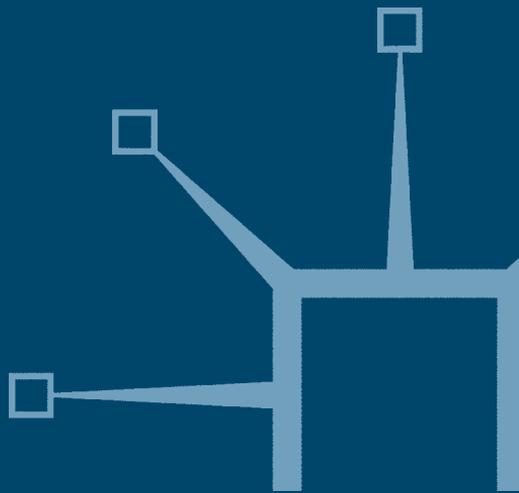


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An Identity Theory of Truth

Julian Dodd



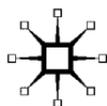
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To Susan and Eleanor

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Preface

Parts of this book are based upon some of my previously published articles. In each case, they have been rewritten, sometimes extensively. Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, §§3.4–3.6 contain work first published as my 1999a, which appeared in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 77. This material is reproduced by kind permission of Oxford University Press. Chapter 2, §2 and Chapter 3, §5 were originally published as my 1997a in the *Journal of Philosophical Research* 22, and those sections relied upon here are reproduced by kind permission of the Philosophy Documentation Center. Chapter 5, §4 is based upon work first published as my 1996b in *Bradley Studies* 2, and that article is reprinted here by kind permission of the editors. Chapter 6, §6 is a later version of my 1997b, which first appeared in *Analysis* 57, while my 1999c, published in *Analysis* 60, is an earlier draft of §8 of the same chapter. Finally, Chapter 7, §4 is a revised and expanded version of my 1999b, which was first published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99.

I would like to thank all of the editors and referees for their valuable comments and criticisms.

Much of this book's first draft was written during a semester's sabbatical in the academic year 1997–98. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues in the Philosophy Group at Bolton Institute for their kindness and support. Special thanks must go to Nick Unwin: rottweiler-in-chief of the Philosophy Research Seminar.

Now that I have finished the book, I feel that I must record my gratitude to two people, both of whom were teachers of mine who have become friends. The first is Michael Morris. My arrival as an undergraduate at the University of Sussex in October 1985 coincided with Michael's arrival as a lecturer. I could not have been luckier. Michael's warmth, enthusiasm and generosity made my time at Sussex intensely challenging and exciting. His teaching, not only in timetabled classes but in his famous 'extra seminars', swept me towards the decision to try to become an academic philosopher. Although he will disagree with much of what I have to say, I hope that some of his style has rubbed off on me.

Jennifer Hornsby's influence upon this book has been twofold. First of all, Jennifer is largely responsible for encouraging me to think along the lines that have led me to where I am now. The book is a descendant of

the Oxford DPhil thesis which she supervised so patiently and thoroughly, and conversations then and since have made this a much better book than it would have been without her. Second, as I brought the book to completion, it increasingly dawned on me that Jennifer's *Actions* (1980) is the Gold Standard when it comes to the concise philosophical monograph. I have tried, however unsuccessfully, to emulate her book's crispness and elegance.

J.D.

Preface to the 2008 Paperback Edition

Inevitably, this book is a snapshot in the development of my thinking about the concept of truth, rather than its summation. On re-reading it, I have discovered that there is plenty that I still agree with, quite a lot that I wish I had put differently, and one part that I now think is plain wrong.

The offending part I have in mind is Chapter 7, §4, in which I criticise the kind of identity conception of truth favoured by John McDowell and Jennifer Hornsby. Presuming that McDowell and Hornsby treat facts as configurations of objects and properties, I go on to argue that their Fregeanism about propositions renders their identity conception incoherent: *per impossibile*, McDowell and Hornsby (it seemed to me in 2000) treat facts as *both* combinations of entities from the realm of reference *and* as configurations of Fregean senses (p. 179). However, the said presumption that McDowell and Hornsby adopt a Tractarian account of facts is, I now recognise, a mistake. While they do, indeed, hold that facts are (true) Fregean Thoughts, their appeal to the Tractarian slogan, 'The world is the totality of facts, not of things', far from committing them to Wittgenstein's own account of facts' ontological nature, merely 'fix[es] a way in which the concept of the world is to be used' (McDowell 1999, p. 94). Whilst agreeing with Wittgenstein that the world is made up of items with propositional structure, McDowell and Hornsby do not sign up to Wittgenstein's own doctrine concerning such items' constituents. The world of facts is, for them, a world of true Fregean Thoughts, pure and simple.

