



Article submitted to the similarity system



Book Review

ASAY, J. *Truthmaking*. (Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 76).

RENATO SEMANIUC VALVASSORI

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1986-3968>

University of Campinas (UNICAMP)

Campinas, SP,

Brazil

renatosv21@gmail.com

Article info

CDD: 111.83

Received: 20.03.2024; Revised: 17.04.2024; Accepted: 17.04.2024

<https://doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2024.V47N2.RV>

Keywords

Truthmaking

Metaphysics

Abstract: *Truthmaking* (2023), by Jamin Asay, is part of the “Elements in Metaphysics” series, published by the Cambridge University Press. The book is an excellent brief introduction to truthmaking theory: accessible, clear, and enjoyable, covering the most fundamental problems of the field. One of the highlights of the book is the chapter on truthmakers for truths concerning social

constructions. It successfully shows that truthmaking theory is not only related to abstract metaphysical problems but is also tied to central puzzles in ethics and political philosophy (more specifically philosophies of race and gender).

The introduction starts by explaining that truthmaking is the study of the relationship between the domain of what exists (something that is settled by ontology) and what is true. Asay, then, points out that a popular way to understand the relationship between these two domains is in terms of dependence: “What is true depends on what exists” (p.1). In other words, for a certain sentence¹ to be true the world must be such that it makes the sentence true. That part of reality that makes a specific sentence true is precisely its truthmaker. For pragmatical reasons, Asay restricts his attention only to sentences and does not discuss propositions or beliefs, that are also supposedly truth-apt.

Asay also explains that the goal of his book is to show the utility of truthmaking in advancing ontological debates and revealing “the metaphysical underpinnings” of different fields of inquiry.

Chapter 2 starts by explaining that engaging in truthmaking is engaging in philosophical discussions that aim to establish how the world must be for certain sentences to be true.

Section 2.1 discusses the fundamental problem of establishing what truthmakers are. Is every object a truthmaker for a certain sentence? Some philosophers, like Asay himself, say “yes” to this question: for every object x , x is a truthmaker of at least one sentence (“ x exists”, for example). Others, like Cameron (2008b), Schaffer (2010), and Rettler (2016) say “no”: only fundamental entities are eligible as truthmakers.

Section 2.2 discusses the nature of the truthmaking relation. First, Asay asserts that necessitation is commonly

¹ For pragmatical reasons, Asay restricts his attention only to sentences and does not discuss propositions or beliefs, that are also supposedly truth-apt.

accepted as a necessary condition in truthmaking: an object φ is a truthmaker for a sentence S only if it is necessary that if φ exists, S is true. Asay then discusses another commonly accepted property of the truthmaking relation: it must be explanatory. In other words, for something to be a truthmaker for a sentence S , it must explain why S is true. One of the examples Asay gives to motivate the thesis that necessitation is not sufficient for truthmaking is that any necessary object is necessitated by any existing object – “if Mount Vesuvius exists, then the Pythagorean theorem is true” is a necessary truth, but many philosophers would not accept the Mount Vesuvius as a truthmaker for the Pythagorean theorem precisely because the Mount Vesuvius is irrelevant, explanatorily speaking, for the truth of the Pythagorean theorem.

With necessitation and explanation in hand, Asay presents what is the dominant position in truthmaker theory: For any object φ and sentence S , φ is a truthmaker for S if and only if it's necessary that if φ exists, S is true, and the truth of S is explained by φ .

Asay himself stands against the dominant position and expresses, in his perspective, that truthmaker theory does not need to incorporate hyperintensional notions such as “explanation” to characterize the truthmaking relation. According to him, necessitation is also a sufficient condition for truthmaking. Even if counterintuitive, Asay's rejection of hyperintensionality as a characteristic of the truthmaking relation reflects the way he understands the role of truthmaker theory in philosophy: truthmaker theorists should not bother about explanation, but only focus on assessing the right balance between what is true and what exists.

Asay starts section 2.3 by exploring further properties of truthmakers: (1) the existence of certain truthmakers is not a necessary condition for the truth of the sentences they make true (usually other objects could make these specific sentences true), (2) there is not a unique truthmaker for each true sentence, and (3) an individual object can be the truthmaker of multiple truths.

Secondly, Asay explains Armstrong's ontological argument in truthmaker theory.² Asay describes that, according to Armstrong, "when an object possesses a property nonessentially, neither the object nor the property is a necessitator for the truth that the object possesses that property" (p.10). Thereby, if "John's ball is red" is a true sentence, and John's ball is not essentially red, then the truthmaker of that sentence cannot be the ball nor the redness. For Armstrong, the truthmaker of sentences of this kind is a state of affairs – something with the form *John's ball being red* (a non-merelogically composed object).

Chapter 2 ends with Asay's consideration that a trope theorist could reject the conclusion of Armstrong's argument and assume that tropes are the truthmakers of sentences describing an object instantiating a certain property non-essentially. It would indeed be interesting if Asay had explored in some more depth the trope theory alternative to the Armstrongian ontology of truthmakers.

