

Real Metaphysics

Essays in honour of D. H. Mellor

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Postscript to ‘Things qua truthmakers’: negative existentials

Gideon Rosen and David Lewis

So far, Lewis has granted that true predications do after all have truthmakers. But he does not yet accept the Truthmaker Principle in full generality, because he still doubts that true negative existentials have truthmakers. But if Lewis’s proposal to take qua-versions of things as truthmakers will work at all – in other words, if we are entitled to take ordinary things as truthmakers by supposing that they make propositions true relative to the peculiar counterpart relations that are evoked by peculiar names for those ordinary things – then his proposal can be extended to the case of negative existentials.

We should not take cat Long qua unaccompanied by unicorns as a truthmaker for the truth that there are no unicorns. That was indeed a cheap trick, for the reason Lewis said: the requisite ‘peculiar counterpart relation’ is no genuine counterpart relation at all, being founded on an unimportant and unduly extrinsic respect of similarity. But if we take a qua-version of a better-chosen thing, we can use a much more satisfactory counterpart relation.

Begin with an easy case: restricted negative existentials, such as the truth that there are no unicorns in this room. (In this room now, but let that restriction remain tacit.) Let this room⁺ consist of this room together with everything in it: the air, the furniture, the unicorns if any, This room⁺ qua including no unicorns is a truthmaker for the truth that there are no unicorns in this room. This time, the peculiar counterpart relation evoked is founded on an entirely intrinsic and salient respect of similarity. But we could instead have used this room qua containing no unicorns; the counterpart relation is still satisfactory, being founded on intrinsic similarity not between the counterparts themselves – the rooms – but between more inclusive things – rooms⁺ – that are saliently related to the counterpart rooms.

Likewise, *mutatis mutandis*, for the less restricted negative existential truth that there are no unicorns on this planet; or even the truth that there are no unicorns in this galaxy; or even the truth that there are no unicorns in this galaxy throughout its history.

For unrestricted negative existentials, such as the truth that there are no unicorns anywhere, ever, we can take as truthmaker a qua-version of the entire world: the totality of everything there actually is. That way, our counterpart relation can again be founded on intrinsic similarity.

What is a counterpart of the world? Must it be an entire possible world, the totality of all there is in its world? (In that case, a counterpart of the actual world in a world W would have to be the world W itself, nothing less.) Or might it be just a proper part of a world? For instance, might our four-dimensional world have as a counterpart a four-dimensional slice of some five-dimensional world? We suppose this is one of those questions about ‘the’ counterpart relation that has no determinate answer; in other words, there are counterpart relations under which the world is essentially total, and there are counterpart relations under which it is not. But for present purposes, we need to consider counterpart relations under which the world is essentially total. ‘The entire world’ or ‘the world qua total’, or ‘the world qua unaccompanied’ can be taken as names for the world that evoke such counterpart relations.

Is the counterpart relation evoked by such names a satisfactory one? We think so. Being unaccompanied is an extrinsic property, to be sure (Lewis 1983; Langton and Lewis 1998). So similarity in respect of being unaccompanied is an extrinsic respect of similarity. However, the property of being completely unaccompanied (unlike Long’s property of being unaccompanied by a unicorn) does seem quite important to the character of anything that has it. Further, it is nomologically linked to quite an important intrinsic property: being, at least ostensibly, self-contained. Because the world is completely unaccompanied it will never, short of a miracle, be affected by signals or visitors suddenly arriving as if from elsewhere.

Besides making the world essentially total, we can impose further conditions on the evoked counterpart relation by adding further qua-phrases in our usual way. For instance, the entire world qua lacking unicorns, under the counterpart relation evoked by the name we just gave it, is (1) essentially total and (2) essentially without unicorns. If indeed the world does lack unicorns, this evocative name is just another name for the world. We propose that the entire world qua lacking unicorns is a truthmaker for the negative existential truth that there are no unicorns anywhere, ever.

The proposal can be repeated for other negative existential propositions, with one exception: the proposition that there are no contingent things at all, not even the world. If indeed that proposition could be true, it would have to be a truth without a truthmaker – for if it were true in virtue of some truthmaker, never mind what, never mind under what counterpart relation, then there would be something and not nothing.

Another truthmaker for the truth that there are no unicorns, and indeed for all other negative existential truths, and indeed for all truths without exception, is the entire world qua just as it is. The counterparts of the world under the peculiar counterpart relation evoked by this name are just those entire worlds that are intrinsic duplicates of the actual world.

Recall that Lewis left open the question of whether there are indiscernible worlds. If there are not, then the actual world itself is the only counterpart of the entire world qua just as it is. So we may well suspect that the Truthmaker

Principle has been trivialized in an unintended way: the proposition – *any* proposition – is true in all worlds where the truthmaker exists because (1) it is true in this world and (2) we have chosen the truthmaker so as to make sure that there are no other worlds where it exists! If, on the other hand, there are indiscernible worlds, then the evoked counterpart relation is not identity but indiscernibility, and so our sense of trivialization should diminish. Anyhow, no parallel suspicion can arise against our first proposal that the truthmaker for the truth that there are no unicorns is the entire world qua lacking unicorns. In that case, the counterparts of the world under the evoked counterpart relation are many and varied.

In Armstrong's (1997: 134–5, 196–201) scheme of things, the truthmakers for negative existential propositions are *totality facts*. These are special states of affairs of the form $T(X)$, where T is a property (perhaps higher order) of totality and X is something (perhaps not a particular) that has this property because it is exhaustive, all there is. Or they may have the form $T(X,Y)$, where T is a totality relation and X and Y stand in this relation because X exhausts Y . We need only consider the easiest case: $T(a)$, where a is a particular and $T(a)$ is the state of affairs of a 's being exhaustive.

Now if a is going to be exhaustive, a had better be an especially big particular: the entire world. And it must be the world considered as a 'concrete' particular, the cosmos, not some sort of 'abstract' entity, such as a linguistic or mathematical or propositional representation of the cosmos, or a structural property instantiated by the cosmos. [It does not matter for present purposes whether we believe, with Lewis (1986), that unactualized *cosmoi* exist, or whether we believe, with Rosen (1990; 1995), that they are fictitious.] And let a be the world as a 'thick' particular, identified with the state of affairs $F(a)$, where F gives the complete intrinsic character of a . The totality fact $T(a)$ is a citizen in good standing of Armstrong's world of states of affairs; and by his lights, it should be a truthmaker for all negative existential truths, all true predications having the world or its parts as subjects and all other truths as well. We note that $T(a)$ has just the same existence conditions as the entire world qua just as it is: necessarily, it exists (it has a counterpart) just in case an exact intrinsic duplicate of the actual world both exists and is exhaustive. So Armstrong, at any rate, dare not say that it trivializes the Truthmaker Principle to take the entire world qua just as it is as a truthmaker for all truths. The parallel with $T(a)$ would be too close for comfort.¹

Note

- 1 We thank Phillip Bricker and Mark Johnston, who suggested the central idea for this chapter. Bricker (1999) is his own account of the matter. We also thank D. M. Armstrong, Cian Dorr, Allen Hazen, D. H. Mellor, Josh Parsons and the Boyce Gibson Memorial Library.

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