And so we might say that truth “depends on the world.” But such “dependence” is trivial. No one would deny it. *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007) considers whether, in addition to the trivial dependence just noted, there is a substantive way in which truth depends on the world or on things or on being.

Truthmaker says that each truth has a “truthmaker.” That is, it says that, for each claim that is true, there is some entity that makes that claim true. Chapter 1 shows that Truthmaker is primarily motivated by the intuition that all truth depends substantively on being and, similarly, by the desire to rule out theories that violate that dependence. And Chapter 1 defends a partial account of *making true*: x makes p true only if, necessarily, if both x and p exist, then p is true.

Chapter 2 argues that if every truth has a truthmaker, then some of those truthmakers are Armstrongian states of affairs or, in other words, events or Russellian facts. States of affairs (i.e., events or Russellian facts) have constituents; for example, if there is the state of affairs of *Fido's being brown*, it is constituted by Fido and the property of *being brown*. Chapter 2 shows that truthmaking states of affairs must have certain of their constituents essentially. It also shows that if Truthmaker is to rule out those theories typically taken to violate truth's dependence on being, Truthmaker must exclude some alleged properties from constituting truthmaking states of affairs. And this chapter argues that Truthmaker requires that a truth be “about” its truthmaker.

Chapter 3 argues that Truthmaker should not be scaled back to say that all truths *except true negative existentials* have truthmakers. That is, this chapter argues, if Truthmaker is true, then all truths, including true negative existentials, have truthmakers. But Chapter 3 also argues that true negative existentials lack truthmakers. So it concludes that Truthmaker is false.

Truth Supervenes on Being (TSB) says that what is true supervenes *globally* on which objects exist and which properties those objects exemplify; in other words, it says that all possible worlds alike with respect to which objects exist and which properties those objects exemplify are alike with respect to what is true.

Like Truthmaker, TSB is intended to articulate the idea that truth depends in a substantive way on being. But unlike Truthmaker, TSB does not imply that true negative existentials have truthmakers. Thus some advocates of truth's non-trivial dependence on being have opted for TSB instead of Truthmaker.

Again, TSB is *intended* to articulate the idea that truth depends in a substantive way on being. But TSB as a thesis of global supervenience fails to articulate that idea. And if TSB is to articulate that idea, so the bulk of Chapter 4 argues, it must be recast to say, among other things, that what is true supervenes *locally* on (i.e., is necessitated by) the objects that exist and the properties they exemplify. But once TSB is recast to articulate truth's dependence on being, it is not significantly better than Truthmaker, not even when it comes to negative existentials.

Chapters 5 through 7 focus on how debates about modality, time, and subjunctive conditionals interact with Truthmaker and TSB. For example, Chapter 7 argues that dispositional conditionals, such as *that if glass G had been struck, it would have shattered*, entail negative existentials, such as *that there is no sorcerer who would keep glass G from shattering, were G to be struck*. Building on arguments from earlier in the book, this chapter argues that nothing

necessitates the truth of that negative existential. Because nothing necessitates the truth of that negative existential, nothing necessitates any proposition that entails that negative existential. So nothing necessitates the aforementioned dispositional conditional. So that dispositional conditional lacks a truthmaker. (For similar reasons, that dispositional conditional violates TSB.) The same goes for other dispositional conditionals. Thus dispositional conditionals are not “grounded.”

Truth and Ontology concludes that only truths about the mere existence of something must have truthmakers. So we should say that Truthmaker is false. We should not say, instead, that Truthmaker is true but that its scope must be curtailed. We should not say this because—as is shown in a variety of ways throughout the book—a version of (so-called) Truthmaker that is thus curtailed cannot accommodate what motivates Truthmaker in the first place. Nor—as is argued throughout the book—can such a version accomplish the tasks that Truthmaker has been assigned. It is best to say, then, that Truthmaker is simply false, thus signaling that its motivations are misguided and its work undone. And the same goes for TSB. Moreover, *Truth and Ontology* argues that to undermine both Truthmaker and TSB is to undermine the idea that every truth depends substantively on being.

The eighth and final chapter begins by arguing that the correspondence theory of truth is false. Nevertheless, this chapter insists that *that the Trojans were conquered* is true if and only if the Trojans really were conquered. It insists that *that hobbits do not exist* is true if and only if hobbits really do not exist. And so on. That is, this chapter upholds “realism” about truth. Moreover, this chapter refutes not only the correspondence theory of truth, but also every other version of the claim that *being true* is a relation that holds between, on the one hand, primary truth-bearers and, on the other, that in virtue of which those truth-bearers are true. It defends the

claim that there is a property of *being true*. And so it concludes that *being true* is a monadic (and even a primitive) property of primary truth-bearers.