

Truthmaking and Realism

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ABSTRACT

Recent literature suggests that truthmaking is not compatible just with realism, but also with pragmatism and idealism, and thus does not help in defending realism in general. I take this point and show that in fact the wider applicability of the truthmaker principle only strengthens the realist's case, for all that is needed is a plausible way to account for our realist intuitions concerning truth. It will be suggested that to motivate truthmaking, we only need a weakened understanding of the truthmaker principle. All this is grist to the realist's mill, as one influential objection to realism, in the lines of Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett and Nelson Goodman, is its inability to put forward a plausible theory of truth. This objection can now be refuted: the truthmaker principle, widely conceived, is just the missing piece – its applicability beyond realist ontologies only increases its plausibility.

1. Introduction

Truthmaking is a very plausible idea: the idea that there is something that makes true propositions true grasps our intuitions very nicely – at least the intuitions of those of us who still crave after some sort of a correspondence theory of truth. Not surprisingly, truthmaking is often considered to be a more sophisticated version of the correspondence theory of truth. But recently (e.g. Beebe & Dodd 2005) there has been a lot of hostility towards truthmaking understood like this. Many would like to see truthmaking as a more general framework, not strictly as a vessel for the correspondence theory of truth, and this seems to suggest that truthmaking is not able to cash out our realist intuitions, as realism and the correspondence theory are often considered to be closely related. In this paper I take this popular view as my starting point, but I will argue that this is all the better for truthmaking, and further, that this is all the better for realism: if we have a plausible theory of truth which is compatible with realism, one influential objection to realism can be refuted.

This objection is due to Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett, and Nelson Goodman. While each of them have their own specific projects, they share a very similar, hostile attitude towards both metaphysical realism and the correspondence theory of truth and their projects as well share a lot of common ground. The argument that will be presented in this paper can be outlined follows:

1. Let us assume that the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection against realism combined with the correspondence theory holds.
2. This does not mean that realism automatically fails, because it is independent of the correspondence theory, as Michael Devitt (1997) has argued.
3. We still need an account of truth which is compatible with realism and does not

succumb to the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection.

4. Truthmaking is such an account of truth, as it is compatible across ontologies, including realism.
5. The combination of realism and truthmaking can stand against the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection.

It is my goal here only to refute the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection rather than to defend realism in general, so I will assume that realism can be defended independently, and indeed that it is the most plausible choice. In addition I hope to support the view that truthmaking is indeed compatible with a number of different ontologies and that it is a promising starting point for a theory of truth.

In the first part of the paper I will examine the influential critique of metaphysical realism, familiar from Putnam, Dummett and Goodman. In the case of Putnam we are mostly interested in his middle period – this is when he was particularly hostile towards metaphysical realism. All three seem to share some basic assumptions about metaphysical realism and thus it is natural to group their objections together. The core idea here is that realism is unable to account for truth, mainly because it is considered to be committed to the correspondence theory of truth, and the correspondence theory of truth is unsatisfactory. I will demonstrate that this is indeed what the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection amounts to.

‘Realism’ is to be understood in a very wide sense here, any position which acknowledges a mind-independent reality may be called realism in this sense. I do not wish to make any strong commitments in this regard, as my purpose is simply to argue that the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman critique does not undermine realism in the broad

sense. For the purposes of this discussion, we could perhaps use Michael Devitt's formulation of *Weak Realism*, according to which 'Something objectively exists independently of the mental' (1997: 23). However, this is obviously an extremely weak sense of realism, so perhaps a slightly stronger formulation would be more appropriate: 'Tokens of most current common-sense and scientific physical types objectively exist independently of the mental' (ibid.). When I talk about realism, it is this type of general understanding of realism that I refer to.

The second part focuses on the details of truthmaking and on how it could be combined with a realist ontology. It will be acknowledged that truthmaking is also compatible with pragmatism and idealism, as a number of authors suggest – even Putnam can be seen as a kind of truthmaker theorist. This suggests that truthmaking is indeed a very plausible idea, perhaps the most plausible way to account for truth, as it can be combined with a variety of ontologies. If this is the case, the question of realism/anti-realism stands on its own, as we can account for truth in a plausible manner which is compatible both with realist and anti-realist ontologies. Thus, we have a clear case against the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman challenge: since realism needs to be no worse off regarding truth than anti-realism is, the objection that realism cannot account for truth is groundless.

