Trenton Merricks' *Truth and Ontology*

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One of the many remarkable things about Trenton Merricks' *Truth and Ontology* is the incredibly wide range of issues discussed therein. I not only enjoyed (and profited from) thinking through the plentitude of always interesting and frequently convincing arguments made throughout the book, but I also discovered (in Fall 2009) that it's an excellent book to assign for a high-powered class on contemporary metaphysics.

My primary goal is to formulate and motivate what I hope to be some interesting questions to which Merricks will no doubt provide interesting answers in response. (Along the way, some arguments will be made.) To be honest, reading Merricks' book was so stimulating that I barely know which questions I most want to ask. So I'll simply plunge in.

1. When is it Appropriate to Modify Rather than Abandon Truthmaker?

Consider the oft-championed slogan 'truths are made true by things in world'. For many, this slogan expresses an important intuition that demands proper expression as a carefully formulated principle that is fit to serve as a premise in a philosophical argument. One of Merricks' goals in *Truth and Ontology* is to argue that no proper formulation of the slogan is acceptable: either a given formulation fails to capture the intuition hovering behind the slogan, or the given formulation is false, or both. If this is right, the slogan itself should be abandoned: the intuition behind it might be powerful, but it's nonetheless misguided.

To what extent can a principle deviate from the paradigmatic formulation of the truthmaking slogan before it's not properly considered to be expressed by the slogan? And by what measure do we determine the degree of deviation?

Let's say that an object necessitates a proposition just in case, necessarily, if that objects exists, the proposition is true. The paradigmatic formulation of the truthmaker principle is the following:

> (TM): □ (P) If P is true, then ∃x x necessitates P.[1]

But this paradigmatic formulation is problematic for those who both (i) want to endorse the slogan and (ii) believe views that seem hard to square with the slogan, such as presentism, the view that everything that exists presently exists.

Let's consider a presentist in this situation who eventually achieves reflective equilibrium in the following way. She first introduces new ideology, such as primitive tense operators: '**W**' ('it was the case that'), '**N**' ('it's now the case that'), and '**F**' ('it will be the case that'). She then adopts the following as her articulation of the slogan:

> (TM-P): □ (P) If P is true, then P is entailed by some instance (or conjunction of instances) of at least one of the following: '**W**(∃x x = y)', '**N**(∃x x = y)' or '**F**(∃x x = y)'.

Many philosophers think that it is inappropriate to achieve reflective equilibrium in this way: it would be better to abandon the slogan than embrace TM-P. But why? It would be useful to have an answer to this question because there are other views besides presentism that seem to motivate dropping TM in favor of something else. Merricks mentions some of them, but I want to broaden our horizons by discussing views that he doesn't discuss.

The first view is *anti-singularism*, the view that there are truths that are not made true by any single entity but are rather made true by many entities collectively. Consider the truth that there are more than 2 things. Why think that there is any single thing that makes this truth true? If there are some students surrounding a building, there isn't any single thing that is surrounding the building.[2] The students collectively

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[1] Merricks (pp. 26–34) argues that this paradigmatic formulation should be augmented by also requiring that the propositions be 'about' its truthmaker. I will discuss this condition in section 2. Merricks (pp. 11–14) also argues that to say that an object necessitates a truth cannot be merely to say that the proposition that the object exists entails the truth. Rather, the claim that an object necessitates a truth should be understood as a claim about 'de re necessiation', a mere consequence of which is the entailment between an existential proposition and the proposition de re necessitated by the object. I'll have more to say about Merricks claim that the truthmaker theorist is committed to de re necessitation in section 3.

[2] Friends of unrestricted composition or weird views about the location of sets might disagree with me here. I set such views aside.

surround the building rather than some single entity, 'a collection' or 'sum' of students, doing the surrounding all by itself. Similarly, although no single thing is needed to make it true that there more than 2 things, there are some things that collectively do make it true that there are more than 2 things. Given anti-singularism, the obvious way to modify TM is as follows. First, introduce new ideology, specifically plural quantifiers, plural variables, and plural predicates that can join with plural variables (bindable by plural quantifers) to make open-sentences.[3] Second, drop TM in favor of:

> (TM-NS): □ (P) If P is true, then either ∃x x necessitates P or there are xx such that xx necessitate P.[4]

Is there something improper about the anti-singularist endorsing TM-NS rather than TM?

