The dependence of truth on being in Asay's *A Theory of Truthmaking*

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Abstract

In this commentary piece, I argue that Asay's accounts of truth and truthmaking in *A Theory of Truthmaking* give no role to the idea that truth depends on being. In fact, some of the positions taken in the book are in tension with this idea that has been central to truthmaker theory. I consider how three aspects of Asay's account relate to the idea that truth depends on being.

Keywords Jamin Asay · Truthmaking · Truth · Dependence · Explanation · Deflationism

1 Introduction

Jamin Asay's book, *A Theory of Truthmaking* (2020), is an ambitious and wide-ranging defense of truthmaker theory as a tool for ontological accounting. Asay should be congratulated for writing a fascinating and well-argued book that helps push truthmaker theory beyond the debates that occupied earlier truthmaker theorists.

Right at the outset of the book, he writes,

Truth depends on reality. When something is true, its truth depends upon the world. Its truth is not some brute, inexplicable feature of reality. Truths are true in virtue of reality, and not vice versa. These ideas are the source of the philosophical enterprise known as *truthmaker theory*. (2020: 1)

In this commentary piece, I argue that Asay's accounts of truth and truthmaking in his book give no role to the idea that truth depends on being. In fact, some of the positions taken in the book are in tension with this idea that has been central to truthmaker theory. I consider how three aspects of Asay's account relate to the idea that truth depends on being: (1) his distinction between explanation-first and ontology-first approaches to truthmaking, (2) his

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view that necessitation is necessary and sufficient for truthmaking, and (3) his argument for the compatibility of truthmaking with a deflationary theory of truth.

2 Ontology-first vs. explanation-first approaches to truthmaking

The prominent feature of Asay's theory is a contrast between ontology-first approaches and explanation-first approaches to truthmaker theory. The former approach "understands truthmaker theory to be in the business of answering the fundamental ontological question 'what is there?'". On the ontology-first approach, truthmaking becomes "ontological accounting", which aims "to properly align our beliefs and our ontological inventories" (2020: 129). The latter "focuses on truthmaking being an explanatory enterprise, and concentrated around the goal of answering the question 'Why are truths true?'" (2020: 32). Asay notes that the two approaches need not be in tension with each other but argues that emphasizing one over the other leads to very different conceptions of the truthmaking enterprise. Asay opts for the ontology-first approach. He thinks that the point of truthmaker theory is to coordinate our ontological commitments with our truth commitments.

I want to push on the distinction between ontology-first and explanation-first approaches. Basically, I don't think you can have truthmaking without also having explanation. Dependence is intimately related to explanation. Recent literature on dependence has highlighted that when X depends upon Y , Y plays some role in explaining X . On some views, ontological dependence just is a kind of explanation. On others, explanation tracks or is undergirded by dependence relations.¹ On either approach, dependence and explanation go hand in hand; explanation is the flip side of dependence. Applied to truthmaking: if x makes true p , then x plays a role in explaining why p is true. Explanation is built into the motivation for the truthmaking project that Asay pinpoints. It seems to me that we should endorse a dependence-first approach to truthmaking. Here, we begin with the fact that truth depends and look to the ontology to determine upon what it depends. Explanation follows dependence. So we get the right ontological accounting and we get the explanation for truth.

The dependence-first view, I think, gets us everything we want, whereas Asay's ontology-first approach may not. By making the dependence of truth on being the flagship notion of truthmaking, we get the right ontological accounting, and we get an explanation for truth. To identify an entity that (fully, sufficiently) explains why p is true is thereby to identify an entity that necessitates the truth of p , which is what Asay's notion of ontological accounting amounts to (more on this below). An ontology-first approach does not itself guarantee this. An ontology-first approach seems to be neutral or uninterested in truth's dependence on being. If our aim is only to properly pair truth to ontology, then that says nothing about the priority between truth and being.

¹ See the debate between those who think grounding is an explanatory relation (e.g., Dasgupta, 2014; Fine, 2001) and those who think it is a relation that undergirds metaphysical explanation (e.g., Audi, 2012; Schaffer, 2012).

Asay will respond that he does think truth depends on being, but that he wants to highlight the foundational role that truthmaking, qua ontological accounting, plays in ontological investigation. But my pitch for the dependence-first approach is that we can do all this and more by highlighting truthmaking as a form of dependence between truth and being. It captures all the important strengths of the tool of truthmaking and doesn't require us to marginalize any of its features.