2. Metaphysical Realism: the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman Challenge

There are good reasons to think that the views of earlier Putnam, Dummett and Goodman are analogous in terms of their challenge for metaphysical realism. In what follows I will motivate this claim by looking at several passages from Putnam and Dummett, as well as a few from Goodman. The focus of the paper is strictly on the objection concerning metaphysical realism and truth, although Putnam has of course put

forward a number of different objections against realism (e.g. Putnam 1980, 1982). However, the argument concerning realism and truth is arguably one of the most influential ones.

Putnam talks about the connection between himself, Dummett and Goodman in several places. In the Dewey lectures (1994) Putnam acknowledges his debt to Dummett in regard to the development of his ‘internal realism’. The problem that Putnam was preoccupied with at the time when he abandoned scientific realism for his ‘internal realism’ was how reference is possible in the ‘Cartesian *cum* materialist’ philosophy of perception, which Putnam admits to have supported earlier (Putnam 1994: 460). This is, in effect, what the infamous model-theoretic argument amounts to (Putnam 1980).¹ When Putnam introduced the model-theoretic argument, he thought that the solution to this puzzle lies in verificationist semantics, an idea that was initially put forward by Dummett (1978). According to Dummett's view, the debate over realism comes down to questions about semantics, although he apparently thinks that one can, in principle, be realist about certain things and anti-realist about others (Dummett 1991: 15-16). In any case, Dummett's view is often considered to collapse into global anti-realism (cf. Tennant 2002: 49-50), although he has resisted this conclusion (Dummett 1993: 472-3). Although Dummett's project is perhaps what inspired Putnam's ‘internal realism’, he does not want to go quite as far as Dummett; it seems to me that Putnam wants to preserve fallibilism, as he is not thrilled about Dummett's idea concerning the absoluteness of the verification or falsification of empirical propositions (Putnam 1994: 461-462).

Putnam's doubts about the correspondence theory of truth are well known, he has

1 See Field (forthcoming) for discussion. The model-theoretic argument is often reconstructed as a *reductio* of metaphysical realism: the premises of metaphysical realism lead to semantic indeterminacy.

reflected on this for instance in his *Realism and Reason* (1983a: viii ff.), where he summarises the core of the model-theoretic argument as follows:

What I show [in the paper ‘Models and reality’] is that no matter what operational and theoretical constraints our practice may impose on our use of a language, there are always *infinitely many different reference relations* (different ‘satisfaction relations’, in the sense of formal semantics, or different *correspondences*) which satisfy all of the constraints. (Putnam 1983a: ix; italics original.)

So, Putnam’s critique of the correspondence theory is effectively that there will be infinitely many correspondence relations between words and things, and hence indeterminacy ensues as we cannot pick out *the* intended correspondence. In the same connection Putnam (1983a: xvi) refers to Dummett, who shares his scepticism concerning the correspondence theory of truth and argues instead for the position according to which truth is justification. Putnam is sympathetic to a version of this position as well, but we need not look into the details, as we are more interested in the case against correspondence. It is not only in connection with the model-theoretic argument that Putnam talks about correspondence as the central problem for metaphysical realism, even though it is his central argument:

The problem that the believer in metaphysical realism [...] has always faced involves the notion of ‘correspondence’. There are many different ways of putting the signs of a language and the things in a set *S* in correspondence with another, in fact infinitely many if the set *S* is infinite [...]. Even if the ‘correspondence’ has to be a reference relation and we specify which *sentences* are to correspond to *states of affairs which actually obtain*, it follows from theorems of model theory that there are still infinitely many ways of

specifying such a correspondence. (Putnam 1982: 206-7.)

So, it is quite clear that at least for Putnam, a central part of metaphysical realism is the correspondence theory of truth – this is certainly a crucial premise of the model-theoretic argument against metaphysical realism, as the model-theoretic argument is essentially an argument against the correspondence theory of truth. Michael Devitt (1997: ch. 12) has forcefully argued that the model-theoretic argument simply begs the question against metaphysical realism for this very reason; Devitt thinks that the question of realism is independent of truth, and hence independent of the correspondence theory of truth:

Suppose that I am wrong and that Putnam's argument is effective against metaphysical realism. That doctrine, as I have pointed out, is a hybrid of a metaphysical doctrine like Realism and a semantic doctrine like Correspondence Truth. Which of the latter doctrines is threatened by Putnam's argument? Only Correspondence Truth. The argument is to do with reference, and has no bearing on Realism. (Devitt 1997: 229.)

I take Devitt's point, but I will remain largely neutral about the correspondence theory of truth. What I wish to insist is that the truthmaker theory is independent of metaphysical realism, and that the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman critique has no bearing on the combination of metaphysical realism and the truthmaker theory. According to Putnam, instead of the correspondence theory of truth, we should adopt the view according to which: "'truth" (idealized justification) is as vague, interest relative, and context sensitive as *we are*' (Putnam 1983a: xvii).

