

# Identity Makers

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“ What, art thou mad? art thou mad? is not  
the truth the truth ?  
*Henry IV, I, II, 90*

The identity theory of truth, according to which a true proposition is identical with a fact, seems to be a *reductio ad absurdum* not only of correspondence theories of truth in general, but also of the very idea of truthmaking. This is why it has been often invoked as a genuine rival to the truthmaking theory of truth. In this short article, I propose a *reductio ad absurdum* of the *reductio ad absurdum*. I hope, from the confrontation, to highlight some of the advantages of thinking of truth in terms of truthmaking, but I do not propose to defend a particular version of it.

## 1. Truthmaking

A theory of truthmaking emerges from taking seriously the common sense idea that Dummett once expressed as the truism that truth, in order to be truth, must be truth *in virtue of* something. The truth of the truth-bearers must be *determined by*, or *grounded in* something which is not truth, (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002: 31). But what is the relationship of grounding, determining, and of course of *making*, in which truthmaking consists? Is it a real relation, like causality, or a logical relation, like entailment, or some other relation (Mulligan 2003)? At least, according to friends of truthmaking, it must be a relation of necessitation: one must accept the *truthmaker principle*:

(TM) For every truth there must be something in the world that makes it true

Most of the time it is said, using Bigelow's characterisation) to be minimally the relationship of supervenience of truth upon being:

(STB) Every truth supervenes on being

or in other words: “If something is true, then it would not be possible for it to be false unless either certain things were to exist which don’t, or else certain things had not existed which do (Bigelow 1988: 133).

But as Rodriguez-Pereyra notes, supervenience is not sufficient, for being also supervenes on truth: if something exists, then it is not possible for it not to exist unless certain truths were false. So the relation of supervenience has to be understood as an asymmetrical dependency of truth upon being. Another way of putting the same idea is to say that truth is not, according to the truthmaker idea, primitive (Rodriguez Pereyra 2002: 31). This is a very important point, for in many conceptions of truth (in particular the disquotationalist and minimalist conceptions) truth is primitive. That truth is primitive means that the nature of truth is exhausted by a set of principles and properties of the predicate or of the property of truth, and not by the existence of entities which are not truths. It can mean also, especially in Davidson’s version of minimalism (Davidson 1996) that truth is a primitive predicate which is implicitly defined by a theory of truth applied to the sentences of the language. In either of these senses, what STB and the insistence on the grounding relation mean is that *there is no theory of truth without a theory of being*, or without an ontology. Tell us what kinds of things there are, and how things are, and you will know what truth is. It is not enough to study the properties of a semantical relation.

From here, truthmaker theorists diverge. Some, like Armstrong (2003) accept the principle of *truthmaker maximalism*:

(TMM) Necessarily for every truth, there is a truthmaker for this truth

Others accept only that some truths have truthmakers: they reject the idea that negative, disjunctive, general or modal truths have truthmakers. Most of the time, those who reject truthmaker maximalism accept only the view that *atomic* propositions have truthmakers. Another great divide within theorists of truthmaking is upon the kinds of entities which are to play the role of truthmakers. Many early and late theorists have taken facts to be the basic entities of which the world is made of, hence the basic truthmakers; but among these some take facts to contain universals as well as individu-

als, whereas others include only tropes, and some others also events (Mellor 1995). And some truthmaking theorists discount facts from the realm of truthmakers, to allow only things and their properties to play this role (Lewis 2003). Here I shall follow the main trend, and assume that the basic truthmakers are entities such as facts and states of affairs. Somewhat misleadingly, I shall talk of the truthmaking conception of truth as a family of conceptions, although there are large differences between the various versions.

## 2. *The identity theory of truth*

The identity theory of truth is the view that truth and reality are just the same thing, but it is more aptly formulated for our purposes as the view that a proposition is true if and only if it is identical with a fact:

(IT)  $\langle p \rangle$  is true if and only  $\langle p \rangle$  is identical with a fact

According to the early proponents of IT in contemporary philosophy (Bradley, Russell and Moore, see Baldwin 1991, Candlish 1989) this is meant to be a *robust* or *substantial* conception, saying that bits of true thoughts, or propositions, *are* identical to bits of reality. There is, however, another version of IT, hinted at by Frege<sup>1</sup> (see Hornsby 1997) and more recently defended by McDowell (1994, 2004) and Dodd (2002) which says that IT just amounts to the truism that facts are true propositions.

