

Heterodox Truthmaker Theory Can Be Defended By Cost/Benefit Analysis

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1. Introduction

Goff [Forthcoming] presents an objection to Cameron's recent argument for truthmaking. Goff wrongly assumes that Cameron treats truthmaking as a pre-theoretical commitment, and this paper argues that because of this his objections miss the mark.

2. Truthmaking

Truthmaker theory (TT) consists of two principles:

- (1) Every truth has at least one truthmaker.
- (2) The existence of a truthmaker necessitates the truths that it makes true.

TT is often said to 'catch the cheaters' when it comes to evaluating our substantive theoretical commitments (e.g. presentism, eternalism, genuine modal realism, Platonism about numbers etc.) [Merricks 2007: xiv]. So, typically, TT is not taken to be a theoretical commitment, but a *pre-theoretical commitment* (where other pre-theoretical commitments are demands for ontological parsimony, theoretical simplicity etc.). This is also how Goff sees things (saying repeatedly that truthmaking comes at the start of the metaphysical enterprise [Forthcoming]). So, for Goff, *orthodox* truthmaking theory isn't just TT, but TT plus an endorsement of:

- (3) The principles of TT are pre-theoretical commitments.

But not every truthmaker theorist says this. Notably, the target of Goff's paper, Ross Cameron, *explicitly* denies that TT should be pre-theoretic:

Too often truthmaker theorists treat the truthmaker principle like it's a constraint on any acceptable metaphysic, while their opponents dismiss it as entirely unmotivated. Both approaches are wrong, in my opinion. There is no pre-theoretic commitment to truthmakers, and nor is truthmaker theory a consequence of something (like realism) that is a pre-theoretic commitment. [Cameron 2008a: 126]

And elsewhere he says:

[TT] is not a pre-theoretic commitment, and it is not a commitment of being a realist. One is not forced to accept [TT]: it is simply advantageous to do so, other things being equal, for it allows for a sparse ground of all truth. [Cameron 2008b: 293]

So Cameron is not an orthodox truthmaking theorist as he denies (3). Instead he is a *heterodox* truthmaking theorist who specifically admonishes orthodox truthmaking theory for taking TT to be pre-theoretical.

Cameron's argument for truthmaking theory is that it provides excellent benefits that outweigh the costs it brings with it. The alleged benefit is that TT offers an elegant theory of what things the truths about the world end up depending upon [Cameron 2008a, esp. 125-6]. Then, so the argument goes, this benefit makes TT worth accepting. Goff has two objections to this argument.

3. *Objection One: Excluding Possibilities*

The first objection is that TT excludes possibilities, and that this is a prohibitive cost that Cameron has failed to take account of. Given TT, certain situations are impossible e.g. a version of presentism where propositions like < dinosaurs once existed > are true, but there are no truthmakers (e.g. Keller style truthmakers [Keller 2004]) for such propositions. Goff believes the loss of such possibilities is a bad thing, which in this case outweighs the alleged benefits of Cameron's theory of truth.

However, excluding possibilities in this fashion does *not* appear to be a cost, as most theories do the same thing. For example, generally eternalists think that if eternalism is true then presentism is necessarily false [Sider 1999: 339]. So whereas Goff thinks *certain* possibilities where presentism is true are ruled out by TT, eternalism rules out *all* possibilities where presentism is true. Eternalism is *worse* than TT when it comes to excluding possibilities in that regard. The same applies to most mainstream metaphysical theories, for most theories are intended to hold of necessity and thus will, as TT does, rule out swathes of possibilities. Unless one wants Goff's objection to rule out all mainstream metaphysical positions (which, I assume, is not the intention), TT's excluding of possibilities cannot be a prohibitive cost either. (And what of those who take the contra-standard position that metaphysical theories, such as eternalism, are contingent rather than necessary? Well, those who buy into that sort of thing, and don't think such contingency is a problem, will likewise be motivated to say TT was contingently true also, and not think that's a problem either. So for such people, the possibilities Goff thinks are ruled out by TT won't even be ruled out in the first place).

But Goff has a response:

Of course, which metaphysical theories one endorses can have implications for what one takes to be metaphysically possible. Those who believe that I am essentially a human being will believe that God could not have made the world such that I was a boiled egg. But [orthodox truthmaking theory] is not a set of metaphysical commitments, but a principle intended as a starting point for metaphysical enquiry. [Goff Forthcoming]

So whilst our theoretical commitments may rule out possibilities without incurring prohibitive costs, according to Goff our *pre*-theoretical commitments should not. It's not entirely clear to me why this disparity holds, but it's irrelevant in any case as, given Cameron is arguing for heterodox truthmaking theory, TT will *not* be a pre-theoretical commitment. So Goff's response fails, and his first objection is misguided.