Chapter 3 is focused on discussing truthmaker maximalism - the thesis according to which all truths have truthmakers – and truthmaker non-maximalism, the thesis according to which there are at least some truthmaker gaps (true sentences with no truthmakers). As Asay explains, the debate between both positions is primarily motivated by supposedly true negative existentials – sentences denying the existence of something.

In section 3.1, Asay presents the two main arguments for truthmaker maximalism. The first argument is for the Unity of Truth and claims that while the maximalist provides a unified account of truth (all truths are true by virtue of their truthmakers), the non-maximalist has to offer different accounts of different kinds of truth. Asay also shows that this argument presupposes a dubious premise: that by offering a theory of truthmakers you are also offering a theory of truth.

The second presented argument is the so-called "Jago's Dilemma". This dilemma demonstrates that at least some

² See Armstrong (1997).

positive truths require truthmakers that are excluders of other entities (objects guaranteeing that something does not exist) - but that is precisely what truthmaker non-maximalists do not want to accept, even if they need to provide truthmakers for all positive truths.

Section 3.2 is focused on negative existentials. First, Asay analyses Armstrong's position according to which the truthmakers of negative existentials are totality states of affairs. These states of affairs are non-mereologically composed of objects under a so-called *exhaust* relation with a property. According to Armstrong, it is the totality state of affairs composed of first-order states of affairs under the *exhaust* relation with the property of *being a first-order state of affairs* that guarantees the truth of all true negative existentials.

Asay, then, presents some arguments against Armstrong's position: (1) it is incompatible with a Humean metaphysics, (2) it requires something with a "negative" nature, and (3) it presupposes a relation whose existence would presumably lead to paradoxes (the *exhausts* relation).

Asay also explores Barker and Jago's position that is favorable to the existence of negative states of affairs - states representing non-instantiation - and that could alternatively be used to ground negative existentials. According to this explanation, what makes "Unicorns do not exist" true is the negative state of affairs non-mereologically composed of the property of *being a unicorn* not instantiating the property of *being instantiated*. Asay also shows that a disadvantage of this position is its commitment to non-instantiated universals (something Armstrong's theory avoids).

The last option Asay surveys as an answer to the problem of truthmakers for negative existentials is Cameron's (2008a) position according to which the world itself is the truthmaker for negative existentials. A drawback of Cameron's position, according to Asay, is that probably the best way to understand what is *the world* for truthmaking purposes is just what Armstrong called "a totality state of affairs" – in other words, Cameron's position would have no advantages compared to Armstrong's.

An alternative that could have been discussed by Asay is Meinongian truthmaking. All positions analyzed by Asay are Quinean in terms of metaontology: they all refuse the possibility of quantifying over nonexistent objects. Meinongians reject this principle and, consequently, can deal more intuitively with negative existentials. For a recent article on Meinongian truthmaking, see Sendlak (2022).

Section 3.3 is devoted to non-maximalism. Asay explains that two of the best candidates for truthmaker gaps, besides negative existentials, are analytic truths, like “all bachelors are unmarried,” and sentences such as “this sentence has no truthmaker”, given that it cannot be false — for a contradiction would follow — and being true, it has no truthmaker (because that is exactly what it asserts).

Chapter 4 focuses on applying truthmaking theory to philosophy of time. More specifically it deals with a truthmaking-based objection to presentism: given that there are certain truths concerning the past, and presentist ontology has no means to ground these truths, presentism must be false.

Section 4.1 presents a first response to the aforementioned objection to presentism, that is, to say that present entities can ground truths about the past. One option is to appeal to tense world properties. Therefore, “Einstein used to be a German citizen” is true today because the present actual world has the property of *being such that Einstein used to be a German citizen*. Asay criticizes this solution since, as he sees it, it has no explanatory power.

Section 4.2 discusses the thesis according to which truths about the past are truthmaker gaps (Nefarious Presentism). This position is, again, criticized for lacking explanatory power and also for undermining the role of truthmakers (if we allow these gaps, why assume there are truthmakers at all?).

A similar position discussed in this section affirms that there are no truthmakers for true assertions about the past because the truthmakers of these assertions are past entities that do not exist anymore. Thereby, philosophers tend to criticize the nefarious presentist for having an “unstable

understanding of ontology”, appealing to past entities even if she says they do not exist anymore.

In section 4.3, Asay accuses the nefarious presentist of not being able to discriminate history and fiction from the ontological point of view (Batman does not exist, and neither Napoleon does), impoverishing the role of ontology as a philosophical enterprise

Chapter 5 explores the problem of finding truthmakers for modal truths. In Section 5.1, Asay describes Lewis’s concretist modal realism. Assuming a plurality of concrete possible worlds, a Lewisian truthmaking theorist can appeal to non-actual objects to serve as truthmakers of assertions about what is merely possible or necessary. Two drawbacks of this theory discussed by Asay are its lack of ontological parsimony and the difficulty it has explaining modal knowledge given that we cannot have causal interaction with other possible worlds. Asay also discusses the objection according to which merely possible worlds are irrelevant to truths about what is actually possible.

