

CHAPTER 14

Postscript to “Why truth-makers”

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In this chapter I shall reply to a pair of articles in which the main contention of my “Why truth-makers” – namely, that an important class of synthetic true propositions have entities as truth-makers – is rejected. In §§1–5 I reply to Jennifer Hornsby’s “Truth without Truthmaking Entities” (2005) and in §§6–7 I reply to Julian Dodd’s “Negative Truths and Truthmaker Principles” (2007).

1.

In §1 of her paper Hornsby writes that I express my premise that truth is grounded in various ways. One of these, which she calls ‘(G₂)’, is this:

(G₂) The truth of <the rose is red> is explained [/determined] by the rose’s being red.

When she later on refers to (G₂), she refers mainly to the formulation in terms of ‘explained by’. In a footnote Hornsby writes that she is quoting almost *verbatim* as far as possible (2005: 34 n.3). Now although I said that one explains the truth of <the rose is red> in terms of the rose’s being red, I did not mean this to be a way of expressing the idea that truth is grounded. Indeed I made this claim about explanation in the paragraph preceding the one where I say there are many ways of expressing the idea that truth is grounded (this vol., Ch. 13, 231). What I had in mind is that this fact about explanation is a *consequence* of the fact that the truth of <the rose is red> is determined by the rose’s being red. But the idea that truth is grounded does not consist in, nor is it constituted by, the fact about explanation. But I acknowledge that I was not explicit on this, and that even if I made my statement about explanation in a different paragraph from the one where I

introduce several ways of expressing the idea that truth is grounded, this may not have been enough to prevent confusion.

Anyway, Hornsby contrasts (G2) with what she calls '(G1)':

(G1) <the rose is red> is true because the rose is red.

And then she makes some curious remarks. For instance, she writes that (G2) would seem to be what I need, given that my target is the claim that truth is grounded in entities. For she writes that in my view 'the rose's being red' denotes a truth-maker and the "nice thing about (G2)" from my point of view, she writes, is that it appears explicitly to mention such an entity. But (G1) does not mention any entity, at least after the 'because' (2005: 35).

If my project had been to show that language commits us to certain entities, then perhaps I would have needed (G2). Then I could have argued that the reference to an entity by 'the rose's being red' is ineliminable and so that (G2) commits us to certain entities, the truth-makers. But that was not my project. My project was not to reach ontological conclusions by exposing a fragment of language that reveals ontology. My project was to reach ontological conclusions through a different kind of argument. In particular, I wanted to give an argument that if truth is grounded, then it is grounded in entities. And (G1) expresses the idea that truth is grounded as well as (G2). This is why I used (G1). And as Hornsby recognizes, I used mainly (G1). And the reason why I used *mainly* (G1) was precisely that 'the rose is red' does not *mention* any entity and therefore no one should think that I am arguing for the existence of truth-makers from the fact that there is a phrase that appears to mention them!

Hornsby writes that (G2) exhibits ontology if I am right, that my opponent holds that (G1) "gives the lie" to the idea that ontology is exhibited, and that a question that separates me from my opponents is which of these approximately equivalent formulations to put one's money on (*ibid.*: 36). But this is not the right diagnosis of the dialectical situation. The issue is not one about choosing between two formulations of one idea, one that exhibits ontology and the other that does not. As I just said, I worked mainly with the formulation that Hornsby says my opponents claim not to exhibit ontology, namely (G1). So the issue between my opponents and me is not one about which one of those formulations we should prefer. The issue is whether one can account for what makes true that, say, the rose is red, in terms of how the rose is or whether one must postulate some entities to account for that.

In §1.2 Hornsby writes that 'the truth of <the rose is red>' might be thought to denote a state of affairs additional to any to which someone who says that the rose is red is committed, or it might be thought simply to denote the same state of affairs as 'the rose's being red' does (*ibid.*: 36). Hornsby is right to say that I do not endorse the second alternative. But on the first alternative, Hornsby writes, a proposition's truth is an entity different from that which makes the proposition true. One then appears to be committed to "an unending hierarchy of truth-

makers in respect of each proposition: the truth of $\langle p \rangle$, the truth of $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle , the truth of $\langle \langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle is true \rangle , and so on" (*ibid.*).