Looking back, I feel that this kind of response to my original charge of incoherence – a response laid out by Hornsby in her 1999 and echoed by McDowell in his 1999 and 2005 – deserved a more serious and charitable treatment than that provided by my (all too brief) discussion on pp. 178–83. The process of providing such a treatment is begun in my 2008.

In the time since this book was first published, discussion of the identity theory of truth – and, in particular, the spin that McDowell puts upon it – has continued apace. I particularly recommend Candlish 2006, Gaskin 2006 and Sullivan 2005, but other more recent articles are

cited in this book's up-dated bibliography. Additionally, later work of mine on truthmaker theory, usefully elaborating the kinds of objections raised in Chapter 1, is found in my 2002 and 2007.

Finally, I'd like to thank Susan and Eleanor for continuing to provide the love, support and gentle mockery that has kept me going in philosophy over the last few years.

J.D.

June, 2007

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1

Truthmakers, Facts and States of Affairs: a Critique of Correspondence

1. Introduction

At first blush, it is difficult to discern what it could be for a theory of truth to count as a *correspondence theory*. Conceptions of truth as different from one another as those offered by the early Wittgenstein (1922); J.L. Austin (1950, 1961), and Alfred Tarski (1944, 1956) have all been labelled ‘correspondence theories’; and this might encourage one to think that there is no core substantial doctrine answering to the name.¹ In response to this feeling, the greater part of this book (Chapters 1 to 4) has two main objectives: first of all, to uncover the substantial doctrine held by correspondence theorists; but second, and more significantly, to expose this credo as a myth. Precisely *why* it is mythological is a question whose consideration propels us towards a more satisfying way of thinking about truth.

In the present chapter we shall see that the correspondence theorist’s guiding principle is that propositions, if true, are *made true* by facts. I shall argue that this is a piece of philosophical folklore which, as we shall duly see, misrepresents the nature of facts. By the end of Chapter 4 we shall come to appreciate that facts are not truthmakers, merely (neo-Fregean) thoughts that are true. Properly speaking, a true thought does not correspond to a fact; where the correspondence theorist looks for correspondence there can only be *identity*. The putative *truthmaker* is nothing but the *truthbearer*.

This response to correspondence theories amounts to what I call a *modest identity theory* of truth. Such an attitude does not share the usual analytical ambitions of things called ‘theories of truth’. It aims neither to define ‘is true’ nor to explain what the difference between truth and falsehood consists in. But, I shall argue in Chapter 5, it is none the

worse for that. The claim that a true thought *is* (identical with) a fact *sheds light* on the concept of truth by virtue of illustrating the error made by correspondence theorists. And in thus removing correspondence theories from the scene, the modest identity theory prepares the ground for a proper deflation of the concept of truth, a deflation I defend in Chapter 6.

It is fair to say that identity theories of truth have only been sporadically adopted by philosophers. None the less, identity theories have been held, however fleetingly, by Bertrand Russell (1903, 1904b); G.E. Moore (1899, 1902); F.H. Bradley (1893, 1907) and, more recently, Jennifer Hornsby (1997, 1999). The book's final chapter distinguishes the modest identity theory from its rival identity theories. The modest theory, so I shall claim, neatly avoids the various objections which disable its competitors.

My aim in writing this book is to make a case for, and to examine the consequences of, a certain attitude towards truth. But we must begin by examining what is meant by the claim that truth is a matter of correspondence. Once we have set out clearly what it is that makes a theory of truth a correspondence theory, decisive objections will duly arise. As I have suggested, an appreciation of these objections will take us some way down the path towards the way of thinking about truth that I shall be recommending.