4. *Objection Two: Inappropriate Simplicity*

Goff's second objection is that Cameron's theory of truth is not simple, but inappropriately simple. Goff starts by pointing out that there are many different types of truth claim. But TT would entail that all truths were made true in the same way, which Goff thinks is quite odd. Goff compares it to the idea that biologists might start their enterprise thinking there was only one species in existence. It would indeed be crazy to endorse such a demand as a *pre-theoretical* commitment. So, just as we cannot *start* with a pre-theoretical commitment to there being (in biology) one species, or (in physics) one type of fundamental sub-atomic particle, or (in economics) one type of economically relevant resource etc. we can't *start* with the idea that there is one type of truth.

But we can *end up* with those things as *theoretical* commitments. It'd be crazy for a physicist to take, as a pre-theoretical commitment, that there was only one type of fundamental particle, but it's *not* crazy for physicists to conclude this after much research (simply witness the rise of superstring theory). As Cameron argues for TT being a theoretical commitment, his theory isn't inappropriately simple. So Goff's second objection also misses the mark.

5. *Is Heterodoxy Viable?*

As it stands, Goff is attacking a strawman. But perhaps Goff thinks he is justified in evaluating Cameron's argument as one for orthodoxy because, even though Cameron doesn't argue for orthodox truthmaking theory, he nevertheless *should*. Presumably, the only reason to think this is if TT being a theoretical commitment renders it unsuitable to carry out the work that truthmaking is normally intended for.

But heterodox truthmaking theory *can* do all the work that orthodoxy manages to achieve. TT is deployed to show that certain substantive theoretical commitments (e.g. typical presentist theories) are wrong. Cameron's heterodox truthmaking theory can do that just as well as orthodox truthmaking theory. Sure, it'll no longer be true that TT is 'catching the cheaters', as the theories that heterodox truthmaking theory rules out aren't 'cheating' *per se*. Rather, such theories are failing to offer the best balance of costs and benefits. Nevertheless, *those theories would still be wrong*. And, at the end of the day, *that's* what we're interested in – which theories are right, and which are wrong. If presentism is wrong because it 'cheated', then it's wrong. But if presentism is wrong because it doesn't offer the best cost/benefit analysis, it's still *wrong*. Wrong is wrong, whether cheating took place or not. So there's no reason to think Cameron should feel obliged to argue for orthodox truthmaking theory.

6. *Orthodoxy and Cameron's Argument*

But even if Cameron needn't pursue orthodoxy on the basis of a cost/benefit analysis, other truthmaking theorists *might*. As so many truthmaking theorists hold 'cheat catching' close to their hearts, we might instead see Goff as exploring logical space and presenting objections to such a possible line of reasoning. In that case, I think Goff would

be correct, and no-one should dare use a cost/benefit analysis to argue for orthodox truthmaking theory.

However, I think the reasons for this are quite different from Goff's. It's not, as Goff argues, that Cameron's argument doesn't work in favour of orthodoxy because it'd get the costs and benefits wrong. Rather, if TT is pre-theoretic then one cannot even carry out a cost/benefit analysis. Cameron's argument involves weighing the merits of a theory that endorses TT (e.g. a standard version of eternalism) versus the merits of theories that don't (e.g. a run of the mill version of presentism). But the orthodox truthmaker theorist doesn't think going against TT is just a cost. Unlike other pre-theoretic demands (such as ontological parsimony, theoretical simplicity etc.), where not meeting those demands just incurs a cost when it comes to carrying out a cost/benefit analysis, the orthodox truthmaking theorist simply says that theories which don't meet the demands of TT are *wrong*. Such theories have cheated, and are to be discarded. So theories inconsistent with TT are cast aside before we even get to the stage of weighing and measuring them for the purpose of a cost/benefit analysis.¹ If there are no theories inconsistent with TT to weigh TT against, it'd be *vacuously* true that theories endorsing TT offer the best theory. This is because TT is only the best theory as all other competitors have been excluded *by relying on TT*, hence it'd be question begging to advance such an argument. So this part of logical space is, as Goff says, not a good place to be, but not for the reasons he lays out.

7. Conclusion

Cameron may well be wrong, and truthmaking may not offer the best combination of costs and benefits (for instance, see Tallant [Forthcoming]). But if Cameron is wrong, it is not for the reasons Goff gives. Nonetheless, an important lesson has been learnt, in that Cameron's version of truthmaking brings to light the maturation of truthmaking theory, and highlights how truthmaking theorists need no longer be wedded to the 'cheat catching' orthodox version. There is more to truthmaking than catching the cheats, as sometimes being wrong is good enough.²

8. Bibliography

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¹ Could we alter TT so it didn't rule out such 'cheating' theories entirely, but merely levied a cost on them? Possibly, but then it isn't orthodox truthmaking theory any more (or even heterodox). So we'd be using Cameron's argument, not just for a conclusion he didn't intend, but a conclusion no-one holds.

² With thanks to Jonathan Tallant and Philip Goff.

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