Now that we have outlined Putnam's argument and seen that its primary target is

indeed the correspondence theory of truth, let us turn to Dummett. We will further clarify Putnam's argument in the process. For Dummett, it is important that bivalence is in a central position for all types of realism. Dummett also claims that realism is a 'semantic thesis' (Dummett 1982: 561). Let us see how Dummett himself describes his position:

My contention is that all these metaphysical issues [questions about truth, time etc.] turn on questions about the correct meaning-theory for our language. We must not try to resolve the metaphysical questions first, and then construct a meaning-theory in the light of the answers. We should investigate how our language actually functions, and how we can construct a workable systematic description of how it functions; the answers to those questions will then determine the answers to the metaphysical ones. (Dummett 1991: 338.)

So, it is a meaning-theory that Dummett wants, and it does indeed seem that his view does not leave much room for metaphysical realism understood as the thesis that there is a mind- and language-independent reality, the study of which is not subject to semantic considerations. Furthermore, Dummett seems to be inclined to think that some kind of *outright anti-realism* is the most interesting alternative. This, in Dummett's terms, means rejecting any kind of objectivist semantics altogether (Dummett 1982: 578, 582). The view seems to be very sympathetic to the idea of conceptual relativity that Putnam has put forward in his writings about 'internal realism' (see for example Putnam 1987). Putnam (1983b) expresses his sympathy towards Dummett's account in a connection where he also suggests that vagueness is problematic for metaphysical realists. In the same paper Putnam notes that he himself as well as Dummett and Goodman generally argue for a conception of truth as idealised justification or rational acceptability. But what about Dummett's case against the correspondence theory? Well, Dummett seems

to be sympathetic to a variant of a classic argument against the correspondence (as well as the coherence) theory of truth, namely, that no general characterisation of what it is for something to be true is possible. However, Dummett thinks that this claim is too strong, even if there is something right about it:

The criticism of such theories (the correspondence and the coherence theory) ought to have been, not that they attempted to give a general characterisation of truth, but that they did so without the background of an account of meaning, of the outlines of a meaning-theory, which alone could provide the terms in which it would be possible to state the general condition for a sentence to be true. Indeed, the traditional theories of truth advertised themselves as explaining the predicate 'is true' as applied, not to *sentences*, but to *propositions*. What proposition a sentence expresses obviously depends upon its meaning; and so these theories assumed that we could grasp the meaning of sentences of our language and also, presumably, give a philosophical analysis of the concept of meaning in advance of knowing how the concept of truth applied to those sentences. Their proponents failed to realise that the concepts of meaning and of truth can only be explained together. (Dummett 1991: 158.)

On the face of it, Dummett's critique of the correspondence theory might seem rather different from Putnam's, but this is not the case. In fact, the passage above already assumes Dummett's key premise, namely that the debate about realism concerns meaning. According to Dummett, the realist claims that our statements possess a truth-value whether or not we have any means to determine that truth-value, that is, they possess a truth-value independently of us, whereas the anti-realist insists that a statement is true only if we have established, will establish, or at least could establish, that it is true – this is the core of Dummett's verificationism (Dummett 1982: 586).² It is

² See also Fumerton (2002: 85 ff.).

not quite clear how strong Dummett's verificationism is supposed to be, but there are some reasons to think that it must be stronger than just the theoretical possibility of establishing a statement's truth-conditions, as in that case the view does not even seem to be opposed to realism: realism does not claim that we *could not* know the truth-conditions of a given statement (cf. Devitt 1997: 280). In his most recent work, Dummett has moved towards a weaker version of verificationism, as he states that a proposition is true just in case '*anyone suitably placed in time and space would be or [could] have been*' in a position to establish its truth (Dummett: 2006: vii-viii).

When Dummett's comments about the problems associated with the correspondence theory of truth and his views concerning the debate about realism are combined, the upshot is that the debate about realism is primarily a debate about the correspondence theory of truth: the question is whether statements have realist or merely verificationist truth-conditions, where realist truth-conditions are simply truth-conditions that are mind-independent, which is exactly what the correspondence theory of truth maintains (cf. Devitt 1997: ch. 14). Accordingly, it appears that Putnam and Dummett are on very similar lines concerning the relationship of the correspondence theory of truth and metaphysical realism. There are several passages in Putnam's work which support this conclusion:

The heart of the correspondence theory, Dummett contends, is the idea that the world consists of mind-independent objects and facts (or discourse-independent objects and facts, if you prefer). A sentence can be true, on the correspondence theory, only if such a fact *makes* it true; and our understanding of the sentence consists in our grasp of what the corresponding mind-independent state of affairs is. [...] In short, Dummett's claim is that 'truth' in the sense of 'correspondence to a state of affairs which obtains' cannot play any *explanatory role* in an account of understanding. (Putnam 1983c: 81-2.)

