

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Truth and Ontology

By TRENTON MERRICKS

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SUMMARY

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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* 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 is one attempt to articulate the claim that truth depends in a substantive way 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, by its mere existence, makes that claim true. As we see in

the first chapter, ‘Truthmaker and *Making True*’, Truthmaker is primarily motivated by the intuition that truth does indeed depend substantively on being and, similarly, by the desire to rule out theories that violate that dependence. (Truthmaker is also sometimes motivated by the mistaken belief that it is identical with the correspondence theory of truth.) And Chapter One defends a partial account of *making true*: x makes p true only if, necessarily, if both x and p exist, then p is true.

The second chapter, ‘Truthmakers’, argues that if every truth has a truthmaker, then some of those truthmakers are states of affairs or, in other words, events or Russellian facts. States of affairs have constituents; for example, the state of affairs of *Fido’s being brown* would be constituted by Fido the dog and the property of *being brown*. This chapter shows that truthmaking states of affairs must have certain of their constituents essentially. Furthermore, if Truthmaker is to rule out those theories typically taken to violate truth’s dependence on being, it must exclude some alleged properties from constituting truthmaking states of affairs. And this chapter argues that Truthmaker requires that a truth be, in some sense, ‘about’ its truthmaker.

‘Negative Existentials’, the next chapter, argues that Truthmaker should not be scaled back to allow truths such as *that hobbits do not exist* to lack truthmakers. And it argues that the best truthmaker for all such truths is a single totality state of affairs, even though this truthmaker is, so this chapter argues, subject to serious objections. And this chapter shows that Truthmaker implies that each true negative existential is really about the positive existence of something, namely, its truthmaker. These results, the chapter argues, are good reasons to reject Truthmaker.

‘Truth Supervenes on Being’ is the name not only of Chapter Four, but also of a doctrine about truth. That doctrine 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.

Truth Supervenes on Being (TSB) is intended to articulate the idea that truth depends in a substantive way on being. Thus TSB is intended to be an alternative for advocates of truth's non-trivial dependence on being who wish to reject Truthmaker. Moreover, it is an alternative with certain advantages. For example, TSB, unlike Truthmaker, has no untoward implications with respect to true negative existentials.

But TSB as a thesis of global supervenience fails to articulate the idea that truth depends non-trivially on being. And if TSB is to articulate that idea, so the bulk of this chapter argues, it must be recast to say, among other things, that what is true supervenes *locally* on (i.e., is necessitated by) which objects exist and which 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 Five through Seven focus on how debates about modality, time, and subjunctive conditionals interact with Truthmaker and TSB. For example, Chapter Seven 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, by its mere existence, 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 each and every truth depends non-trivially on being.

The final chapter, ‘Theory of Truth’, 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 truth-bearers.