Hornsby thinks there are ways out of this unending hierarchy. She thinks that by simply denying that 'the truth of \langle the rose is red \rangle ' denotes I could accord unequal treatment to 'the truth of \langle the rose is red \rangle ' and 'the rose's being red'. Then she writes that I would "acknowledge that finding a nominalization in an approximate equivalent of a sentence doesn't *in general* reveal an ontology to which one would be committed by affirming the corresponding proposition" and that I would probably acknowledge also that "no *general* support for [the claim that truth is grounded in entities] can be made with the claim [truth is grounded]" (*ibid.*). Yes, I would happily acknowledge the things Hornsby says I would. But I never said or thought that a nominalization would in general reveal the ontological commitments of the propositions, so I never thought that that truth is grounded could give support to the idea that truth is grounded in entities in that way. Only in the context of an argument, like the one I presented in §7 of "Why truth-makers", can the claim that truth is grounded give support to the idea that truth is grounded in entities.

Anyway, in a footnote, Hornsby considers something very close to what is indeed my line with respect to the problem of the unending hierarchy. She writes that I might say that even if the terms 'the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ ', 'the truth of $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle ' and so on do not denote states of affairs, nonetheless $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle , $\langle \langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle is true \rangle and so on are all grounded in an entity – namely the entity that is $\langle p \rangle$'s truth-maker (*ibid.*: 37 n.7). I would indeed say that all those nested propositions are made true by $\langle p \rangle$'s truth-maker. But note that in order to say this it is not necessary, as Hornsby suggests, to deny that 'the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ ', 'the truth of $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle ' and so on denote states of affairs. One could accept that they denote states of affairs yet maintain that these states of affairs are not the truth-makers of the nested propositions. This could be maintained for many different reasons. One could maintain that the entity that makes $\langle p \rangle$ and all the nested propositions true is not a state of affairs, but a trope, say, and that only tropes are truth-makers. Or one could maintain that, although some propositions like $\langle p \rangle$ have states of affairs as truth-makers, not all states of affairs act as truth-makers. So one could maintain that it is the state of affairs that p that makes $\langle p \rangle$ and the nested propositions true and that the states of affairs referred to by 'the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ ', 'the truth of $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle ' and so on are the truth-makers of no propositions at all.

As I said, I think that the truth-maker of the nested propositions $\langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle , $\langle \langle \langle p \rangle$ is true \rangle is true \rangle and so on is the truth-maker of $\langle p \rangle$. But Hornsby says that if this is the line, then in order to determine how terms like 'the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ ' behave, one will need to decide whether or not $\langle p \rangle$ has a truth-maker in some instance. And, she writes, what we need to be persuaded of in any particular case is precisely that $\langle p \rangle$ has a truth-maker (*ibid.*: 37 n.7). But I gave an argument that $\langle p \rangle$, when it is a synthetic proposition like \langle the rose is red \rangle , has a truth-maker. Hornsby is not convinced by this argument, but we shall see below that her criticisms do not go through.

In §1.3 Hornsby writes that we need to consider whether we are apt to accept the existence of truth-makers wherever such claims apply. She wonders whether nominalized phrases such as ‘the rose’s not being blue,’ ‘the rose’s being red or yellow’ and others are all equally good candidates for denoting truth-makers. She remembers that there are friends of states of affairs who doubt the existence of negative or disjunctive ones, and so, she writes, they will deny that things such as ‘The truth of <the rose is not blue> is determined by the rose’s not being blue’ and ‘The truth of <the rose is red or yellow> is determined by the rose’s being red or yellow’ (*ibid.*: 38).

First, as for negative and disjunctive facts, nothing in “Why truth-makers” commits me to their existence, or to the thesis that if they exist, they are the truth-makers of disjunctive or negative propositions. All my paper commits me to is that disjunctive and negative propositions such as <the rose is red or yellow> and <the rose is not blue> have some truth-maker: but that truth-maker might be, say, the non-disjunctive and non-negative fact that the rose is red. Note that I am not now claiming that the fact that the rose is red is the truth-maker of <the rose is red or yellow> and <the rose is not blue>. What I am saying is that this view is consistent with the thesis argued for and defended in “Why truth-makers”. My thesis was that all the propositions in a certain class of synthetic propositions have truth-makers, not that each one of those propositions has its own distinctive truth-maker.

