**Armstrong’s Truth and Truthmakers**  
*(Weekly supervision essay; written 1st November 2005)*

**Overview**

In section one I outline the project of Armstrong’s book *Truth and Truthmakers*. In section two I make some observations about the relation of this project to various theories of truth and to realism. In section three I present Armstrong’s response to one of the toughest challenges to his thesis that every truth has a truthmaker: the challenge of finding truthmakers for negative truths and general truths. Section four is the conclusion.

1. **Truthmaking**

In *Truth and Truthmakers*, Armstrong is largely concerned with finding truthmakers (where possible, minimal truthmakers—I shall explain the notion of a minimal truthmaker below) for various propositions that he takes to be truths. The idea of a truthmaker for a particular truth “is just some existent, some portion of reality, in virtue of which that truth is true”.  

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1. Armstrong (2004:5)  
2. Ibid., p12-16
he would need to say that truthmakers necessitate actual beliefs, actual thoughts and actual statements.

b) The existents/portions of reality are to play the role of truthmaker for all sorts of truths, so it follows that we can only make general remarks about them. I make two. First, since Armstrong describes himself as a Factualist rather than a Thingist (which, in his own words, is to say that he thinks that the world is a world of facts rather than a world of things), we would expect all of Armstrong’s truthmakers to be states of affairs. But this is not the case; particulars, properties, states of affairs, mereological wholes of particulars, mereological wholes of states of affairs, conjunctions of states of affairs, and meanings are all admitted (and I do not suppose that this list is comprehensive). Armstrong does not even say that all minimal truthmakers are states of affairs. The second remark is that the existents/portions of reality are “independent of the propositions in question”, and also independent of us and our attitudes towards them.

c) The “in virtue of which” remains obscure, even after the following pair of comments; first, to say that some truth is true in virtue of some portion of reality is not to say that the portion of reality causes the truth to be true. Second, Armstrong tells us that truthmakers necessitate their truths, and calls this important thesis Truthmaker Necessititarianism. Unfortunately, however, just like “in virtue of which”, the meaning of “necessitate” is somewhat hard to glean. We are told that necessitation cannot be any kind of entailment, because entailment is a relation between propositions. We are also told that Armstrong endorses a symmetrical supervenience, at least for contingent truths, between truth and being; there can no change in being without a change in truth, and no change in truth without a change in being. But this is all we are told about necessitation.

I mentioned minimal truthmakers above. Armstrong does not seem to give a definition of a minimal truthmaker; all he says is that “if T is a minimal truthmaker for p, then you cannot subtract anything from T and the remainder still be a...

3 Ibid., p54
4 Ibid., p109
5 Ibid., p33
truthmaker for p".\(^9\) It is not clear whether the “cannot subtract…” condition is supposed to be sufficient as well as necessary for T to be a minimal truthmaker. Armstrong also leaves us guessing what he means by subtraction from a truthmaker. At one stage in his book he tells us that the mereological sum of the particulars Venus and Mars is a truthmaker for <Venus is greater in size than Mars>. Then he tells us that it is not the minimal truthmaker since the mereological sum of the state of affairs of Venus being of size ‘x’ with the state of affairs of Mars being of size ‘y’ is a truthmaker. In what sense, though, is the second mereological sum the result of a subtraction from the first mereological sum?

Armstrong combines Truthmaker Necessitarianism with a second fundamental thesis that he calls Truthmaker Maximalism. This is the thesis that every truth has a truthmaker. Notice that the easiest way to argue for this thesis is to argue that the world is a truthmaker for every truth. But Armstrong wants a stronger result than this; he wants every truth to have a truthmaker other than the world.

2. Correspondence theories of truth; and realism

At one point, Armstrong formulates his theory as the following theory of truth:

\[ p \text{ (a proposition) is true if and only if there exists a } T \text{ (some entity in the world) such that } T \text{ necessitates that } p \text{ and } p \text{ is true in virtue of } T.\]

In this form, Armstrong’s theory may remind us of correspondence theories of truth. However, Armstrong’s theory differs from many correspondence theories in at least two respects. First, it does not assert a one-one correspondence between truths and truthmakers. A single truth may have more than one truthmaker (and more than one minimal truthmaker) and a single truthmaker may make more than one truth true. Second, Armstrong does not claim to give a definition of truth since he expects the right-hand side of the above formula to involve the notion of truth.

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\(^8\) Ibid., p8
\(^9\) Ibid., p20
\(^{10}\) Ibid., p17
Lewis (2001) argues that Armstrong’s theory (and many other theories of truth) is less a theory of truth than “a theory of many things”.\textsuperscript{11} His argument is simple. In the above formula, replace “p is true” with “p”. This is a legitimate substitution as long as we agree that “p is true if and only if p”. The formulas we obtain by running through all propositions comprise a theory of many things. I suggest that it is best to look at Armstrong’s theory as a theory of many things rather than as a theory of truth.

A final independent remark: a philosopher who holds Armstrong’s two fundamental theses—Truthmaker Necessitarianism and Truthmaker Maximalism—is not committed to some sort of correspondence theory of truth. We may, for instance, hold a coherence theory of truth and still think that for every truth there is a truthmaker that necessitates the truth. The holder of a naïve coherence theory might claim that the truthmaker for a proposition \( p \) is the state of affairs of \( p \)’s belonging to a maximally consistent set of propositions. Similarly, we may hold a pragmatic theory of truth and still endorse Armstrong’s two theses. Deflationary theorists, however, would have no sympathy with the two theses, nor with truthmaking in general.