2. Facts as truthmaking states of affairs

2.1 'A proposition is true just in case it corresponds to a fact.'² If this slogan is meant in the way a correspondence theorist means it, it commits its user, firstly, to the claim that a certain theoretical role must be played by entities of some kind, and, secondly, to the thesis that the entities in question are facts. Let us examine the theoretical role first.

J.L. Austin famously claims that '[i]t takes two to make a truth... When a statement is true, there is, *of course*, a state of affairs which makes it true' (1950, p. 23). Bertrand Russell takes a similar view, at least during his logical atomist period. 'When I speak of a fact', Russell says, 'I mean the kind of thing that makes a proposition true or false' (1918, p. 182). Finally, Michael Dummett has noted that 'Frege does not himself employ the notion of what *makes* the thought expressed by a sentence true, perhaps because he wants to avoid the conception of a fact or state of affairs as belonging to the realm of reference' (1981, p. 444). These remarks point nicely to what I take to be the distinctive intuition motivating correspondence theories of truth: every truth must have a *truthmaker*.

According to a correspondence theorist, there must be entities occupying the truthmaking role. But as yet, this declaration is little more than a form of words. What does it really mean?

One thing is clear enough. A truthmaker for $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is supposed to be an entity in the real world, a thing distinct from the proposition itself, with which the proposition, as a whole, is correlated.³ The believer in truthmakers holds that complete truths, and not just their sub-propositional constituents, have worldly relata. But this does not get to the bottom of the idea that something in the world must *make* the truth in question true. The correspondence theorist's intuition is not simply that $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ must be correlated with an entity in the world, but that there must be 'something in the world which *ensures* that $a \text{ is } F$ ' (Armstrong 1991, p. 190; my italics): something which acts as the truth's 'ontological ground' (Armstrong 1991, p. 190). The idea here is that a true proposition's truthmaker must be such that its *mere existence guarantees* that the proposition is true. As D.M. Armstrong puts it, 'the truthmaker for a truth must necessitate that truth... [I]f a certain truthmaker makes a certain truth true, then there is no alternative world where that truthmaker exists but the truth is a false proposition' (1997, p. 115).

The sense in which the existence of a truthmaker necessitates a proposition's truth cannot be causal (*ibid.*, p. 115). The idea can only be that the existence of the truthmaker is necessarily sufficient for the proposition to be true. Tidied up a little, what this means is that a true proposition's truthmaker is an entity whose existence *entails* that the proposition is true.⁴ And with this account of truthmaking in place, we can regard as a correspondence theory any theory of truth which upholds the following principle:

(TM) For $\langle p \rangle$ to be true, there must exist at least one entity, distinct from $\langle p \rangle$, whose existence entails that $\langle p \rangle$ is true.⁵

To some, this might appear overly stipulative. In my defence, some of the heartiest defenders of 'correspondence'-talk (Russell, Austin and Armstrong) appeal to the idea that truths are made true by something; and (TM) would seem to be the most plausible way of spelling out this idea in such a way as to reconstruct a substantial theory that goes beyond the mere platitude that $\langle p \rangle$ is true just in case things are as they are stated to be.

Having introduced (TM), three points of clarification must be made at once. The first is that (TM) commits one neither to the thesis that each truth has just one truthmaker, nor to the thesis that each truth has a minimal truthmaker (where a minimal truthmaker for a truth is an entity which is a part of each of the truth's truthmakers). The believer in (TM)

may well regard truths such as <At least one person has written a book about truth> as counterexamples to both theses. Of itself, (TM) entails neither of the theses in question.

My second remark concerns the nature of the supposed correspondence between truthbearer and truthmaker. I have said nothing specific about this matter beyond (TM), and for good reason. Although it is tempting to think that the correspondence relation can only be pictorial, other options are available. One may deny that a truth and its truthmaker are structurally isomorphic, preferring instead to hold either that true propositions refer to their truthmakers or that the non-pictorial relation between a truth and its truthmaker is a *sui generis* semantic relation.⁶ Again, we should not mistake the essential doctrine for inessential features shared by some, but not all, correspondence theories. We shall see that it is the essential doctrine, the commitment to (TM), which is the source of the correspondence theorist's travails.