Robust identity theories, which say that true propositions are facts in the world, are of two kinds. Identity is a symmetric relation, which can be read from left to right, and from right to left. From left to right the identity theorist nudges propositions into facts, the world is made of true propositions

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<sup>1</sup> “A correspondence, ..., can only be perfect if the corresponding things coincide and are, therefore, not distinct things at all. It is said to be possible to establish the authenticity of a bank note by comparing it stereoscopically with an authentic one. But it would be ridiculous to try to compare a gold piece with a twenty mark piece stereoscopically. It would only be possible to compare an idea with the thing if the thing were an idea too. And then, if the first did correspond perfectly with the second, they would coincide. But this is not at all what is wanted when truth is defined as correspondence of an idea with something real. For it is absolutely essential that the reality be distinct from the idea. But then there can be no complete correspondence, no complete truth. So nothing at all would be true; for what is only half true is untrue.” (Frege 1967: 18-19)

and we get a theory on the realist pole (this was famously Moore's own version towards 1900). From right to left, the identity nudges facts into thoughts, and we get a theory on the idealist pole (Bradley)<sup>2</sup>. Let us consider only the first type of version, which I shall call the identity theory of facts (ITF). There are two versions of it, depending how one answers the following question: if a true proposition *is* a fact, how can a *false* thought be identical with a fact? Will there be facts which are objective falsehoods? Or should we say instead that false thoughts are not really thoughts, and that only true thoughts are? Truth and falsity seem to be contingent properties of thought contents: these can be true or can be false. To take up Wittgenstein's term, propositions have two "poles", truth and falsity, and can instantiate whichever property. Hence if they are identical with facts, they seem to be identical with merely *possible* facts, and not necessarily with *actual* facts. On this view, facts can obtain or not, and if they don't they remain only possible. But there is another notion of fact, according to which facts *cannot fail* to obtain, or are *essentially* facts. So ITF can be read in two ways, both for truth and falsity :

- (ITF *a*) (i) The thought that *p* is true = the fact that *p* contingently obtains  
(ii) The thought that *p* is false = the merely possible fact that *p*
- (ITF *b*) (i) The thought that *p* is true = the essentially obtaining fact that *p*  
(ii) The thought that *p* is false ≠ the essentially obtaining fact that *p*

According to (ITF *a*), facts themselves have two poles: <obtaining, not obtaining> (they are *bipolar* (Dokic 1998)). In possible world terminology, a true thought could be true at another possible world if it were identical with a possible fact, but truth in the actual world is defined as the actualisation of a possible fact.<sup>3</sup> According to (ITF *b*), facts have only one pole: <obtaining>. Facts which are not actual are *not* facts, but mere "states of affairs" or "virtual" facts. Truth is identity with what is essentially or necessarily a fact, and could not be a fact in other possible worlds. Hence falsity

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is tempting to represent the fact oriented view as realist and the thought oriented view as idealist, in all rigour the world is, on either view, neither made of facts nor made of thought, as McDowell (2004) reminded me.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g Fine 1982

is simply the absence of fact, non facthood. But we might go further and allow facthood also for false propositions. So there is a reading of (ITF*b*) on which false thoughts are identical with *negative facts*. (ii) is replaced by:

(ITF*b*) (iii) The thought that *p* is false = the essential fact that not *p*

Famously Russell held such a view for some time, until he was too much worried by this consequence of his early identity theory of truth.<sup>4</sup>

