

EXPRESSIBILITY AND TRUTHMAKER MAXIMALISM: A PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT. Advocates of truthmaker theory (like David Armstrong) regularly postulate both maximalism (that every truth has a truthmaker) and expressibility (that any truth can be expressed in a proposition). My aim in this paper is to demonstrate that these two theses are inconsistent, and hence that we must abandon one of them if we are to preserve truthmaker theory.

KEYWORDS. truthmakers, maximalism, expressibility, D. M. Armstrong, analyticity

Truthmaker theory is the view that for true propositions of type *p*, there will be an object or entity *T* such that *T* entails *p*. For a large class of true propositions, then, there will be some state-of-affairs in virtue of which said propositions are true.

Truthmaker maximalism is the view that *every* true proposition has a truth-maker.¹ This is sometimes accompanied by what I will call 'the expressibility thesis'. The expressibility thesis claims that every truthmaker necessitates a possible proposition. That is, for any state-of-affairs, it is possible to formulate true propositions whose truth-maker is this state-of-affairs. Moreover, any state-of-affairs or entity *can* be expressed in a proposition. David Armstrong defends truth-maker maximalism as well as the expressibility thesis.² These two views, however, are inconsistent.

Consider again the doctrine of truth-maker maximalism: every true proposition has a truth-maker. Presumably, this claim itself is true, so it too must have a truth-maker. It is a claim about propositions, as 'truth' is a predicate of propositions that articulate some state-of-affairs. The claim is not empirical: if truth-maker maximalism is true, it is not a contingent

¹ The term 'truth-maker maximalism' comes from Armstrong (2004). This thesis is also advocated in his (1997, 2000).

² Armstrong (2000, 2004).

truth about the true propositions human beings happen to utilize in speaking true sentences. The basis of this hypothesis, in other words, is not a contingent human practice. As the claim is philosophical, moreover, it is not a claim about empirical truths, even if these happen to be non-contingent (if there are any such non-contingent empirical truths, these are not to be discovered by philosophy, even if they wind up being of some use to philosophy).

So, the truth-maker for 'all truths have truth-makers' is not empirical. Even the broad truth-maker of 'the world' will not act as a truth-maker for this claim, at least insofar as we regard the world as the set of empirical states-of-affairs, some of which are contingent and some of which are necessary. This leaves the possibility that the truth-maker is semantic – i.e. that the claim 'every truth has a truth-maker' is an analytic truth. Every analytic truth can be accounted for under truth-maker maximalism in the following way: the truth-maker for some proposition that is analytically true is the meaning of the constituent parts of the proposition. Thus, 'All tables are extended' has for its truth-maker the meaning of the terms involved in the proposition (assuming that it is, in fact, analytic). For the materialist-minded, this is presumably the only non-empirical truth-maker available – and it is only non-empirical in a mitigated sense. While one might revert here to a Platonic realm of truths, simplicity suggests that we refrain from postulating entities when they are not essential to explanation.

Analytic truths need not be obvious to be truths. Even if we express some skepticism about whether or not the claim 'every truth has a truth-maker' is analytic, it may well turn out to be analytic upon inspection. If the claim is not analytic, then we have a truth without a truth-maker (as the claim is not an empirical one). Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that it *is* an analytic truth. This analytic truth can be expressed in another proposition (as is required, given the expressibility thesis): 'the meaning of the true proposition 'every truth has a truth-maker' is the truth-maker for this truth.' But then we must ask what the truth-maker for *this* claim is. For the same reasons as those given above, the truth-maker is not empirical (this would make it contingently true). The only other option is to proclaim that this proposition is also true in virtue of the meaning of its constituent parts. This, in turn, yields the proposition: 'The proposition that 'the meaning of the true proposition 'every truth has a truth-maker' is the truth-maker for this truth' is analytic.' Once again, this claim seems to be

true (if it is) in virtue of the meanings of the terms involved. That is, the claim that a proposition is analytic must itself be analytic if we are to maintain that it has a truth-maker. The problem emerges here gradually as we progress to infinity: one can always generate a new proposition beginning with 'it is analytic that...' which will itself be an analytic claim.³ The implication of this is that there will be infinite propositions of the form 'It is analytic that 'it is analytic that 'it is analytic that...etc.'"

It may well be the case that the notion of 'truth' semantically entails/ involves the notion of a truth-maker. That is, upon reflection on the notion of a truth, we may see that there must be something in virtue of which a proposition is true. This would make it the case that the meaning of 'every truth has a truth-maker' is that in virtue of which the proposition is true.

This is at least intelligible. It might even be right. But it is harder to make out how the higher-order claims would function. If we maintain that these higher-order claims have a truth-maker, we are forced to say that the truth-maker is semantic. But this commits us to an infinite regress. The problem with the infinite regress is *not* that it is infinite, but that it contradicts the expressibility thesis. It isn't possible to form a belief that is equivalent to an infinitely long chain of analytical truths, so there are truths that cannot be expressed in a proposition. 'Proposition' is here understood (along functionalist lines) as the set of things capable of filling the variable in 'I believe x ', 'I think x ', and 'I say x '.⁴ It thus looks like we must give up either truth-maker maximalism or the expressibility thesis.

To escape this dilemma, there are at least two strategies one might employ. The first, and obvious strategy is to try to stop the infinite regress. The second strategy would be to modify the notion of proposition here employed. Both of these strategies, however, are problematic.

One way to stop the regress would be to make a claim about higher-order propositions. If we claim 'There are no higher than third-order propositions,' or 'Only propositions third-order or less are propositions,' then we will need a truth-maker for this claim as well. Once again, unless we go Platonic, we might be stuck with the view that this claim is an analytic one. This, in turn, would start the regress over once again. Indeed, it

³ If one disputes that nested analytic claims are themselves analytic, a regress can also be generated with a series of 'It is true that's (e.g. 'It is true that 'It is true that 'All tables are extended'''). My thanks to Nicholas Georgalis for pointing this out.

⁴ While this is contentious, it is precisely this view that Armstrong advocates in 2004.

would culminate in a paradox when we reached the claim that ‘It is analytic that ‘It is analytic that ‘the proposition that ‘Only propositions third-order or less are propositions’ is analytic’’. For, in this case of a fourth-order proposition, we would have a true proposition that was not a proposition at all (if it was in fact true by definition). There might be other, more successful strategies for stopping the regress, but here I leave the topic.

The second strategy involves reconsidering the notion of a ‘proposition.’ The above dilemma is generated because we regard a proposition as something capable of filling out the ‘that’ clause in a series of sentences: ‘I believe that...’ ‘I think that...’ etc. An infinite proposition could not fill out the variable in these claims, as human beings have finite minds. We can save both truth-maker maximalism and the expressibility thesis, however, if we claim that propositions need not be expressible by human beings. That is, we can maintain that propositions exist independently of the beliefs, thoughts, and sentences of human beings. This would allow us to maintain that all states-of-affairs and entities are expressed in propositions, but that these propositions (some of them, at any rate) are not available to the human mind.

Once again, we seem to have entered the realm of Platonic forms. I will not here try to argue against this view of propositions – it is a live possibility for truth-maker theory. It is not one, however, that I am yet ready to endorse. If we refuse Platonism, then, the dilemma remains: we either give up the view that truth-maker maximalism is itself true, or we give up the expressibility thesis. One cannot have both.

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