Asay thinks that the explanation-first approach faces a dilemma (2020: 36ff.): either truthmaker explanations compete (poorly) with other kinds of explanations or if they do carve out a distinctive form of explanation, they bring with them baggage of substantive theories of truth. I'm sympathetic with what Asay says about the first horn, but I'm unconvinced about the second horn. Yes, the effort to explain why a proposition is true could collapse into or be confused with the task of defining truth. We do need to distinguish the question "what *makes* a proposition true?" from the question "what does the truth of a proposition *consist* in?". The former is asking about the ontological grounds for the truth, whereas the latter is asking about the constitution of the property *being true*. And there is an important difference between the constitution of a property and the entities responsible for the instantiation of the property with that constitution. For the substantivist about truth, these questions are intimately related: knowing what truth consists in (correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic utility) helps identify truthmakers, the entities responsible for the truth of a proposition. But no substantivist about truth will say that the truthmaker for *p* is what *p*'s truth (much less truth in general) consists in; e.g., the truth of <Penguins exist> does not consist in the existence of penguins, rather in a certain relation the proposition bears to certain things. Substantive theories of truth are clearly distinct from theories of truthmaking even though the former endeavor lends itself to the latter.² However, the opposite direction does not hold. Truthmaker theorists—including explanation-first approaches—are *not* required by their theory to give an account of the constitution of truth. (Though I'm not suggesting that having a theory of truth would not help in building a theory of truthmaking.) Truthmaker theorists are free to explore what a truth depends upon, what explains its truth, and its ontological grounding without endorsing any particular theory of truth. So yes, there is baggage that one might be tempted to pick up, but none of that is forced upon us by taking a dependence/explanation approach to truth to be the foremost job of truthmaker theory.

² Sometimes Asay characterizes substantive theories of truth as committing to the gloss that "to *be* true is to be *made* true" (2020: 41). Jago (2018) explicitly embraces such an analysis. But no defenders of traditional correspondence, coherence, or pragmatist theories of truth do so. For them, truth is defined by a relation to certain kinds of entities. What these theories *go on to* identify as truthmakers are a relatum of this relation, but these theories make no such claim as that truth consists in being made true by certain entities. Rather truth consists in correspondence, coherence, and utility with something.

3 Truthmaker necessitarianism

My second worry concerns Asay's "simple view" that necessitation is necessary and sufficient for truthmaking, i.e., that truthmaking is nothing but the necessitation of a truth by an object (2020: 50ff.). Asay offers a compelling argument for the necessity of necessitation. However, it is his arguments for the sufficiency of necessitation that I am suspicious of. Being a purely modal notion, necessitation is not sensitive to dependencies. The standard counterexamples involving a random contingent object and a necessary truth show that we can have necessitation without dependence; e.g., my left shoe necessitates the truth of $\langle \text{red is a color} \rangle$. There are also cases of symmetrical necessitation; e.g., Socrates necessitates the truth of $\langle \text{Socrates exists} \rangle$ and vice versa. So, necessitation does not track dependence. There is no "making" on the simple view, only modal covariation. Asay's simple view doesn't speak to whether truth depends on being. In fact, it appears consistent with the simple view that being depends on truth or that there is no dependence between truth and being in either direction.³

This point can be brought out by considering what Asay says about trivial truthmaking. Anything at all, he says, makes true necessary truths: "all objects are truthmakers for all necessary truths...as long as *something* is in one's ontology, then the accounting is sound" (2020: 69). But if truth's dependence on being is what is behind truthmaking talk, then this view is wrong. Necessary truths do not depend on all objects and so are not made true by all objects, even though all objects necessitate necessary truths. It is also odd that Asay thinks that to ontologically account for necessary truths something must exist. If a necessary truth is true come what may and is not sensitive to what exists, why think that any ontological accounting is needed for this necessary truth? For instance, he thinks mathematical truths are made true by any and every entity, but trivially so. He admits that such truths do not depend on contingent entities; they are not ontologically relevant (2020: 233). Yet, he thinks that they are made true by everything and that ontological accounting requires trivial truthmakers (2020: 69). I am unclear about how this all works. Taking necessitation to be truthmaking entails that some truths have truthmakers that they don't depend upon.⁴

³ This is not to say that Asay is neutral on this question. He does commit to the priority of being to truth. However, that being depends on truth is compatible with Asay's focus on the proper coordination of truth and ontology. A theory of truthmaking is incompatible, I think, with the view that being depends on truth. That is not truth-making, but being-making. This is not to say that truthmaking is incompatible with idealism. The idealist should not be interpreted as holding that being depends on truth, but that the being upon which truth depends is mind dependent.

