# Truthmaking and Supervenience

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ABSTRACT. In his criticism of Armstrong's argument against nominalism, Parsons (1999) makes a crucial use of a notion of truthmaking in terms of weak supervenience which assumedly: (i) does not entail truthmaker essentialism, (ii) is neutral as to the issue of nominalism, and (iii) is useful in Armstrong's argument against Ryle. I will try to show that Parsons' notion is defective because it does not preserve the explanatory character of truthmakers. Besides, I argue that the natural reformulation of the notion in terms of strong supervenience fails in two respects: (i) it is not neutral as to the issue of nominalism and (ii) it does not preserve the explanatory character of truthmakers if it succeeds in avoiding truthmaker essentialism. As a corollary, Armstrong's truthmaker argument against nominalism is vindicated.

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## 1. Parsons on Armstrong's argument against nominalism

Parsons (1999) claims that Armstrong's argument against nominalism is not a truthmaker argument. Parsons starts his criticism of Armstrong by contrasting Armstrong's argument against Ryle (the AR-argument) and his argument against nominalism (the AN-argument). Armstrong contends that the two arguments are similar and calls them "truthmaker arguments", since they depend on a crucial premise: the truthmaker principle. Roughly, the truthmaker principle says that for any true sentence there is a truthmaker (i.e., something in the world that makes it true).[1] According to Armstrong, the truthmaker principle entails truthmaker essentialism, namely, the thesis that the existence of a truthmaker entails the truth of the sentence it makes true. However, Parsons contends that the truthmaker principle is independent of truthmaker essentialism, and he argues that the AN-argument and the AR-argument are not alike. The reason is as follows: the AR-argument makes use of the truthmaker principle, but not of truthmaker essentialism, whereas the AN-argument requires both premises.

Parsons maintains that there are still more differences between the two arguments. On his view, the AN-argument is not a truthmaker argument, since it does not in fact require the truthmaker principle. According to Parsons, the AN-argument makes use of the truthmaker principle and truthmaker essentialism only to force the nominalist to embrace Leibnizian essentialism (the thesis that all intrinsic properties of a thing are essential to it). However, Leibnizian essentialism conflicts with the contingency intuition: there are intrinsic properties which are not essential to the things that have them,

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[1] Assumedly, the principle will not hold for every type of sentence. Perhaps only simple, contingent, affirmative and predicative sentences fall under its domain.

and there seems to be no way for the nominalist to solve the antinomy. Although Armstrong is also embracing a form of Leibnizian essentialism, his ontological resources (universals, thin particulars and states of affairs) suffice to resolve the antinomy. At this stage, the AN-argument can be summarized as follows: the realist is in a better position than the nominalist to coherently hold both the contingency intuition and the conjunction of the truthmaker principle and truthmaker essentialism. However, Parsons concludes that given that (i) the truthmaker principle is too weak to obtain Leibnizian essentialism, and (ii) Leibnizian essentialism on its own refutes nominalism in the AN-argument, the truthmaker principle (and truthmaker essentialism as well) should be dropped as a premise in the AN-argument. The proper way to understand the AN-argument, according to Parsons, is to take the contingency intuition and Leibinizian essentialism as its premises and the negation of nominalism (there are only concrete things) as a conclusion. Thus, the AN-argument is not a truthmaker argument at all, for it does not make essential use of the truthmaker principle.

I disagree with Parsons on a main point. Parsons' attempt to characterize a notion of truthmaker which must be neutral on the issue of nominalism but suitable to the AR-argument fails because it makes use of a notion of weak supervenience. In addition, the natural reformulation of his proposal in terms of strong supervenience fails by not being neutral on the issue of nominalism and also by not preserving the notion, essential to the concept of truthmaker, that truthmakers explain the truth of their truthbearers. It follows from these two main objections that Parsons' interpretation of the AN-argument is not correct and also that the AN-argument should be considered a truthmaker argument with the truthmaker principle as its main premise, rather than an argument that stems from Leibnizian essentialism (which would no doubt be an interesting argument by itself). Hence, the AN-argument and the AR-argument are, as Armstrong holds, the same style of argument.