ITF *a* and ITF *b* (i)-(ii) do not only rely on two different notions of fact, but also on two different notions of proposition or thought. For ITF*a*, a single entity, a thought or a proposition, can be true or false, hence identical to an actual or a possible fact. If I think, for instance, that spring has begun, my thought is one thing, and its being true or false are other things. Same thought content, different realisations. This is why ITF*a* is a bipolar theory of facts. For ITF*b* (i)-(ii), on the contrary, when I think truly that spring has begun, my thought is a fact, the essential fact that spring has begun, but when I think falsely that spring has begun, my thought is not a fact, since only the fact that spring has begun obtains. Hence it is not a thought, if the identity theory is correct, but a mere representation. It does not have the same content when it is identical to a fact and when it is not. This why ITF *b* (i)-(ii) is a unipolar theory of facts: only true propositions can be facts. Only when negative facts are introduced with ITF*b* (i)-(iii) can one reinstate the bipolarity of facts, but also one has to introduce a bipolarity of propositions or thoughts as well.

More recently versions of the identity theory have been held by John Mc Dowell (1994, 2004) Jennifer Hornsby (1997) and Julian Dodd (2002) which, while resting upon the basic identity of propositions and facts IT<sub>2</sub>, are meant to reject any ontological commitment to entities such as facts.<sup>5</sup> The identity theory then becomes simply the truism that a proposition is true if and only if it is a fact. Thus Mc Dowell writes:

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<sup>4</sup> One of the familiar reasons why the notion of negative fact is worrying is that, to put it in terms of an identity theory, a single truth would also be identical with an indefinite number of such negative facts.

<sup>5</sup> There are differences between these versions, which I do not attend here. see Engel 2001

“There is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* the case. So since the world is everything that is the case (as [Wittgenstein] once wrote) there is no gap between thought, as such and the world.” [...] “But to say that there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world is to dress up a truism in a high flown language. All the point comes to is that one can think, for instance, that *spring has begun* and the very thing, *that spring has begun*, can be the case. That is a truism, and it cannot embody something metaphysically contentious, like slighting the independence of reality.”(McDowell 1994: 27.)

This is meant to be no more contentious than the redundancy conception of truth expressed by the familiar biconditional

(R ) The proposition that P is true iff P

Actually the modest version of the identity theory is meant to free us from the difficulties that the ontological talk about facts created, hence to avoid to “dress up a truism in high flown language”. If this is correct, then the identity theory of truth is a fully deflationist view of truth.<sup>6</sup>

An important consequence of the modest identity theory is that it will reject the ITFb version of IT according to which facts are essentially obtaining entities. Trivially for the modest or minimalist identity theory, just as true propositions are facts, false propositions fail to be facts, which just means that the proposition P is false iff not P. At best, for the modest identity theory, only the version ITFa can be countenanced. *Exeunt* negative facts. this seems to confirm a verdict that a number of writers have given on the identity theory,. To speak like Armstrong ( 1997: 228) the identity theory itself has fallen “into the gravitational field” of the redundancy theory. So how can we hope to extract from it a substantive theory of facts? In so far as we conceive ITF on the model of a correspondence theory of facts as truthmakers, then, it is difficult to resist the thought voiced by Baldwin, that “the identity theory is the result of adding the unnecessary insistence that truth requires a relationship between thought and the world.” (Baldwin 1991: 50)

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis (2001) considers the identity theory as a version of correspondence theory of truth, which in turn is said to be a version of the redundancy theory.

## 1. Identity theory as a reductio of truthmaking?

Consider now the main principles of truthmaking in comparison with the claims of an robust identity theory of truth. First (IT) entails the truthmaker principle TM: the truthmaking relation is simply interpreted as the identity relation between true propositions and facts, in the same manner as an identity theorist interests the relation of correspondence as a version of the relation of identity. Trivially every truth is grounded in a fact. We can also, given the necessity of identity and in assuming that “the proposition that P” and “the fact that P” are respectively rigid designators for propositions and fact, say that the identity between facts and propositions is necessary.

$$( \text{the proposition that P} = \text{the fact that F} \supset \text{the proposition that P} = \text{the fact that F} )$$

and so for any particular fact . In this sense true propositions are necessitated by facts.