It is of course the commitment to mind-independent objects and facts that supposedly makes the correspondence theory expressive of realism.³ However, we can find passages from Dummett which are in tension with this idea:

The correspondence theory of truth is often claimed as essential to realism. This is evidently false, since Frege was undoubtedly a realist but rejected the correspondence theory. The correspondence theory is also often confused with a truth-conditional meaning-theory, which is the natural extension of the classical two-valued semantic theory that we have taken as characteristic of realism. A properly constructed meaning-theory rightly seeks to characterise the concepts of truth and meaning simultaneously, whereas the correspondence theory took meaning as already given. It is an analogous mistake to regard the principle that, if a statement is true, there must be something in virtue of which it is true, is peculiar to realism. On the contrary, it is a regulative principle which all must accept. (Dummett 1991: 331).

The argument in this passage is obviously dubious, and not only because Frege is certainly not *undoubtedly* a realist, as Hans Sluga (1977) has argued. The importance of this passage for our purposes is nevertheless undeniable: Dummett, perhaps rather surprisingly, asserts that everyone must accept the principle according to which if a statement is true, there must be something in virtue of which it is true. Now, Dummett is certainly right in saying that this principle is not expressive of realism, and indeed, the correspondence theory of truth is not expressive of realism either, as Devitt has argued in length. The principle in question, however, looks very much like a primitive version of the truthmaker principle, which we will analyse in the next section, and it seems that Dummett is here promoting the view that the principle is compatible both with realism and anti-realism, as he thinks that everyone must accept it.

3 See also Putnam (1983c: 85), where he says that 'I agree with Dummett in rejecting the correspondence theory of truth'.

In the light of this, Dummett's argument against realism loses at least some of its strength; Dummett must concede that realism does not depend on the success of the correspondence theory of truth, but his principal argument seems to be directed exactly against the correspondence theory of truth rather than realism. But maybe this is not a fair reading, for Dummett indicates that his concern is with a truth-conditional theory of meaning rather than the correspondence theory of truth. Well, that may be, but it has little influence for the argument that I wish to develop: even if the correspondence theory of truth is not a truth-conditional theory of meaning itself, one of its main virtues is often considered to be that it is compatible with the truth-conditional theory (cf. Patterson 2003: 439). Moreover, it is not at all clear that realism and the truth-conditional theory go hand in hand, and specifically, an argument against the truth-conditional theory is not, by itself, an argument against realism any more than an argument against the correspondence theory is. This has been demonstrated by Stirton (1997), who argues that the so called 'meaning is use'⁴ principle, which acts as a starting point of Dummett's argument against realism, does not entail anti-realism, or even that the correct theory of meaning must be of the Dummettian, verificationist type. At any rate, in Dummett (1993) we see a much more modest attitude, as there he states that rather than putting forward a clear, anti-realist doctrine which is opposed to the realist one, he sees the realism-anti-realism debate as a 'research programme'. Given these complications, it is extremely difficult to pin Dummett down, but most importantly for our purposes, we have already seen that he accepts a crude form of the truthmaker principle as a regulative principle.

In fact, we do not need to look far for a critique of Dummett's views, for Putnam

4 The principle states that 'if someone understands a statement in a certain way, there must be some possible behaviour on his part by which he could show that he understands it in that way' (Stirton 1997: 697).

(1994: 494 ff.) himself puts forward a strong case against Dummett. It is Dummett's strong verificationist account of understanding that worries Putnam. In his Dewey lectures Putnam seems to have realized why many metaphysical realists are so frustrated with the typical anti-realist and deflationist arguments:

If we structure the debate in the way in which both Dummett and the deflationists do, then we are left with a forced choice between (a) either Dummettian antirealism or deflationism about truth, or (b) a retreat to metaphysical realism. Both Dummett's "global antirealist" and the deflationist advertise their accounts as rescuing us from metaphysical realism. But, surely, one of the sources of the continuing appeal of metaphysical realism in contemporary philosophy is a dissatisfaction with the only apparent alternatives. (Putnam 1994: 498.)

It is indeed interesting to see that even Putnam acknowledges the appeal of metaphysical realism. This helps to motivate our case as well: for those of us who find realism the more appealing choice compared to Dummettian anti-realism or deflationism about truth, the only reason to abandon realism would be a strong argument against the possibility of a realist account of truth. This is of course what the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman line of criticism is supposed to offer, but we have already seen that neither Putnam nor Dummett have offered a conclusive argument. It is now time to take Goodman aboard, as advertised.

