

Trivial Truthmaking Matters

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1. Introduction

What is true and what is not depends upon how the world is: *that there are no white ravens* is true because there are no white ravens. That much, Trenton Merricks accepts. But he denies that principles about truthmaking can do any heavy lifting in metaphysics, and he provides powerful, sophisticated arguments for this denial. The hunt for individual truthmakers for specific truths is doomed once we consider negative existentials, and, on the other side of that coin, universal claims. But the weaker claim that truth supervenes upon being either collapses into the platitudes about dependence that even Merricks accepts, or else collapses into the fruitless search for individual truthmakers. The reasoning is complex, yet elegant and clear, and from now on anyone wishing to use truthmaker principles to establish substantive positions in metaphysics will need to grapple with this critique.

We can distinguish two stages in the overall argument. First, any truthmaker principle substantive enough to discriminate between rival metaphysical views about time, for example, will require just as much defence as any of those metaphysical views: such truthmaker principles are not neutral presuppositions of metaphysical debate. Second, the substantive truthmaker principles which look incompatible with presentism, for example, are themselves false. Two stages, and correspondingly *Truth and Ontology* makes claims both about the proper methodology for metaphysics, and about various metaphysical debates, concerning time, modality, and freedom.

I am sympathetic with Merricks' arguments that truthmaker principles cannot of themselves settle substantive metaphysical disputes, though I am less sympathetic with his substantive metaphysical views. However, I think Merricks underestimates the methodological power of even the very weak truthmaker principle he endorses: it can do important work even without directly settling substantive metaphysical disputes. This is the important work of shifting our attention from truth to being, and so bringing us into a realm where metaphysical considerations carry weight. To illustrate the importance of this shift, I will discuss two debates in which it is sometimes resisted: first, debate around neo-Fregeanism in the philosophy of mathematics, and second, debate about identity and indiscernibility. But I will begin by exploring Merricks' discussion of presentism.

2. Presentism

Presentists deny the existence of wholly-past objects, yet standardly they accept that there are truths and falsehoods concerning the past. The ideology of truthmaking has been employed to provoke presentists into coming up with truthmakers for claims about the past. These truthmakers may involve abstract 'times' (construed as analogous to ersatz possible worlds), or perhaps Lucretian properties instantiated by presently-existing objects (you instantiate the property *being such that the Trojans were once conquered*). Merricks argues convincingly that none of these surrogates can meet the demands of those who advocate a strong truth-making principle. For example, the true claim that the Trojans were once conquered is surely not about you, gentle reader, yet on a robust

conception of truthmaking true claims are about their truthmakers. Strong truthmaker principles are incompatible with presentism, and Merricks argues that since we have good grounds for presentism, we have good grounds to reject such truthmaker principles.

Instead, Merricks advocates the presentist view that existing and existing at the present time are one and the same, and argues that it is true that the Trojans were conquered simply because the Trojans were once conquered. If I have this straight, it is to say that there are brute facts about the past, brute in the sense that they are not reducible to facts about certain objects (abstract or concrete) having certain properties (ordinary or past-directed).

How are we to assess this version of presentism? We will need to use metaphysical tools, examining the notion of a brute fact, and comparing it to the more reductive alternatives, presentist and nonpresentist. But without the weak 'truth depends upon being' principle, we would not even be in the realm of metaphysical discussion. Merricks is right to say that participants in the presentist-eternalist debate cannot simply presuppose a strong truthmaker principle; nevertheless it is common acceptance of the weak truthmaker principle which enables those participants to engage with one another at all, to start quarrelling about cross-time relations, the relativity of simultaneity, ontological economy, or the differences between space and time. Where that common acceptance of weak truthmaking begins to wobble, mutual engagement becomes more difficult, as illustrated by recent debate about neo-Fregeanism.

3. Neo-Fregeanism

Neo-Fregeanism about the natural numbers is intended to ground our knowledge of numbers in (i) our knowledge of facts about one-one correspondence, and (ii) our ability to make successful stipulative definitions. We may introduce number-talk by stipulating that, for any F and G, the number of Fs is identical to the number of Gs if and only if the Fs and the Gs are in one-one correspondence; this biconditional is known as 'Hume's Principle'. Then whenever we know a truth which can fit into the right-hand side of Hume's Principle, we can infer a truth which fits into the left-hand side, and thus establish the existence of numbers. Moreover, we can get things going *a priori*, since we know *a priori* that the non-self-identical things and the non-self-identical things are in one-one correspondence; once we've thereby established the existence of one number, there are techniques for establishing the rest.