IT also entails TMM, truthmaker maximalism: every true proposition has a truth maker, which is identical to it. And trivially IT grounds truth in being and entails the supervenience of truth over being STB, as a case of identity. Truthmakers are identitymakers.

But of course this assimilation of truthmaking to a robust version of identity theory can't be right. When one says that truths are *grounded* in facts and entities upon which they depend, one does not say that they are simply identical. Moreover, identity is a reflexive and symmetric relation, but grounding is neither symmetric nor reflexive. In this sense a truthmaker is not an identity maker.

A modest identity theorist can retort that since the robust version of IT can't be assimilated to the truthmaking conception of truth, the modest version has to be adopted. This is the line taken by Dodd (2001 , ch.2).

But a truthmaking theorist will reject this. At no point, the principles of truth making can be made equivalent to those of an identity theory of truth, for it is an essential feature of truth makers that they are not *identical* to the truths which they make. In other words, TM entails that

If  $\langle p \rangle$  is true, necessarily there is at least one entity, *distinct from*  $\langle p \rangle$ , whose existence entails that  $\langle p \rangle$  is true

For an identity theorist, there are as many facts as there are truths, and a one-one relation between facts and truth bearers. On some versions of truth making, the truthmakers mirror the propositions. But on most interesting versions, the facts are not simply the tautological accusatives, to speak like Armstrong, of propositions. But on a truthmaker theory of facts the truthmaking relation is one-many, or many-one. To take simple examples, if  $p$  or  $q$  (inclusive *or*) is true, this truth has two truth makers,  $p$  and  $q$ . Or for a true existential sentence saying that there is at least a black swan, there are as many truth makers as there are black swans. Conversely, to one truth maker correspond many truths. For instance, if it is true that either  $p$  or  $q$  is true, then the truth maker for  $p$  is also a truth maker for the disjunctive truth, and for innumerable many other truths (Armstrong 1997:129-130). In other words, facts as truth makers are *not* true propositions. This prevents a correspondence theory of facts from “falling into the gravitational field of a redundancy theory, to their mutual confusion” (*ibid.* 128). But it also prevents a correspondence theory of facts from falling into the gravitational field of an identity theory of facts, if such there be, since the identity of propositions and facts implies that there is a one-one relation between them.

But the truthmaking conception of truth is not only non equivalent to the identity conception of truth; it gives us also an argument against it.

According to ITFa and the modest conception of the identity theory, facts are, just like propositions, bipolar: they are be positive or negative, just as propositions can be true or false.

But the very idea that fact can be bipolar is incoherent. It was actually the objection which was pressed by Moore when he rejected his earlier identity theory of truth:

[Suppose I have the true belief ]that a given tree, which I see, is an oak...The proposition that the tree is an oak is something which is and equally is whether the belief is true or false...But..the fact that the tree is an oak is something which *is*, only if the belief be true, and hence it is quite plain that...the fact that

the tree is an oak is quite a different thing...from what I believe, when I believe that it is one.." (Moore 1953: 308)<sup>7</sup>

Moore's notion of a fact is the notion that facts *essentially* obtain, as opposed to the notion of facts as states of affairs which may or may not obtain. It is in this sense that facts have only one pole: either they obtain, and they exist, or not and they are not facts. This contrasts strongly with thoughts or propositions, which can be true or false, but which keep their contents whether they are true or false. Propositions, unlike facts are "bipolar".

A modest identity theorist can answer in the following way: (Dodd 87-88)

"Socrates" designates Socrates in every possible world in which he exists, regardless of whether he is married or not. By contrast, "Xanthippe's husband" designates Socrates only in those possible worlds where he is married. This does not prevent Socrates from being identical with Xanthippe's husband. Similarly "the proposition that P" designates the proposition that P in all possible worlds, whereas "the fact that P" designates that proposition only in those worlds in which it is true. So why would this observation refute the identity thesis?

But the point is precisely that when a proposition is false there is no possible world in which it is true, hence no fact to which it could be identical. But the very idea of fact as having two poles yields an incoherent notion of fact (Fine 1982). This can also be shown through a linguistic argument to the effect that in number of uses facts are not equivalent to true propositions. In

The fact that Mary went was a surprise for John

the description is not equivalent to a true proposition.