Let me now make a more general point. Hornsby’s method in these passages consists in seeing whether we are disposed to assent to instances like ‘The truth of <the rose is not blue> is determined by the rose’s not being blue’ and ‘The truth of <the rose is red or yellow> is determined by the rose’s being red or yellow’. I reject this method from the very beginning. What if we are not disposed to assent to some or all of these instances? What if we are disposed to assent to some or all of these instances? Nothing of ontological interest follows from this. Our dispositions to assent or dissent tell us nothing about whether the world really contains entities that act as truth-makers. Thus such dispositions are not ontologically revealing. Such dispositions can only tell us about our *intuitions* and so they can only tell us about *us*. And of course my method in “Why truth-makers” was not to prove that there are truth-makers via establishing that we would assent to linguistic instances of *any* sort.

2.

In §6 of “Why truth-makers” I put forward an argument for truth-makers based on the claim that truth is grounded. The argument, very roughly put, consists in showing that since there are many ways the rose is, one cannot account for what makes true that the rose is red without reifying those ways the rose is. At one point in the course of that argument I challenged my opponents to explain what it

means, or what it consists in, that for the rose to instantiate the property of *being red* is not for it to instantiate the property of *being light*. The challenge consists in explaining that without reifying ways things are.

Hornsby writes that it is obvious that for the rose to instantiate the property of *being red* is not for it to instantiate the property of *being light*, and that it is also obvious what this means. She says that given a conception of properties we know that for any object to instantiate the property of *being red* is for that object to be red, and that for it to instantiate the property of *being light* is for it to be light; and we know that what it is for an object to be red is not what it is for it to be light (2005: 41).

First, a preliminary comment. Hornsby says that given a conception of properties we know that for any object to instantiate the property of *being red* is for it to be red. But it is the other way around. For a conception of properties is supposed to explain what it is for an object to be red. So, in any case, what one should say is that given a conception of properties one knows that for any object to be red is for it to instantiate the property of *being red*.

Secondly, but more importantly, the challenge consisted in explaining what it means, or what it consists in, that for the rose to instantiate the property of *being red* is not for it to instantiate the property of *being light without* reifying the rose's instantiation of the properties of *being red* and *being light*. Nothing in what Hornsby writes meets this challenge.

Saying that it is obvious that what it is for an object to be red is not for it to be light clearly does not meet the challenge. Could saying that being red and being light consists, respectively, in instantiating different properties meet the challenge? Not on the face of it. One has to explain how having the property of *being red* is not having the property of *being light* without reifying the having of properties. I considered certain ways of doing this in the context of trying to account for what makes true that the rose is red and I argued they were not satisfactory. But Hornsby provides no way of doing that. So far, the challenge remains unmet.

3.

In §3 of her reply Hornsby turns to my main argument for truth-makers, namely:

- (1) Truth is grounded.
- (2) Grounding is a relation.
- (3) Relations link entities.
- (4) Therefore, truth is grounded in entities.

She writes that one is entitled to (2) only if a relation is employed in the proper explication of (1). And she says that in §1 of her reply she gave reasons for

doubting whether any relations are introduced in the spellings out of (1) I offered (2005: 41).

No reasons were needed to show that I did not introduce any relations when I spelled out (1), for introducing relations at that stage was never my intention. I argued for (2) in §7 of my paper.

Anyway, Hornsby does not explain why one is entitled to (2) only if a relation is employed in the proper explication of (1). But surely this is not true. Imagine someone arguing like this: (A) Hector is a Trojan; (B) Being a Trojan consists in having a property; (C) Therefore, Hector has a property. And now imagine someone objecting to this argument on the basis that one is entitled to (B) only if a property is employed or introduced in the proper explication of (A). Surely the objector would be missing the nature of this argument. Hornsby is missing the nature of my argument in the same way.

Perhaps by 'proper explication' Hornsby understands 'complete explication' and by completely explicating that truth is grounded Hornsby understands something that includes explaining or at least mentioning everything about grounding. Then one would be entitled to (2) only if a relation appeared in the proper explication of (1). But if this is what 'proper explication' means I did not need to 'properly explicate' the claim that truth is grounded in order to establish it. So, once established, I could go on to establish (2), which is what I did.

4.