⁴ I do not understand what numbers (or trivial truthmakers) are on Asay's view. Mathematical truths are trivially made true by everything contingent and necessary. They also have trivial truthmakers, objects that only make true necessary truths. Asay thinks mathematical truths are not truthmaker gaps: they require truthmakers, trivial ones. Numbers are not substantive entities on his view like platonic entities that increase one's ontological commitments (2020: 233). Numbers do not exist ontologically independently (2020: 236). Asay describes numbers completely negatively, so what exactly are they?

4 Truthmaking and deflationism

Asay argues that truthmaker theory supplants any substantive theory of truth, especially the correspondence theory (2020: chapter 6). Deflationism about *being true* is perfectly compatible with truthmaker theory, he thinks. Indeed, he goes further to suggest that there is reason to adopt both truthmaking and deflationism as they address different, but complementary questions, viz., ontology and truth.

Deflationism (e.g., Horwich, 1998) says that everything there is to say about truth can be accounted for by instances of the schema “ $\langle p \rangle$ is true iff p ” (plus other notions that do not involve truth). Strictly speaking, then, truthmaking is no part of deflationism. The deflationist, qua deflationist, needs not make any commitments about the dependence of truth on being. If truth depends on being, then that fact is not a fact about the nature of truth. Because of his ontology-first approach, Asay can say that truthmaking is not about the nature of truth or its dependence on being. It is only concerned with the ontological grounds for truths. Proper coordination of truth and ontology is, argues Asay, compatible with deflationism about *being true*.

That may be the case. But Asay is walking a thin line. On the one hand, he wants to bring along those attracted to truthmaker theory’s central motivation: “When something is true, its truth depends upon the world. Its truth is not some brute, inexplicable feature of reality. Truths are true in virtue of reality, and not vice versa” (2020: 1). Such philosophers think that that is an important insight into truth itself; it is in truth’s nature to depend.⁵ On the other, he wants to court the deflationist who eschews talk of a deep nature of truth. The deflationist doesn’t think truth has a substantive nature and denies that it is part of truth’s nature to depend. Asay’s strategy of making truthmaking about ontological accounting may pay off in attracting the deflationist, but potentially at the expense of alienating theorists who make dependence, explanation, and truth the centerpiece of truthmaking.

Moreover, I am concerned that Asay’s argument for the compatibility of deflationism and truthmaking puts pressure on his claim that the explanation of truth may still be part of truthmaking. Early in the book, he cautions that we do not pit explanation-first and ontology-first approaches against each other (2020: 33), for the distinction is a matter of emphasis on what is central to truthmaking. But given his argument in chapter 2 that explanation-first approaches to truthmaking lend themselves to giving a substantive theory of truth, the deflationist will want nothing to do with such an approach. Moreover, the idea that truths need explanation in terms of ontology does not *prima facie* sit well with deflationism. It is not part of the deflationist’s theory of truth that truths need explanation in terms of being. The schema “ $\langle p \rangle$ is true iff p ” entails nothing about the explanatory priority between truth and being. If the deflationist affirms the explanation of truth by being, then they will have to account for this in a way that does not appeal to facts about the property *being true* alone.⁶ All this is to say that Asay needs further argument to make it

⁵ See Tallant and Ingram (2017).

⁶ Horwich (2008: 265) wants to account for the dependence of truth on being in terms of the explanatory priority of the initial conditions of the world and the laws of nature.

plausible that deflationism is consistent with an explanatory approach to truthmaking. My worry is that the extent to which Asay's account of truthmaking welcomes deflationism, it is ill at ease with the idea that truth is explained by or dependent upon what there is.

5 Conclusion

To be sure, Asay commits right from the start to truth's dependence on being (2020: 1). As we read on in the book, though, we see that this idea is not central to Asay's theory of truthmaking. It is not entailed or explained by his accounts of truth (he's a deflationist), truthmaking (which is merely metaphysical necessitation), or truthmakers (to be is to be a truthmaker). What is essential, for Asay, is the proper coordination between truth and ontology. Indeed, his theory of truthmaking can be framed without even mentioning truth or dependence:

On the view I have defended, truthmaking is a matter of metaphysical necessitation...The basis for my claim that penguins make "There are penguins" true is that it's metaphysically necessary for the sentence, given what it is means, to be true if penguins exist. *That is to say, it's metaphysically necessary that if a penguin exists, then there are penguins* (because "There are penguins" means that there are penguins). (2020: 132, emphasis added, cf. 129)

For truthmaker theorists who focus on the explanation and dependence of truth, the conviction is rooted in the nature of truth, the nature of the truthmaking relation, and/or the nature of truthmakers. These are exactly the places we'd expect to find an account of truth's dependence, unless we let that be a brute, inexplicable fact about truths. Asay's project of ontological accounting is a coherent and important project. It is just not truth-making.

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