The second view is *ontological pluralism*.[5] Suppose that there are different modes of being and that nothing enjoys more than one mode of being. Assume that there are two such modes: *existence*, which is enjoyed by concrete objects, and *subsistence* enjoyed by abstracta. On a view like this, 'being is said in many ways': there might not be any metaphysically significant notion of *being* that can be applied to both concrete and abstract objects. One who holds this view is likely to modify TM in the following ways. First, introduce new ideology: special 'restricted' quantifiers that range either only over concrete objects or abstract objects but never both, and corresponding variables bindable by them. Let 'e∃' be the quantifier ranging over all and only concretia and 's∃' be the quantifier ranging over all and only abstracta. Second, abandon TM in favor of:

> (TM-OP): □ (P) If P is true, then P is entailed by some instance (or conjunction of instances) of at least one of the following: 'e∃x x = y' or 's∃x x = y'.

The third view is *things and stuffism*. According to things and stuffism, the world isn't merely a world of things, but includes stuff as well. In order to have a complete metaphysical picture, we need not only quantifiers ranging over things that can be counted but mass quantification as well.[6]

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[3] For a thorough discussion of the logic of plural quantification, see McKay (2007).

[4] The 'xx' is a plural variable bound by the plural quantifier expressed by the ordinary English phrase 'there are'. Some xx necessitate a proposition just in case, necessarily if these xx exist, then the proposition is true.

[5] I defend ontological pluralism in McDaniel (2009).

[6] See Markosian (2004) for a defense of things and stuffism.

Talk about stuff cannot be translated into talk about things, and truths about stuff needn't be made true by truths about things. One could hold things and stuffism while embracing something like truthmaker. A things and stuffist modifies TM as follows. First, new ideology is introduced: mass terms, predicates appendable to mass terms, and mass quantification. (Let 'm∃' be a mass quantifier.) Next, abandon TM in favor of:

> (TM-S): □ (P) If P is true, then P is entailed either by some instance of at least on of the following: '∃x x = y' or 'm∃ x x = y'.

The fourth view is *metaphysical indeterminism*.[7] Suppose that the correct account of vagueness is a metaphysical account rather than an epistemic or a semantic account. But suppose further that there are no 'existents that are vague'. Rather, truths about vagueness are made true by it being vague what exists. One who holds this view modifies TM as follows. First, new ideology is introduced: a sentential operator '**I**' ('It's indeterminate that'). Next, abandon TM in favor of:

> (TM-MI): □ (P) If P is true, then P is entailed either by some instance of at least on of the following: '∃x x = y' or '**I**(∃x x = y)'.

Presentism, anti-singularism, ontological pluralism, stuffism and metaphysical indeterminism can all be motivated. Each of these views seems to demand that the truth-maker slogan either not be formulated as TM or be abandoned altogether. For each of these views, there is an apparent alternative formulation of the slogan in terms of new ideology. Which of these alternative formulations are appropriate to adopt and why?

For what it's worth, my (somewhat shaky) intuitions are that TM-NS is as adequate a formulation of the slogan as TM, as is TM-OP and TM-S. These three formulations introduce new ideology, but what are introduced are new forms of quantification. In this respect, they differ from TM-P and TM-I, both of which introduce new sentential operators. Are TM-P and TM-I on a par for that reason? This isn't clear to me. For note that TM-I is analogous to the view that truths are made true by what there is or what there isn't, i.e.:

> (TM-N): □ (P) If P is true, then P is entailed by some instance (or conjunction of instances) of at least one of the following: '∃x x = y' or '~(∃x x = y)'.

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7   See Barnes and Williams (forthcoming) for a defense of metaphysical indeterminism.

And for what it's worth, unlike Merricks, I could settle with TM-N as a proper expression of the truthmaking slogan.[8] (If a truth can be made true by some thing or some things, why not also by no things?)

Suppose that one allows that a truth can be 'made true' by nothing. Then I would think the question of whether '**I**' is more like '**W**' or more like '∼' would be pressing. If a truth can be made true by what exists or by what exist or by what fails to exist, why not also allow that some truths can be made true by what indeterminately exists, if there is ontological indeterminacy?