My third point concerns the relation between (TM) and what most commentators assume to be the task of a correspondence theory: that of providing a *definition* of 'is true'.⁷ In short, someone accepting (TM) need not be viewed as aiming to do this. The project of defining 'is true' is supposed to supply a phrase synonymous with the truth predicate which makes use of concepts suitably distinct from, and which do not presuppose, the concept of truth. Needless to say, it is far from obvious that (TM) helps us to do this: it looks like the notions of *entailment* and *fact* cannot be explicated other than in terms of the concept of truth. However, even if (TM) does not promise to lead us towards a definition of truth, it is, I should stress, by no means trivial. To appreciate this, note that (TM) goes way beyond the simple claim that truthbearers have ontological commitments in a mind-independent world.⁸ It is a platitude that for it to be true that snow is white, things must be as they are judged to be: snow must be white. And we may cash this out by saying that for the proposition to be true, the stuff referred to by the word 'snow' must satisfy the predicate 'is white'. But such an explanation gets us nowhere near a correspondence theory: snow is not a *truthmaker* for <Snow is white>, since snow could exist and yet not be white. A correspondence theorist takes the truth in question to commit us ontologically not only to snow but to some entity playing the truthmaking role as well.⁹

What, then, is (TM) doing, if not forming the basis of an attempt to define truth? The answer is that it aims to provide us with an explanation of what truth *consists in*. That is to say, (TM) is supposed to deliver a property *F*, possessed by all and only the true propositions, which is such that those propositions are true *because* they are *F*. The property

in question is, of course, *being made true by something*, where truthmaking is explicated along the lines set out above. It is this property which is supposed to explain the difference between truth and falsehood.¹⁰ Falsehoods, so the story goes, do not have truthmakers.

Having distinguished a commitment to (TM) from the project of trying to define 'is true', a familiar objection to correspondence theories can be dismissed at once. This objection, originating with Ramsey (1927), has it that the correspondence theorist's remarks risk being platitudinous because there is a circularity engendered by the attempt to analyze the concept of truth in terms of those of *correspondence* and *fact* (supposing facts to be the most convincing pretenders to the truthmaking crown). As Blackburn colourfully suggests (1984, p. 225), 'corresponds-to-the-facts' looks as if it might be nothing more than a piece of Pentagoneze: an important-sounding paraphrase of 'is true'. But, as we have seen, a correspondence theory can be informative without being in the business of offering a definition. Granted that a commitment to a correspondence theory is a commitment to (TM), the correspondence theorist offers a (putative) explanation of what truth consists in, an account which, by virtue of its reliance on the idea of true propositions being *made true* by something, is substantial and, we shall shortly see, highly controversial.

Typically, this point has not been appreciated by deflationists. A deflationist holds, roughly, that the correctness of

(E) $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if p

is all that can be said about the truth of propositions, and hence that there can be no property F explanatory of truth.¹¹ And when deflationists are faced by a would-be correspondence theorist of truth, someone who offers the kind of (putative) explanation to which deflationists believe truth to be unsusceptible, they usually argue that nothing substantial has been said. Quine, for example, claims that 'the correspondence theory dwindle[s] to disquotation' (1987, p. 214), while Paul Horwich (1990) has contended that

(1) $\langle \text{Snow is white} \rangle$ is *made true* by the fact that snow is white

is nothing but a 'trivial reformulation' (1990, p. 112) of 'an innocuous idea' (ibid., p. 110), namely, that

(2) $\langle \text{Snow is white} \rangle$ is true *because* snow is white.

As I shall make plain in Chapter 6, I share the deflationary attitude towards truth, but it is a mistake to suppose that the correspondence theorist's error is that of lapsing into the utterance of truisms. For,

when (1) is understood as correspondence theorists understand it, it is far from being a mere reformulation of (2). As Horwich himself inadvertently says (*ibid.*, pp. 111–12), (2) commits us only to the idea that if it is true that snow is white, then it is true because ‘something in the world’ (1990, p. 111), snow, is a certain way: white. So far we are ontologically committed only to snow. But (1), as understood by a correspondence theorist, commits us to the idea that the truth has a truthmaker (here presumed to be a fact): something distinct from the proposition, whose existence entails that the proposition is true. We are thus ontologically committed not only to snow but to something which plays the truthmaking role.