Hold on: can we really establish the existence of numbers this way, or just the truth of claims of the form 'the number of Fs is identical to the number of Gs'? There is apparently no reference to numbers on the right-hand side of the biconditional, and the left-hand side has been stipulated to be equivalent to this apparently-numberless right-hand side. To cut a long story short: neo-Fregeans argue that if something looks like object-talk, then it is indeed talk about objects – numbers, in this case. An instance of the left-hand side of Hume's Principle is an identity statement about numbers, from which we can infer the existential claim that there is (for example) something which is identical to the number of non-self-identical things. There's nothing more to the existence of numbers than the truth of a sentence which apparently includes singular terms for

numbers. The trick is to maintain this ‘committing’ view of the left-hand side, whilst simultaneously maintaining that the entire biconditional is true by stipulation.

Metaphysicians have found neo-Fregeanism somewhat puzzling. What could be the background ontology which would allow us to discover the existence of ‘new’ objects simply by stipulating the truth of abstraction principles? Might this background ontology be something like ‘maximalism’, the view that every object which could exist without contradiction actually does exist? Or perhaps neo-Fregeanism depends upon Hirsch-style quantifier variance, the idea that there are a number of equally good meanings for the existential quantifier, none of which is simply a restriction of the others. Or perhaps neo-Fregeanism presupposes that states of affairs are the fundamental constituents of the world, with objects, properties and relations somehow reducible to these. Or perhaps some other background ontology will do the job. (Hale and Wright (2009) contains references to this literature, and to the key texts of their own neo-Fregeanism.)

All these views have their advantages and disadvantages, both on their own terms and as underpinnings for the neo-Fregean epistemology of numbers. But what’s especially striking is that neo-Fregeans do not seem to see a need for *any* such ontological underpinnings. For them, the truth of an instance of the left-hand side of Hume’s Principle establishes that there are numbers, and whilst there are various challenges which the neo-Fregeans take seriously, the challenge from ‘anxious metaphysicians’ is not one of these.

The anxious metaphysicians take it that ‘there are...possible situations, in some relevant sense of ‘possible’ – in which an abstraction which actually succeeds would fail, even though conceptually, at the level of explanation and the understanding thereby imparted, everything is as it is in the successful scenario. Hence, in order to make good that the right-to-left transition of an otherwise good abstraction is truth-preserving, argument is needed that some relevant form of metaphysical assistance is indeed provided...[in contrast] we reject this felt need for some kind of collateral metaphysical assistance’. (Hale and Wright (2009) p. 193)

Hale and Wright then propose a ‘thin’ or ‘abundant’ conception of objects, somewhat analogous to the abundant conception of properties according to which there is a property for every (consistent) predicate. This is not the place to examine this proposal closely, but the surrounding dialectic highlights the importance of even the weak truthmaking principle which Merricks regards as trivial. Somehow or other, truth depends upon being. So if it is true that the number of Fs is identical to the number of Gs, then this is because the number of Fs is identical to the number of Gs. Of course, the neo-Fregeans accept – indeed rely upon – the inference from truth to being, but it’s not clear that they take seriously the truthmaking direction of dependence: the claim is true *because* of how things are, and not the other way around.

Granted even the weak truthmaker principle, that dependency runs from truth to being, the anxious metaphysicians’ question arises naturally: how could there be numbers existing in order to make the claims about them true? From this perspective, talk of an

‘abundant’ conception of objects needs collateral assistance from an account of the nature of such objects (just as an abundant conception of properties is typically founded on an identification of properties with sets of actual and possible particulars); given such an account we will be in a position to see how, if at all, this proposal differs from maximalism. In contrast, in the absence of the weak truthmaker principle, it becomes difficult to see what the metaphysicians are so anxious about: the neo-Fregeans are in a position to establish truths which are apparently about numbers, and without any commitment to truthmaking it’s difficult to know what more could be wanted.

Now, positive existence claims are amongst those to which Merricks is happy to grant truthmakers in a fairly robust sense, and I have not introduced neo-Fregeanism as a challenge to Merricks’ dismissal of strong truthmaker principles. Instead, my point is this: acceptance of even a weak truthmaker principle gets us into the realm of metaphysics, despite the fact that, as Merricks shows, it places very few direct constraints upon subsequent metaphysical theorising. Conversely, questioning of the weak principle leads to questioning the relevance of any kind of metaphysical considerations. I turn now to a second debate in which recognition of even the weak truthmaking principle can make a difference.