Section 5.2 discusses Armstrong’s proposal that the truthmakers of unactualized possibilities are the truthmakers of contingent truths (given that I am contingently not a chemist, the truthmaker of “I am not a chemist” is also the truthmaker of “It is possible that I am a chemist”). Asay then, analyses two objections to this proposal: (i) its assumption of the false generalization according to which for any object *x*, if *x* is contingent then *x* is a truthmaker for “*x* is contingent”, and (ii) its supposed lack of relevance and even triviality.

Section 5.3 deals with truthmakers for counterfactuals. According to Asay, there is no uniform account of truthmakers for all counterfactuals, given that counterfactuals can vary in nature and require different truthmakers depending on their modal status or subject matter.

Chapter 6 is focused on truthmakers for truths concerning social constructions. Section 6.1 explains how truths about social constructions are presumably grounded by social ontology. Facts about the meaning of words, for example, are grounded in certain practices and conventions,

and it is the task of the truthmaking theorist to investigate the ontology of such practices and determine which ones count as truthmakers for the aforementioned facts.

Section 6.2 explores the connections between truthmaking theory and the metaphysics of race. For example, If “Martin Luther King is black” is a true sentence, what in the world makes it true? If it is false, what in the world is lacking that, if it were there, the sentence would be true?

The section also discusses two rival positions in the metaphysics of race debate: realism and anti-realism about race. According to the realists, races are not real because the very idea of race presupposes a false biologically essentialist thesis. Anti-realists, on the other hand, assume either (i) that biological essentialism is not false, or (ii) that the truthmakers for race assertions do not depend on biological essentialism, but are indeed (according to philosophers such as Haslanger and Jeffers) social constructions.

Asay discusses Haslanger's (2000) proposal that to be of a certain race is to be subject to a certain form of social privilege or oppression. A controversial consequence of this view is that the ideal of racial equality is contradictory. Jeffers (2013), in turn, defends a cultural constructivism that allows races to exist in non-racist societies.

Section 6.3 discusses truthmakers for sentences concerning gender. Asay starts this section by noting that metaphysics of race and gender presumably share structural similarities given the fact that, according to certain philosophers, gender is also the result of social patterns of oppression and privilege.

To avoid discussing again the problems analyzed in section 6.2, Asay explains Ásta's conferralist approach to social constructions (an alternative to the positions previously presented). According to Ásta, to be of a certain gender is a matter of being perceived as possessing the contextually-relevant properties (and these can be related to self-identification, but also to reproductive or social role and even bodily presentation). Truths concerning the gender of a person are then, from Ásta point of view, grounded on conferrals of these properties.

Discussion

All in all, Asay's book does not intend to be comprehensive but offers a really good introduction for those interested in truthmaking theory. Not only informative, the book is also clear and well-written without overloading the reader with technical definitions (a common mistake of many introductory analytic philosophy books). Although Asay expresses his views regarding many of the analyzed themes, he always reconstructs arguments and theses from his rival positions honestly and charitably.

Some interesting applications of truthmaking theory that could have been discussed in this volume are truthmakers for mathematical, metaethical, and aesthetic assertions. Nevertheless, the author suggests some good references by the end of his book so that the readers can deepen their knowledge of these subjects.

Dealing with such a variety of topics related to truthmaking theory (from philosophy of time to modality and gender), the book shows how pervasive discussions on truthmaking can be in contemporary analytic philosophy. All of those working with philosophy in 2024 must be, one way or another, acquainted with truthmaking discussions, and *Truthmaking* (2023), by Jamin Asay, is an excellent starting point.

Author contributions: All authors contributed to the discussion and writing of the manuscript. All authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript and read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding: Funded by FAPESP; 2022/00112-2.

Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Armstrong, David M. 1997. *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511583308>.
- Ásta. 2018. *Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190256791.001.0001>.
- Cameron, Ross Paul. 2008a. How to be a truthmaker maximalist. *Noûs* 42: 410–421. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2008.00687.x>.
- Cameron, Ross Paul. 2008b. Truthmakers and ontological commitment: or how to deal with complex objects and mathematical ontology without getting into trouble. *Philosophical Studies* 140: 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-008-9223-3>.
- Haslanger, Sally. 2000. Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? *Noûs* 34: 31–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00201>.
- Jeffers, Chike. 2013. The cultural theory of race: yet another look at Du Bois’s “The Conservation of Races.” *Ethics* 123: 403–426. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669566>.
- Rettler, Bradley. 2016. The General Truthmaker View of ontological commitment. *Philosophical Studies* 173: 1405–1425. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0526-x>.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2008. Truthmaker commitments. *Philosophical Studies* 141: 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-008-9260-y>.
- Sendlak, Maciej. 2022. Truthmaking for Meinongians. *Synthese* 200 (1):1–20.