It should also be noted that Armstrong’s two theses are not incompatible with forms of antirealism. We may, for example, take truthmakers to be portions of reality, but of a mind-dependent rather than a mind-independent reality.\textsuperscript{12} It is only when Armstrong makes substantive claims about the nature of various truthmakers that his theory becomes a realist correspondence theory.

3. Negative truths and general truths

Having introduced the topic of truthmakers in the first three chapters, Armstrong devotes the rest of the book to defending Truthmaker Maximalism. Two chapters are spent seeking truthmakers for negative truths and general truths. I sketch the results below.

What is a truthmaker for \(<\text{Jane is not in London}>\), if the proposition is true? Such truths are called negative truths; their general form is \(<a \text{ is not } F>\) where a is some

\textsuperscript{11} Lewis (2001:603)

\textsuperscript{12} The theory of truthmaking may encourage a realist position—as Armstrong argues—but the point I want to make is that it does not force one.
existent thing and F is some property or relation. One class of negative truths that are also often discussed, but that do not have this form, consists of those true propositions that deny that some thing exists. For example, <unicorns do not exist>. (I assume, as does Armstrong, that existence is not a property.)

Providing truthmakers for negative truths is difficult. What, for example, is a truthmaker for <Jane is not in London>? According to Armstrong, the (minimal) truthmaker for <Jane is in London> is the state of affairs of Jane’s being in London. Perhaps, then, a truthmaker for <Jane is not in London> is the state of affairs of Jane’s possessing the property of not being in London. But Armstrong does not want to admit the existence of this property because he thinks that it is hard to credit the property with causal efficacy, which in turn makes it hard to see how we can get knowledge or rational belief of its existence.13

Instead, Armstrong proposes a truthmaker for <Jane is not in London> consisting of two parts14: the first part is the conjunction of states of affairs that involve Jane and her properties. The idea is that for each property in the world, either Jane possesses the property or she does not.15 For each property that she does possess, there is a corresponding state of affairs: the state of affairs of Jane’s possessing that property. The conjunction of these states of affairs is the first part of the proposed truthmaker. The second part is a truthmaker for <the properties involved in the conjunction are all the properties that Jane possesses>. The truthmaker that Armstrong proposes for this proposition is, in Armstrong’s terminology, a higher-order state of affairs. Before saying more about this state of affairs it will be useful to see what Armstrong has to say about general truths.

A typical general truth is a true proposition of the form <all Fs are Gs>. For instance, <all ravens are black>. At first sight, a truthmaker for this proposition is the collection of all the ravens that there are (more precisely, the mereological whole of the ravens). But Armstrong wants truthmakers to necessitate their truths, and he suggests that for necessitation we must supplement the mereological16 whole with a

13 Ibid., p55
14 Ibid., p56-58
15 Armstrong thinks that the collection of properties that there are is to be discovered by science. We have already seen that the property of not being in London is unlikely to be in the collection, and that this has something to do with causal efficacy.
16 Mereological composition is composition in the most general sense. Armstrong accepts Unrestricted Mereological Composition; that is, “composition of all existents whatsoever, however heterogeneous
truthmaker for <the ravens of the whole are all the ravens that there are>. The idea
being that without such a truthmaker the mereological whole of (black) ravens could
coexist with non-black ravens. The proposed truthmaker for <the ravens of the whole
are all the ravens that there are> is somewhat strange; it is the state of affairs of a
certain relation, called the totality relation, holding between the mereological whole of
ravens and the property of being a raven. In other words, it is the state of affairs of the
mereological whole totalling the property of being a raven.

Having introduced the totality relation we can now identify the higher-order state of
affairs that is the second part of the truthmaker for <Jane is not in London>. (Recall
that the second part is a truthmaker for <the properties involved in the conjunction are
all the properties that Jane possesses>.) It is the higher-order state of affairs of the
aggregate of the properties involved in the conjunction totalling the property of being
a property of Jane. With the addition of this state of affairs to the truthmaker,
Armstrong claims that the truthmaker necessitates <Jane is not in London>.

4. Conclusion

I end the essay with remarks about the value of locating truthmakers. Suppose that
we had chosen truthmakers for all the propositions that we take to be truths. What
would we have achieved?

On the negative side, we would be no closer to knowing that the propositions that
we take to be truths are in fact true. Armstrong tells us that the minimal truthmaker for
<Venus is greater in size than Mars> is the mereological sum of the state of affairs of
Venus being of size ‘x’ with the state of affairs of Mars being of size ‘y’. Unless we
know that the two states of affairs exist then we do not know that Venus is greater in
size than Mars.

On the positive side, it seems fair to say that we would have a better sense of our
ontological commitments. If we take <Venus is greater in size than Mars> to be a
truth, and we choose the mereological sum of the particulars Venus and Mars as our
truthmaker, then we are committed to the existence of these two particulars.
Alternatively, we may choose the mereological sum of two states of affairs, in which

and/or numerous they may be”. (p72)

17 See Armstrong (2004:22-23)
case we will be committed to the existence of those two states of affairs. By Truthmaker Maximalism we must choose a truthmaker for each truth, and each choice entails admitting the truthmaker to our ontology.

Bibliography