As it turns out, Horwich has recently come to appreciate the controversial nature of the correspondence theorist’s claim about the existence of truthmakers. As a result of being rather clearer on the notion of truthmaking, Horwich now recognises that (1) amounts to the claim that

- (3) \langle Snow is white \rangle is true *because* there exists the fact that snow is white (1998, p. 105),

a claim which he correctly identifies as highly contentious (*ibid.*, p. 106). For if propositions are taken to be Russellian in nature – things with objects and properties as constituents – then propositions, when true, are *identical* to facts, and not merely ‘similar to them’ (*ibid.*, p. 106). If, on the other hand, we take propositions to be thoughts – entities with senses as constituents – we seem to have the opportunity to wield Occam’s Razor and identify facts with true thoughts (*ibid.*, p. 106). It is precisely this latter option – the modest identity theory – which I shall advocate. The mistake made by the correspondence theorist is that of taking facts to be truthmakers instead of true thoughts.

2.2 Let us now consider the question of the nature of the entities which may occupy the truthmaking role. I have been assuming up to now that if $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$ needs a truthmaker, its truthmaker must be a *fact*: a ’s *being* F . This, of course, means that the correspondence theorist is committed to a certain conception of the nature of facts. If a ’s *being* F is to act as a truthmaker, it must be what I shall term a *state of affairs*. It must be a complex of items from what Fregeans term the realm of reference: the reality of which we speak minus our modes of presentation.¹² Specifically, the state of affairs of a ’s *being* F is supposed to have a and F – the particular and the universal themselves – as constituents, and is supposed to exist just in case a is F . The state of affairs is, so to speak, the particular and property bonded together into a complex object.

Armstrong puts the case for facts (that is, states of affairs) being truthmakers like this:

We are asking what in the world will ensure, make true, underlie, serve as the ontological ground for, the truth that *a* is *F*. The obvious candidate seems to be the state of affairs of *a*'s being *F*. In this state of affairs (fact, circumstance) *a* and *F* are brought together. (1997, p. 116)

The suggestion that truthmakers can only be states of affairs is backed by powerful considerations. Neither *a* nor *F* can be a truthmaker for $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$: both could exist and yet *a* not be *F*.¹³ And, as Armstrong himself says (*ibid.*, p. 115), neither can the pair of *a* and *F* do the job, for this too could exist without *a*'s being *F*. (A world in which *a* existed and was not *F*, but in which *b* was *F* would be a world in which this were the case.) The moral Armstrong draws is that the fugitive truthmaker must (like the pair) have *a* and *F* as constituents, but in such a way that it exists only if its constituents are unified; only if, that is, *a* really is *F*. To use Russell's language, a complex can only be a truthmaker if it is a *unity* rather than an *aggregate* (1903, p. 140). This being so, states of affairs appear to be promising candidates for truthmaking because, as conceived of by correspondence theorists, a state of affairs exists just in case a particular has a property or a relation holds between two or more particulars (Armstrong 1997, p. 1).¹⁴

However, an objector might worry whether we have been too quick to install states of affairs as the best candidates to be truthmakers. Perhaps *tropes*, rather than states of affairs, are best placed for truthmaking. Fully-blown trope theory is characterized by two axioms.¹⁵ First, tropes are particularized properties or relations. What this means can best be explained by contrasting tropes with universals. According to the believer in universals, if *a* is *F*, *a* has the identical property which is had by everything else which is *F*. There is just one property *F*. By contrast, the trope theorist holds that properties cannot be shared by numerically distinct particulars. If *a* is *F* and *b* is *F*, then we have two properties. *The F-ness of a* and *the F-ness of b* are distinct entities. The second axiom of the theory of tropes is that tropes are fundamental, unstructured entities; simples, in other words.¹⁶ *The F-ness of a* is not a complex consisting of *a* and the universal *F*; the trope is not, in other words, a state of affairs. Rather, the *F-ness of a* is a simple entity that cannot be understood in other terms.

Having introduced tropes, it may seem that they are well suited for playing the truthmaking role.¹⁷ If the trope *a*'s *F-ness* exists, then *a* must