Or we cannot argue in the following way

Mary's thought was that John would come  
That John would come would be a surprise  
Therefore Mary's thought would be surprise<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Künne 2003 : 9-10.

So the friend of the identity theory of truth cannot use (IT) as a form of *reductio* of truthmaking and correspondence truth. He cannot argue that an identity theory of truth provides a *reductio* of the notion which the friends of truthmakers finds essential. On the identity theory of truth, truth is not grounded or made true by anything. True propositions are facts, and that's the end of it. But that is not the end of it.

### 1. *Truthmaking and truth aptness*

Most of the objections against a modest identity theory of truth are the same as those that one can raise against a redundancy and other deflationist conceptions of truth. This is not the place here to restate them.<sup>9</sup> A theory of truth cannot get rid of the truism, upon which the truthmaking conceptions rest, that truth, in order to be truth, has to be grounded in something else. But there is still an important objection to the truthmaking conception, which is, in particular voiced by David Lewis:

“Why is the truthmaker conception of truth a conception of truth? It seems instead to be a theory of all manners of things, and not especially of truth, and what we learn about truth does not come from it but rather from the allied redundancy conditionals. Truth is mentioned in the truth maker principle only for the sake of making a long story short. Take for instance the

- (1) it is true that cat purr iff there exists something such as the existence of that thing implies that cats purr  
this by the redundancy conditional is equivalent to
- (2) Cats purr iff there exists something the existence of which implies that cats purr  
but (2) tells us nothing about truth. It is about the existential grounding of the purring of cats. (Lewis 2002: 278-79)

David (2002) replies to this on behalf of the correspondence theorist that the argument could as well be used against the redundancy conception, since it implies an infinity of biconditionals which are about truth, and the truthmaker principle is not identical with its instances, but offers a generalisation about truth. Lewis, however, has a point, which can be formulated thus. The truthmaker conception of truth implies that a theory of truth cannot be given unless one also provides an ontology of the kinds of things

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<sup>8</sup> Künne 2003 p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> I have given some reasons to reject a deflationist conception in Engel 2002.

which make truth truth. When these various kinds of makings will have been spelled out, there should be no more to say about truth. But, Lewis's objection says, we shall have ended up with a whole treatise on ontology, not on truth. The intuition which underlies Lewis' objection is that a theory of truth should not simply list the kinds of truths there are and tell us a story about each, but it should give us a *general* account of what truth is, independently of the fact that there are such and such kinds of truths: negative, general, modal, temporal, deontic, etc. A theory of truth should have to be about the common core of all such kinds of truths. The idea that there are various kinds of truthmaking relations, specific for the varieties of kinds of truths, should not be confused with what is sometimes referred to as a "pluralist" conception of truth, according to which there are as many truths as there are subject matters : mathematical, ethical, empirical, etc. (Wright 1992). For this pluralistic stance is also congenial to a deflationary or minimalist conception: there are truths, but no property of truth. Truth does not come up to much more than the usual truisms about disquotation, syntactic embeddings, and the ordinary platitudes about it. For a truthmaker conception, on the contrary, there is such a property as truth. It is philosophically interesting. But in order not to make the whole topic of a theory of truth collapse into ontology of metaphysics, what we should accept is the existence of a common property of truth which has the very same formal properties in each domain, but which is *realised* differently in each domain. We need something like a distinction between the claims of a theory of truth and the properties of our statements of being, in each kind of domain *truth apt*. Not all domains are truth apt: for instance ethical statements may not be, or statements about universal properties may not be. But a theory of truth contains the main properties of the concept of truth. In this sense, it will include such principles as the truthmaker principle and the principle of supervenience of truth over being. These are substantial requirements to be added to the usual platitudes that truth is correspondence, objective, that is disquotational, a norm of assertion and belief, and the like. The job of sorting out the various ways in which truths can be truths will be devoted to ontology.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I have defended such a quasi functionalist conception of truth and the distinction between truth and truth aptness in Engel 2002.

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