

Forget about the ‘correspondence theory of truth’

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The topic of truth is standardly presented as a contest between several rival theories of truth: the correspondence theory, the redundancy theory, the coherence theory, and perhaps also the pragmatic and epistemic theories. The correspondence theory is supposed to be the leading contender, the one to beat. It says that truth is correspondence to fact.

Four-fifths of this picture is right. The redundancy theory, the coherence theory, and the pragmatic and epistemic theories really are rival theories of truth. They are incompatible. For instance, since the redundancy theory says

(1) It's true that cats purr iff cats purr,

and the pragmatic theory says

It's true that cats purr iff it's useful to believe that cats purr,

and since these two biconditionals are meant to be a priori, and since

It's useful to believe that cats purr iff cats purr

is manifestly not a priori, the redundancy theory and the pragmatic theory conflict. Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the redundancy theory versus the coherence and epistemic theories; and for the coherence, pragmatic, and epistemic theories versus one another.

The alleged conflict between the correspondence theory and the redundancy theory is different. The conflict is not with the positive part of the redundancy theory, the bundle of redundancy biconditionals such as (1). Taking (1) together with

It's true that cats purr iff the proposition that cats purr corresponds to fact

we get something that does *not* manifestly fail to be a priori:

The proposition that cats purr corresponds to fact iff cats purr.

It is safe to assume, and I shall assume henceforth, that the redundancy biconditionals are joined in alliance with the correspondence theory. So far, so good. But there is also a negative part to the redundancy theory: the claim that the redundancy biconditionals are all the theory of truth we need. The correspondence theory allegedly disagrees, insisting that more must be said.

The idea that the correspondence theory is another one of the rival theories of truth is mistaken. For that to be true, it would be necessary, first,

that the correspondence theory really does go beyond the redundancy theory; second, that it really does conflict with the coherence and pragmatic and epistemic theories; third, that it is a theory aptly summarized by the slogan ‘truth is correspondence to fact’; and fourth, that it really is a theory of truth, not a bundle of claims having nothing especially to do with truth.

I shall consider two principal versions of the correspondence theory. I shall complain that one of them fails to satisfy the first and second conditions, whereas the other fails to satisfy the third and fourth. I think that other versions will resemble one or the other of these two well enough that my complaints will carry over.

I take our topic to be, in the first instance, the truth of propositions. Sentences, or sentences in context, or particular assertions of sentences, or thoughts, can derivatively be called true; but only when they succeed in expressing determinate (or near enough determinate) propositions. A sentence (or ...) might fail to express a proposition because it is ambiguous; or because it is vague; or because it is paradoxical or ungrounded; or because it is not declarative; or because it is a mere expression of feeling in the syntactic guise of a declarative sentence.¹ Such a sentence (or ...) is not a candidate for the status of truth *simpliciter*. But it might be a candidate for a related status such as truth on some or all of its disambiguations, or truth on some or all or most or few of its precisifications, or truth on some or all of a class of arbitrary and ungrounded assignments of truth values, or make-believe truth.

Someone might say ‘correspondence theory of truth’ and just mean the claim that true sentences (or ...) correspond to true propositions. Well and good; but set it aside because it conflicts with none of the alleged rivals to the correspondence theory, and because it does not address the prior question of the nature of propositional truth.

Someone might say ‘correspondence theory of truth’ and just mean the claim that truth, at least contingent truth, is an extrinsic rather than an intrinsic property. Set this aside because it again conflicts with none of the alleged rivals, and because it does not even mention the relation of correspondence or the facts that are supposed to be the relata. We go on to a version that deserves more serious consideration.

More often than not, saying it’s true that cats purr is synonymous with calling it a truth that cats purr, and that in turn is synonymous with calling

¹ When people in philosophy books go to the footy, they express their feelings by saying ‘Boo!’ or ‘Hooray!’ Real people use a wider range of expressive locutions. Some of these have at least the superficial form of declarative sentences: ‘Leeds boot boys rule’ or ‘Collingwood sucks’. A (pompous) bystander might indeed respond to such a sentence by saying ‘That’s true’ or ‘That’s false’, but calling it so doesn’t make it so. Unless the sentence did after all express a true or false proposition, the bystander’s response would be just a piece of make-believe.

it a fact that cats purr, or with saying that there is such a fact as the fact that cats purr. In short: a fact on this usage is nothing other than a true proposition, whatever that is. Likewise saying it's false that pigs fly is synonymous with calling it a falsehood that pigs fly, and that in turn is synonymous with saying it is not a fact that pigs fly, or with saying that there is no such fact as the fact that pigs fly.

On this usage, *of course* truth is correspondence to fact: each truth corresponds to a fact by being identical to that fact. On this usage, the correspondence theory is utterly vacuous. Any work done is done not by this vacuous theory but by the redundancy biconditionals that we have assumed to be joined in alliance with it. So on this usage, the correspondence theory fails to go beyond the redundancy theory. It doesn't even get as far as the redundancy theory.

Further, on this usage the claim that truth is correspondence to fact does not conflict with any rival theory of truth; it is only the redundancy biconditionals that are joined in alliance with it that conflict. An adherent of the coherence or pragmatic or epistemic theory of truth has no business denying that truth is correspondence, indeed identity, to fact. He should instead offer us his coherence or pragmatic or epistemic theory of what it is to be a fact.

This usage leads to a 'correspondence theory' that does not go beyond the redundancy theory, and that does not by itself conflict with any of its alleged rivals. Away with it!