Is each modification of TM defective but for a different reason? Is the presentist modification that modification which most departs from the intuition motivating the truthmaking slogan? Are some deviations from orthodoxy more forgivable than others?

Merricks (p. 41) denies that the truthmaking intuition, which hovers behind the slogan and demands proper formulation, is disjunctive. Each of the modified versions of TM introduces clauses by way of disjunction, and perhaps this is the problem: a disjunctive formulation departs too much from a non-disjunctive intuition to count as a proper expression of it.

When I look within and inspect the intuition that motivates the slogan, I don't find something expressly disjunctive in form. But I also don't find something that demands a non-disjunctive expression. Rather, what I find is an inchoate impression that truths are true because of something to do with reality, which is an intuition that appears to permit many different concrete articulations.

2. What is Aboutness?

Actually, since each of these formulations is a modification of TM, Merricks will think that there is at least one respect in which each of them is defective, since TM, by Merricks' lights, is too *weak* of a principle. All necessary truths are necessitated by any object whatsoever, and so every necessary truth automatically has a truthmaker given TM. I share Merricks' unease over this consequence. (It's bad enough that I am a truthmaker for $2 + 6 = 8$, but it's unacceptable that Adolf Hitler is the truthmaker for the moral law.) The friend of the truthmaker slogan should amplify TM by adding an additional constraint on being a truthmaker.

Merricks' proposed constraint is that the proposition in question must be *about* its truthmaker. On a number of occasions, Merricks argues that some putative entity cannot serve as a truthmaker for a

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[8]   See pp. 40–41 for Merricks' arguments against settling for TM-N.

proposition even though the entity in question would necessitate the truth of the proposition because the proposition isn't (according to Merricks) about the entity. And here I must confess that I don't think that I understand what Merricks' means by 'about'. My lack of understanding made it hard for me to evaluate some of these arguments.

I'll try to make clear why I had a hard time glomming onto the notion of aboutness Merricks employs, and hopefully Merricks will be able to help me out. (My lack of understanding is a genuine lack of understanding, and not a disguised complaint that the idea is nonsense.)

It's not as if I think no sense can be made of the expression 'proposition P is about object x'. I can think of two reasonable ways to understand the expression. But neither of them seems to fit the text well, and so I hesitate to attribute them to Merricks. In fact, Merricks himself refrains from offering an analysis of 'about', but hopes that the examples he provides elucidate the notion sufficiently to proceed. At least in my case, they don't.

Way one: a proposition is *about* some entity just in case that entity is a constituent of that proposition. This sense of 'about' is familiar from work on so-called singular propositions. Propositions are structured entities consisting of objects and properties. Some expressions are directly referential. A sentence containing a directly referential expression expresses a proposition that contains the referent of that expression as a constituent. An example: the sentence 'Ben is musical' contains a directly referential expression, 'Ben', and the proposition expressed contains Ben as a constituent, along with the property of being musical.

On this notion of aboutness, the proposition that $2 + 6 = 8$ isn't about me since I am not a constituent of it. So I will fail to be a truthmaker for this proposition, which is a desired result. Moreover, on this conception of aboutness, the proposition that water is wet is about H20, as Merricks suggests.[9] However, on this notion of aboutness, I am not a truthmaker for the proposition that some person exists, even if I am essentially a person. The proposition that some person exists is a general proposition, one that contains no substances, such as me, as parts. And not only is it intuitive that I am a truthmaker for this proposition, Merricks affirms that existentially generalized propositions are made true by instances of them, and so must be about them.[10] So 'some person exists' is about me on Merricks' sense of 'about'.

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[9]   P.132.
[10]   P. 33.

Understanding aboutness in this familiar way leads to further problems. States of affairs, themselves complex entities that exist whenever some object or objects enjoy some property or relation, are often postulated to serve as truthmakers for predicative truths. They cannot serve this role if aboutness is understood in way one. The proposition that the cat is on the mat contains the same constituents as the state of affairs that the cat is on the mat, but it doesn't contain this state of affairs itself as a constituent. (Rather, it's isomorphic to this state of affairs.) So the fact that the cat is on the mat isn't a truthmaker for the proposition that the cat is on the mat. This is the wrong result.