## 2. Parsons' notion of truthmaking

First of all, let us state truthmaker essentialism:

(TE) If A makes S true then necessarily: if A exists, then S is true.

It is no accident that most versions of the notion of truthmaker include truthmaker essentialism as a constitutive ingredient of truthmaking. Truthmakers are theoretical entities posited to give a metaphysical explanation of the truth of true sentences. The modal connection holding between truthmaker and truthbearer stated by truthmaker essentialism is intended to satisfy this purpose. Parsons, however, intends to give a formulation of the truthmaker principle that does not assume truthmaker essentialism (Parsons 1999, pp. 328-329). In this section I will argue that Parsons's definition, which avoids (TE), does not satisfy the explanatory purpose.

According to Parsons, the general form of the truthmaker principle is as follows:

[T]o say that a certain class of sentences (in our case, sentences asserting dispositions) are made true is to say that those sentences supervene for their truth on the qualitative properties of some-

thing in the world. 'Qualitative' is here used by contrast with 'dispositional', but is equally intended to cover something of what is meant by 'intrinsic'. (Parsons 1999, p. 326).

Since the principle is also proposed in a context in which nominalism is at stake, Parsons favours a more neutral version that avoids explicit talk of properties:

(P) For every true sentence, there is something on whose *nature* that sentence's truth supervenes, and that thing is the sentence's truthmaker (Parsons 1999, p. 326), where by 'nature' of a thing is meant "a grand conjunctive property, conjoining *all* of the thing's intrinsic properties" (Parsons 1999, p. 326, italics mine).

This peculiar characterization of the truthmaker principle has three main motivations: it attempts not to beg the question against nominalism, nor to entail Leibnizian essentialism, nor to entail truthmaker essentialism. I think that Parsons' characterization of the truthmaker principle only succeeds in avoiding the three commitments because it is defective.

Let us focus our attention on the notion of supervenience that Parsons uses in this characterization. What kind of supervenience relation does he invoke? Although he is not very explicit on this matter, the following passage seems to point to what is commonly labelled as "weak supervenience":

To put this another way, for every true sentence, there is some thing such that sentence cannot become false without a qualitative change, a non-Cambridge change, in that thing. That thing, whatever it is, is the sentence's truthmaker. (Parsons 1999, p. 327.)

If we make explicit this appeal to a weak notion of supervenience, Parsons' truthmaker principle should be understood as follows:

(WP) For any true sentence, there is something on whose nature the truth of the sentence weakly supervenes, and this something is the sentence's truthmaker.[2]

It should be noted that the use of weak supervenience avoids committing the truthmaker principle to truthmaker essentialism: it does not follow from the fact that the actual truth of 'Jim is scared' weakly supervenes on Jim's nature that 'Jim is scared' must be true in any possible world in which Jim has that nature.

However (WP) cannot be a good general characterization of the notion of truthmaker, since it does not guarantee the explanatory character that the truthmaker is assumed to have. In order to explain the actual truth of a sentence, any truthmaker T should at least be modally tied to the truth of S in the following way: if T (which has actually nature N) makes true S in the actual world, then in any possible world where nature N exists, S is true. If Jim, given his scaredness, is what explains the truth of 'Jim is scared', then it should be the case that in any possible world where his scaredness exists the sentence 'Jim is scared' must be true in that world.

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[2] The truth of S weakly supervenes on x's nature, N, if and only if necessarily (if S is true then N exists and if N exists S is true).