In §4.1 Hornsby writes that it is true of *any* proposition $\langle p \rangle$ that while $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p , it is not that p because $\langle p \rangle$ is true (2005: 42). I disagree. This is not true of *any* propositions since the truth-teller is an exception, as I pointed out in §5 of "Why truth-makers". But what Hornsby says is true of any proposition is instead true of a significant class of synthetic propositions about things like roses and non-truth-bearers in general.

Hornsby writes that I do not think that this asymmetry can be explained by the fact that instances of ' $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p ' involve us in semantic descent, whereas instances of ' p because $\langle p \rangle$ is true' do not. This is true: I do not believe that.

Hornsby suggests that whatever explanation I give of why $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p , while it is not the case that p because $\langle p \rangle$ is true, should work along the same lines of the explanation of why $\{a\}$ has an F -member because a is F while it is not the case that a is F because $\{a\}$ has an F -member.

Note that this assumes that the 'because' is the same in the case of the truth of $\langle p \rangle$ as in the case of the F -ness of the member of $\{a\}$. This assumption deserves serious discussion, but for reasons of space I shall assume it without proper discussion.

Now if the 'because' is the same then of course I take it to be a relation, and then $\{a\}$ has an F -member because of a certain entity. This entity cannot be a , at

least if F is a contingent property of a . It must be either the fact that a is F , or some other entity apt to fit the role in question. (And, although it does not follow, it is plausible to suppose that that entity is as well the truth-maker of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$.) So (assuming the ‘because’ is the same in both cases) Hornsby’s natural idea that the explanations should work along the same lines is satisfied: they do.

In §4.2 Hornsby gives her own explanation of why $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p but not vice versa. She writes:

sometimes it is no good answering the question *Why s?* by saying *because t* unless s ’s being the case requires something more than t ’s being the case. To take the example of concern here – its being the case that $\langle p \rangle$ is true requires more (in the sense elicited) than that p should be the case; and it is no good answering the question *Why p?* by saying *because $\langle p \rangle$ is true*, even though one may answer the question *Why is $\langle p \rangle$ true?* by saying *because p*. (2005: 44)

First, although Hornsby writes that in some cases (“sometimes”) one should not answer *Why s?* by saying *because t* unless s ’s being the case requires something more than t ’s being the case, she does not say why saying that p because $\langle p \rangle$ is true is one of those cases.

Furthermore Hornsby assumes but does not explain why that $\langle p \rangle$ is true requires more than what that p requires. She says that for the rose to be red it is not required that there should be anything meaningful to say or to think, and that it is not required that the proposition that the rose is red should be propounded (*ibid.*: 43). True, for the rose to be red it is not required that the proposition that the rose is red should be propounded. But that the rose is red requires that there be something meaningful that can be said or thought, namely the proposition that the rose is red. For if the rose is red, then the proposition that the rose is red is true, and therefore the proposition exists. So, necessarily the rose is red if and only if the proposition that the rose is red is true. And so, that the rose is red requires that the proposition be true no less than that that the proposition is true requires that the rose be red.

5.

Hornsby sees a tension in my thought about truth-makers. For, she writes, on the one hand, I call them entities, I speak of our need of reifying some features of reality and I shrink from saying that any old sentence nominalization denotes such a thing. On the other hand, Hornsby says, my main argument for the existence of truth-makers “can seem to show that every proposition has a truthmaker”. For, Hornsby says, I believe the existence of truth-makers is required to explain

the correctness of the schema ' $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p ' and "in any instance of this schema, one might simply nominalize the sentence that expresses $\langle p \rangle$ to say what $\langle p \rangle$'s truthmaker is" (2005: 45). Hornsby proposes to relieve this tension by using nominalizations but refusing to claim that their denotations exist (*ibid.*: 46).

But there is no need to relieve a tension that does not exist. For, as I have already said, I reject the idea that any nominalization of the sentence that expresses $\langle p \rangle$ gives us the truth-maker of $\langle p \rangle$. Nothing in the argument of "Why truth-makers" suggests or implies that any sentence nominalization gives us the truth-maker of the propositions expressed by the sentence. All the argument claims is that if certain true propositions are grounded, then given that grounding is a relation and that relations link entities, those grounded propositions are grounded in entities. All this is consistent with the nominalization 'the rose's not being blue' not giving us the truth-maker of \langle the rose is not blue \rangle . As I said before, this could be the fact that the rose is not blue, but it could also be the fact that the rose is red, or the red trope of the rose, or the rose itself if it is necessarily red, or whatever entity metaphysicians might discover play the role of truth-makers. The nominalization 'the rose's not being blue' does not settle the issue of what the truth-maker of \langle the rose is not blue \rangle is – nor did I ever suggest it did.