So we get nowhere if we stick to the usage on which a fact is nothing else but a true proposition. Fortunately, a quite different usage is available: the usage on which a 'fact' is a Tractarian fact, or what Armstrong (as opposed to Chisholm) calls a state of affairs, or what Mellor calls a 'factum'. (See Wittgenstein 1922; Armstrong 1997; Chisholm 1970: 20f.; Mellor 1995: 162ff. Of course I don't assume that a proponent of Tractarian facts must agree with all that Wittgenstein or Armstrong or Mellor says about them.) A Tractarian fact is not a proposition. It is not something true that might have been false. Rather, it might have not existed at all. What do we get if we say that truth is correspondence to Tractarian facts?

Armstrong (1997: 128ff.) says that we get the truthmaker principle, and that this is indeed a version of the correspondence theory of truth. It differs from other versions mostly by denying that the correspondence of truths to facts must be one-one. The principle may be stated as follows. For every truth there is a truthmaker; for every true proposition there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies (strictly? relevantly?) the proposition in question.

The truthmaker principle is certainly not vacuous! Myself, I think it is right in spirit, and importantly so; but it may be wrong in letter, and may stand in need of the 're-articulation' proposed by John Bigelow (1988:

132ff.). Or it may be right in letter, but defensible as such only by invoking some highly controversial metaphysics of modality, as I've argued (Lewis forthcoming). This theory does go beyond the allied redundancy biconditionals. It does conflict with the coherence or pragmatic or epistemic theories, since it is manifestly not a priori, for example, that there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that cats purr iff it is useful to believe that cats purr. So far so good. My complaints against the vacuous 'correspondence theory' do not recur. However, I have two new complaints.

First. Wherefore does the truthmaker principle deserve the name 'correspondence theory'? How does having a truthmaker come to the same thing as corresponding to a fact? Presumably because it is expected that the truthmakers will be facts. Tractarian facts, presumably; because the facts that are just true propositions are well-nigh useless as truthmakers.² Sometimes so, if indeed there are any Tractarian facts. There may not be. (For a thorough recent defence of them, see Armstrong 1997; for some misgivings, see Lewis 1999.) If there are Tractarian facts, each of them is a truthmaker at least for the truth that there exists at least one Tractarian fact; and if there are Tractarian facts, doubtless they do a lot more truthmaking than that. But there are also things that are not Tractarian facts. Even if they are constituents of facts, or abstractions from facts, that is not the same as being identical to facts. For instance, if there are non-facts, each of them is a truthmaker for the truth that there exists at least one non-fact. In this case, at least, the truthmaker is not a fact. (You could at best hope that whenever a non-fact is a truthmaker, some fact is another truthmaker for the same truth, namely a fact that has the non-fact as a constituent. But that is still not to say that all truthmakers are facts, and anyway it depends on the ambitious claim that every non-fact whatever is a constituent of some fact.)

Second. Wherefore is this 'correspondence theory of truth' a theory of *truth*? It seems instead to be a theory of all manner of things, and not especially of truth; and what we learn about truth comes not from it but rather from the allied redundancy biconditionals. Truth is mentioned in the truthmaker principle only for the sake of making a long story short. Take an instance of the truthmaker principle

- (2) It's true that cats purr iff there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that cats purr.

² A fact in the sense of a true proposition would still exist if it were false; it exists non-contingently. Its non-contingent existence cannot imply anything contingent, and so cannot imply the truth of any contingent proposition. Yet true propositions are not altogether inert as truthmakers: each of them is a truthmaker at least for the truth that there exists at least one proposition. Trivially so, if we understand truthmaking in terms of strict implication; for then anything whatever is a truthmaker for any non-contingent truth. Non-trivially so, if instead we have recourse to relevant implication.

Given the redundancy biconditional (1), (2) is equivalent to

- (3) Cats purr iff there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that cats purr.

But (3) tells us nothing about truth. It is about the existential grounding of the purring of cats. All other instances of the truthmaker principle are likewise equivalent, given the redundancy biconditionals, to biconditionals not about truth but about the existential grounding of all manner of other things: the flying of pigs, or what-have-you. The concise slogan that every truth has a truthmaker is equivalent, given the redundancy biconditionals, to this infinite bundle of biconditionals that are not at all about truth. So it too is not at all about truth.

The point is familiar in other connections. Given the redundancy biconditionals, the mention of truth lets us formulate generalizations that make long stories short, but the long stories made short are not about truth. Take another example.

Whatever the Party says is true
is equivalent to an infinite bundle of conditionals:

If the Party says that two and two make five, then two and two make five,

If the Party says that we have always been at war with Eastasia, then we have always been at war with Eastasia.

And so on, and so forth. Every item in the bundle is about the inerrancy of the Party, not about truth. Even those of them that pertain to what the Party might say about truth, though indeed they do at least mention truth, give us exactly no unconditional information about truth, and in that sense even they are not about truth.

If the truthmaker principle amounts to a bundle of claims that are not at all about truth, it should not be called a 'theory of truth'. For this reason, as well as the previous one, if it's the truthmaker principle we mean, 'correspondence theory of truth' is a misnomer.

Now I ought to survey all the other things that 'correspondence theory of truth' might possibly be thought to mean. Rather than do that, I merely conjecture that every alternative will come out like one or another of the ones we've already considered.³

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³ Thanks are due to Vera Koffman, who gave the correspondence theory a very good run for its money and thereby provoked this tirade.

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