4. Identity and Indiscernibility

Are there – could there be – distinct but indiscernible objects? Max Black’s spheres provide a putative example of distinct indiscernibles, as do certain pairs of quantum particles, and, perhaps, pairs of mathematical objects such as i and $-i$. In most such cases, however, there is a relation between the objects which is symmetric and yet irreflexive. For example, each of Max Black’s spheres is two miles from a sphere, and in this respect they are indiscernible. But each of them is two miles from the other, and not two miles from itself (setting aside concerns about peculiar spacetimes). Analogously, each of i and $-i$ is of opposite value to a square root of minus one, and in this respect they are indiscernible. But each of them is of opposite value to the other, and not to itself. In the cases in question, a relation is instantiated which cannot be instantiated by a single object, and this serves to distinguish the two objects. Objects which stand in an irreflexive but symmetric relation are called ‘weakly indiscernible’, and weakly indiscernible objects pose no threat to a suitably-weak Principle of Identity of Indiscernibles. This reasoning can seem both impeccable and besides the point.

One source of mutual puzzlement in this debate is an underlying disagreement about whether this is an issue in metaphysics or in logic. How so? Debate about the PII can be understood as debate about whether identity is definable in a first-order language with a given stock of predicates (perhaps corresponding to the predicates of a given physical theory). In this context, PII is the claim that indiscernibility in every such respect is equivalent to identity. Suppose now that our stock of predicates includes a relation R (is two miles from, is of opposite value to). Then $\forall x \forall y [(x=y) \rightarrow \forall z (Rxz \leftrightarrow Ryz)]$. If R is irreflexive then on any valuation in which Rxy is true, $\forall z (Rxz \rightarrow Ryz)$ is false, because Rxy but not Ryy . (Saunders 2006.) The upshot is that differences between objects which stand in an irreflexive relation to one another can be captured in the specified language, and so objects which differ only in this weak way are correctly classified as distinct.

Understood this way, the only threat to PII would come from distinct objects which are not even weakly discernible; it is controversial whether there are any actual examples of this.

From a different perspective – that of the anxious metaphysician? – this resort to mere weak discernibility looks like cheating. If we're looking for a qualitative ground for the distinction between two objects, then how can we be satisfied by a reminder that they stand in an irreflexive relation? It looks as if the relation is irreflexive only because these are two distinct objects. So the irreflexivity of the relation cannot be used to ground the distinctness of the objects, for it distinguishes them only because they are 'already' distinct. No-one thinks that weakly discernible objects are identical. The difficulty is to understand how there can be (distinct) objects which are weakly discernible without being discernible in other respects.

The weak truthmaker principle can do useful work here. In the cases in question, it is true that $\exists z(Rxz \ \& \ \sim Ryz)$. If truth depends – somehow or other, boringly – upon being, then the anxious metaphysician is entitled to ask why this claim is true. Now, one possible response to this question is that it is a brute fact, susceptible to no further reduction or explanation. Or perhaps it is a brute fact that certain relations are irreflexive, so if objects stand in such a relation, this guarantees that they are two distinct objects. A different possible response is that each object has its own 'identity-property' or haecceity or 'transcendental thisness' which makes it distinct from every other object, and thus provides for the distinction between reflexive and irreflexive relations. Perhaps other responses are available.

As Merricks would argue, and I would agree, we cannot presuppose a strong truthmaker principle in attempting to adjudicate this debate. But we do need the weak truthmaker principle in order to establish that the debate is one about being, not just truth, a debate where metaphysical considerations can appropriately be brought to bear.

5. Conclusion

I do not see the debates about either neo-Fregeanism or the identity of indiscernibles as making trouble for *Truth and Ontology*. I have not argued that views in these areas should be governed by a substantive principle about truthmaking, since Merricks has persuaded me that such principles are neither plausible nor theory-neutral. But we should not underestimate the importance of the very weak notion of truthmaking that Merricks is happy to accept: the idea that being is prior to truth can help us to recognise metaphysical questions as metaphysical, and to see that reluctance to engage in metaphysical theorising can sometimes amount to a metaphysical commitment to brute facts.

Hale, Bob and Wright, Crispin (2009): 'The Metaontology of Abstraction', in *Metametaphysics*, edited by David J. Chalmers, David Manley and Ryan Wasserman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 178-212.

Saunders, Simon (2006): 'Are Quantum Particles Objects?', *Analysis* 66, 52-63.