But the result does suggest an alternative conception of aboutness. Way two: a proposition is about some entity just in case it overlaps that entity, that is, the proposition and the entity contain a common constituent. That some entity overlaps a proposition isn't sufficient for it to be a truthmaker of that proposition, but perhaps overlapping and necessitating a proposition are jointly sufficient. On this conception of aboutness, the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ isn't about me, which is again a desired result. And the proposition that the cat is on the mat is about the fact that the cat is on the mat, which is also a desired result. But the proposition that there is at least one person is still not about me, since that proposition and I don't overlap. Moreover, the fact that God wills that Jack loves Jill appears to overlap the proposition that Jack loves Jill (though this is more contentious) because both contain Jack and Jill as constituents. Hence, on this conception of aboutness, the proposition that Jack loves Jill is about a fact concerning what God wills, and moreover a fact that necessitates the proposition. And so the fact about what God wills is a truthmaker for the proposition in question. For what it's worth, my intuitions aren't bothered by this specific result, but Merricks indicates that his are.[11]

Merricks has some sympathy with the worry that there is no notion of aboutness suitable to do the work the truthmaker theorist requires of it.[12] It would be unfortunate were the truthmaker theorist forced to take the notion as undefined. And even if the notion is primitive, we are still owed some explanation of how the primitive works. Here are some questions that I invite the fan of the aboutness relation (and Merricks) to consider.

First, how does aboutness interact with other primitive notions, such as parthood or constituency? Suppose P is about the fact that Fa. Is P thereby about a as well? Second, if P is about x, does x necessitate P? That is, does the aboutness requirement render the necessitation

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[11]   P. 29

[12]   P. 34.

requirement superfluous? On the two accounts of aboutness given above, the answer is 'no'. Remember that Merricks argues that the friend of truthmakers is committed to a primitive relation of *de re* necessitation over and above a relation of *de dicto* necessitation between propositions.[13] This argument would be reinforced were it shown that (i) P's being about x entails that x *de re* necessitates P and (ii) *aboutness* is a primitive relation. A good hypothesis for the truth-maker theorist would be that the primitive necessitation relation is identical with the aboutness relation.

3. Primitive De Re Necessitation?

Entailment is a relation between propositions: P entails Q just in case, necessarily, if P is true, then Q is true. Suppose x is a truthmaker for P. Then the proposition that x exists entails P. But, as mentioned ear-lier, Merricks thinks that there is more to truthmaking than a relation of entailment between an existential proposition and some other propo-sition. He claims that the truthmaker theorist is committed to a primi-tive relation of 'de re necessitation', and offers three arguments for this claim. I'll focus on the first argument, since it's the one that I found most compelling. (Additionally, Merricks' third argument to some extent piggybacks on his first.)

Merricks argues that it's not trivial that Aristotle is a truthmaker for the proposition that Aristotle exists. But if all there is to truthmaking is a relation of entailment between propositions, then it would be trivial that Aristotle is a truthmaker for the proposition that Aristotle exists. The idea is that, on the view Merricks is arguing against, something x is a truthmaker for a proposition P just in case the proposition that x exists entails P. The proposition that Aristotle exists entails the propo-sition that Aristotle exists. And so, on the view Merricks argues against, it's trivial that Aristotle is a truthmaker for the proposition that Aristotle exists. So, according to Merricks, there must be more to truthmaking than mere entailment. This extra ingredient is a relation of primitive de re necessitation.

Perhaps this argument is sound, although I would be willing to grant that it's trivial that positive existentials have truthmakers. However, note that one could concede that this argument is sound but deny that the extra ingredient to truthmaking is an irreducible relation of de re necessitation. Suppose we agree with Merricks that truths must be about their truthmakers, but we understand the aboutness relation in one of the two ways described in the previous section. Is it a trivial

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[13]   Pp. 11–14. More on this in section 3.

claim that Aristotle is a constituent of the proposition that Aristotle exists? It seems to me that this is a contested, substantive claim about the nature of propositions. But then it's not a trivial claim that Aristotle is the truthmaker for the proposition that Aristotle exists. In other words, on the view that I am considering, x is a truthmaker for P just in case (i) the proposition that x exists entails P and (ii) P overlaps (or contains) x. Possibly, Merricks' arguments that truths must be about their truthmakers undercuts Merricks' first argument that truths must be necessitated by their truthmakers.

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