This drawback becomes even more apparent when we consider Parsons' central contention that (WP) can be also employed in Armstrong's AR-argument and it condemns Parsons' general strategy to failure. Truthmakers as defined by (WP) cannot be used in Armstrong's AR-argument because they lack explanatory force, since they don't allow the kind of transworld inferences that are required for the explanation to be successful. According to AR-argument, saying that a certain object has some dispositional property entails that the object has some (non-dispositional) property that *explains* the fact that the object displays a certain behaviour. But it follows from this that in any possible world with the same laws as the actual world in which the object has that non-dispositional property, the object displays the same behaviour. Parsons seems to interpret Armstrong in the same way:

> It may be true that someone has a belief which is never manifested in their behavioral dispositions: the belief that worms are not typically bearded, for example. Armstrong agreed with Ryle's dispositional view about belief, though; it's just that he insisted that there must be some difference in the world, some difference that the disposition makes, which *makes it true* that, at times when the disposition is not being manifested, it *would* be manifested, were we to ask, say 'Do worms have beards?' (Parsons 1999, p. 326).

On my view, this entails that the non-dispositional property which is responsible for *x*'s belief that worms are not typically bearded is such that in any possible world with the same laws as the actual world in which *x* has that non-dispositional property and is asked whether worms are typically bearded, *x* answers negatively. The truthmaker principle should at least be formulated in a way that it allows these transworld inferences if truthmakers have to explain their related truths.

A way to grant these transworld inferences may be to interpret (P) in terms of strong supervenience:

> (SP) For any true sentence, there is something on whose nature the truth of the sentence strongly supervenes, and this something is the sentence's truthmaker.[3]

I will attempt now to justify that (SP):

> (i) is not neutral as to the nominalism issue, because it is committed to (ia) non-interchangeable tropes and (ib) propertyless abstracta[4] (if it is to avoid truthmaker essentialism),

> (ii) it cannot preserve the thesis that the truthmaking relation is an explanatory relation.

(ia) According to (SP), as the truth of a sentence strongly supervenes on the nature of something in the world, then the existence of the nature of this something entails the truth of the sentence. But this seems to work only if the nature of something is taken in a particular(ized) way and essentially tied to that something. The truth of the sen-

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[3] The truth of S strongly supervenes on x's nature, N, if and only if necessarily ((if S is true then N exists) and necessarily if N exists then S is true).

[4] Also called "bare particulars"; namely, entities devoid of properties.

tence 'Jim is scared' supervenes on Jim's scaredness, but only because is *Jim*'s scaredness. If Jim's scaredness were part of the nature of a different individual, let us say Ross, then the truth of 'Jim is scared' could not supervene on Jim's scaredness, since then this sentence should be true if Ross is scared.[5] Parsons use of 'nominalism' is explicitly strong and excludes tropes, as any other property-like entity. My point here is just that there is no way to make sense of the application of (SP) other than taking natures of things as non-interchangeable tropes essentially tied to these things. Hence, (SP) is not neutral as to the issue of nominalism.

(ib) Besides, (SP) can avoid truthmaker essentialism only at the cost of positing propertyless abstracta. Can Jim, taken along with his nature, be the truthmaker for the true sentence 'Jim is scared' according to (SP)? Clearly not, if truthmaker essentialism is to be avoided. Assume that Jim, along with his scaredness, is the truthmaker for the true sentence 'Jim is scared'. Then, as the truth of 'Jim is scared' strongly supervenes on Jim's scaredness, Jim, taken along with his scaredness, cannot fail to make true the sentence 'Jim is scared'. Hence, the truthmaker for 'Jim is scared' should be Jim devoid of his nature.

Thus, this theory involves non-interchangeable tropes and propertyless abstracta. This is a high price to payto avoid truthmaker essentialism.[6]

(ii) (SP) denies that truths strongly supervene on their truthmakers, but it still allows that they strongly supervene on the nature of their truthmakers. It must say that even if a thing, which is a truthmaker for S, can exist while S be false, things such as truthmakers can still (partially) explain the truth of the sentences they make true by contingently having a nature on which the truth of the sentence strongly supervenes. It could be objected that if this is the case, then we can rid ourselves of such things as truthmakers since the explanatory role for their truths is played well enough by their natures alone. However, if my above argument is correct, these natures must be taken as particular(ized) natures that are essentially tied to the things that have them. Jim's scaredness could not exist if Jim does not. Thus, natures are existentially dependent on things and we cannot get rid of things and just retain their natures.