6.

Dodd (2007) thinks the idea that grounding is a relation can be accommodated without thereby admitting truth-makers. Taking inspiration from Russell's theory of judgement, Dodd claims that it may well be correct to think of grounding as a relation, but it does not follow that it is a relation between a true proposition and a truth-maker, since it could be a relation of a true proposition to several objects (*ibid.*: 398). Thus, according to Dodd, for the true proposition $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$ to be grounded is not for a binary relation to obtain between it and its truth-maker but for $\langle a \rangle$ to refer to a , $\langle F \rangle$ to express F , and for a to instantiate F . "The obtaining of any grounding relation consists in the obtaining of sub-sentential thought/world relations and the fact that the object instantiates the property" (*ibid.*).

But this is not very clear. Dodd starts by saying that although grounding is a relation it may well be a relation between a proposition and several objects: but what are those objects? He does not say. He singles out a and F as *relata* of certain relations but they are not singled out as *relata* of a relation linking them to the proposition $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$ but of two different relations linking them to $\langle a \rangle$ and $\langle F \rangle$. True, he says that the grounding relation, one of whose *relata* is the proposition $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$, consists in these other relations obtaining. Perhaps he means that $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$ is grounded by being related to a and F . But this cannot be true since the groundedness of a proposition $\langle p \rangle$ consists in that $\langle p \rangle$ is true because p , but it makes no sense to say that $\langle a$ is $F \rangle$ is true because a and F . This is, perhaps,

why Dodd writes that for $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ to be grounded is for $\langle a \rangle$ to refer to a , $\langle F \rangle$ to express F , and for a to instantiate F . But this still does not tell us to which objects $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is related by the grounding relation; unless, of course, he means that there are three such objects: a , F and a 's instantiating F . But this would be to posit a truth-maker, and it would make it unnecessary to include the non-truth-makers a and F among the *relata* of the grounding relation. Clearly, this is not what Dodd wanted to mean. But it is not easy to see what else what he writes could mean.

7.

Dodd argues that the asymmetry of the dependence between truth and reality (namely that, in general, while truth depends on reality, reality does not depend on truth) is a conceptual rather than a modal-existential asymmetry. This means, according to Dodd, that ' $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true because $a \text{ is } F$ ' is true because 'because' signals that what follows it is claimed to be conceptually more basic than what precedes it, and this is indeed the case (2007: 398–9). Similarly, according to this explanation, what explains why ' $a \text{ is } F$ because $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true' is false is that what follows the 'because' is not conceptually more basic than what precedes it. According to Dodd, that $a \text{ is } F$ is conceptually more basic than that $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true because the identity of $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is partially determined by the items to which its constituents refer, and so one can understand what is required for $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ to be true, namely that a be F , by engaging in semantic descent and ceasing to talk of propositions, while semantic ascent from ' $a \text{ is } F$ ' to ' $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true' introduces a concept, namely that of a proposition, which was not in use before the ascent took place (*ibid.*: 399–400).

Provided ' F ' can be understood without understanding the concept of proposition (and truth, let us add), then there seems to be the asymmetry mentioned by Dodd.¹ But I fail to see what such an asymmetry has to do with the asymmetry that consists in that a 's being F determines that $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true but that $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true does not determine that $a \text{ is } F$. Dodd may have accounted for an asymmetry concerning truth but he has not shown that he has accounted for the asymmetry that needed accounting for. And it is difficult to see how he could do that, since the fact that to understand the concept of the proposition that $a \text{ is } F$ one needs to understand what a and F are, but to understand that $a \text{ is } F$ one does not need to understand the concept of the proposition that $a \text{ is } F$ is perfectly compatible with (the falsity) that while $a \text{ is } F$ because $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true, it is not the case that $\langle a \text{ is } F \rangle$ is true because $a \text{ is } F$.²

Notes

1. I owe the important proviso in the antecedent to David Liggins.
2. Thanks to David Liggins for discussion.