Now, we should ask: what explains the truth of the true sentence 'Jim is scared', according to (SP)? There are two candidates: the sentence truthmaker, "Bare Jim" (Jim devoid of his nature) and the supervenience basis for the truth of the sentence, Jim's scaredness (particularized and essentially tied to Jim). However, neither of these can-

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[5] Notice that this still does not amount to Leibnizian essentialism, since for all that has been said Jim could still have had a different nature, although *his* nature could not have been the nature of another individual.

[6] In order to be fair to the nominalist, it seems that the truthmaker principle should be formulated as follows:

(P*) For every true sentence, there is something on which the truth of this sentence strongly supervenes, and this thing is the sentence's truthmaker.

Now, the problem for Parsons' strategy would be that this characterization entails truthmaker essentialism.

didates explains by itself the truth of 'Jim is scared'. Jim's scaredness, being existentially dependent on Jim, cannot, by itself (i.e., without Jim), explain that truth. Nor is Bare Jim by itself able to explain the truth of 'Jim is scared'.[7]

If you completely split up truthmaking and supervenience to avoid truthmaker essentialism by having an independent entity as the supervenience base to play the explanatory role, then the truthmaking entity is not explanatory at all, since it is the subvenient entity that accounts for the truth by itself. (SP)'s strategy is to state that the subvenient entity is a dependent entity whose existence is essentially tied to the existence of the truthmaker. As the subvenient entity does indeed have an explanatory role and its existence requires the existence of the truthmaker, it can be argued that the truthmaker also plays an explanatory role. But this only shows that the intended subvenient entity cannot play the explanatory role by itself. Only if we bring together the intended subvenient entity and the intended truthmaker will we have a complete account for the truth. There seems to be no way of avoiding truthmaker essentialism if truthmakers are to explain truths. But that is precisely their intended function.

## 3. The AN-argument is a truthmaker argument

I think that Parsons has failed to prove that the AN-argument is not a truthmaker argument. His argument is as follows:

> (i) You can have a truthmaker argument without assuming truthmaker essentialism (by stating the truthmaker principle (WP), which does not assume truthmaker essentialism).

> (ii) Such an argument causes no trouble for the nominalist.

> (iii) Armstrong's AN-argument causes trouble for the nominalist only by assuming truthmaking essentialism.

> (iv) Truthmaking essentialism is merely a way to drive the nominalist to embrace Leibnizian essentialism.

> Conclusion:

> (v) We have no truthmaker argument against nominalism. What we really have is an argument against nominalism which has Leibnizian essentialism as a premise.

We have seen thatParsons' truthmaker principle (WP) should be rejected since it does not correctly characterize truthmaking. Hence, (i) is false. Besides, my critical

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[7] Notice that if (SP) were rephrased by placing Jim's having his scaredness as the supervenience basis for the truth of 'Jim is scared' instead of merely Jim's scaredness, then it would be Jim's having his scaredness on its own that would do the whole job of account for the truth of the sentence 'Jim is scared'. Hence, it would be absurd to insist on saying that Bare Jim is the truthmaker for 'Jim is scared'. The truthmaker would be Jim's having his scaredness and we would be committed to truthmaker essentialism after all.

considerations on principle (SP) point to the fact that there are no non-essential truthmakers. Thus, (iv) is also false. I think that we should conclude that Parsons' argument fails.

Why should we maintain that the proper way to understand the AN-argument is to have it involve the truthmaker principle (and truthmaker essentialism) rather than Leibnizian essentialism? I think that they are two different arguments that should be kept separate. But it is clear that the AN-argument was intended by Armstrong as a truthmaker argument and I have given reasons for interpreting it in this way. Which argument one prefers depends on the independent merits one thinks that the truthmaker principle (committed to truthmaker essentialism) or Leibnizian essentialism may have.[8]

## REFERENCES

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