I will not try to give an exhaustive account of Goodman's views here, at this time we are merely interested in the connection between Putnam and Goodman (and Dummett) and in how Goodman constructs his case against realism. It was in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) that Goodman put forward his irrealism, and it is quite clear that his critique of realism is at least partly based on similar concerns as Putnam's and Dummett's. Goodman's account, however, has a specific emphasis, which is not quite

so clearly present in Putnam or Dummett (even though it is implied); we could follow Devitt (1997: ch. 13) and label it *Constructivism*: the world is a mind-dependent, conceptual construction, and since concepts differ between different linguistic and cultural groups, there are in fact several worlds. The only kind of mind-independent world that this view leaves room for is the kind which is beyond our knowledge and language (ibid., 235). Devitt (1997) has an interesting discussion of the relationship between realism and constructivism, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. What is interesting for our purposes are the implications of this for the correspondence theory of truth and realism:

[T]ruth cannot be defined or tested by agreement with ‘the world’; for not only do truths differ for different worlds but the nature of agreement between a version and a world apart from it is notoriously nebulous. Rather [...] a version is taken to be true when it offends no unyielding beliefs and none of its own precepts. (Goodman 1978: 17.)

Later on Goodman explicitly states that his account is not compatible with the correspondence theory:

What I have said so far plainly points to a radical relativism; but severe restraints are imposed. Willingness to adopt countless alternative true or right world-versions does not mean that everything goes, that tall stories are as good as short ones, that truths are no longer distinguished from falsehoods, but only that truth must be otherwise conceived than as correspondence with a ready-made world. (Goodman 1978: 94).

It might also be helpful to take a look at some responses that Goodman’s account

produced. Goodman's book was published at about the same time that Putnam turned from scientific realism to his 'internal realism' and thus it is not surprising that Putnam (e.g. 1979) sympathises with Goodman's project. What is especially interesting to us is that Putnam acknowledges the connection between himself, Goodman, and Dummett:

It seems to me that Goodman's view is closely related to a point recently made by Michael Dummett and by me, notably the point that the metaphysical realist notion of truth cannot play any role in a theory of how we *understand* our various versions and languages. This is clear, on Goodman's view, since no actual psychological mechanism can play the required role of comparing our statements with unconceptualized reality. (Putnam 1979: 166.)

Once we again we see that according to this line of criticism, the problem with 'the metaphysical realist notion of truth' is that the correspondence between our statements and 'unconceptualized' reality cannot be upheld. The core of the critique would seem to be that the metaphysical realist notion of truth is somehow detached from how we actually use and understand language. Goodman's solution to this problem, although not quite the same as Putnam's and Dummett's, appears to have similar elements. For Goodman, the notion of 'rightness' precedes truth:

Under "rightness" I include, along with truth, standards of acceptability that sometimes supplement or even compete with truth where it applies, or replace truth for nondeclarative renderings. (Goodman 1978: 109-110.)

Goodman is notoriously difficult to interpret, but his account (1977, 1978) as well arguably takes in the verificationist semantics familiar from Dummett, and which acted

as the basis for Putnam's 'internal realism':

The direction in which Goodman's thought takes him is the direction of verificationist or 'non-realist' semantics. That is, Goodman is saying, I think, that we understand our languages in terms of a grasp of conditions of warranted assertibility and 'rightness'; not a grasp of 'truth-conditions' in the old realist sense. (Putnam 1979: 167.)

As we recall, this is exactly the view that Putnam recognized in Dummett too, although he modified it a bit:

I proposed to identify "being true" not with "being verified," as Dummett does, but with "being verified to a sufficient degree to warrant acceptance under sufficiently good epistemic conditions." (Putnam 1994: 461.)

Or, as Putnam put it earlier, 'truth is an idealization of warranted assertibility' (Putnam 1979: 167). Thus, each one of these three opponents of metaphysical realism – the middle-period Putnam, Dummett and Goodman – claim that the metaphysical realist conception of truth fails due to an inherent inability to take into account the relative character of all truth-claims. Relative, that is, to different conceptual schemes or perspectives (cf. Putnam 1992a). Although it is clear that Putnam is a bit uneasy about the full-blown Goodman-style irrealism as well as Dummettian global anti-realism, it is quite as clear that his own earlier account merely masquerades as more commonsensical (cf. Norris 2002: 85-86).

One of the main premises shared by these three opponents of metaphysical realism would appear to be conceptual relativity; as we have seen, they all point out the

problems that conceptual relativity introduces for the correspondence theory of truth. Putnam has talked about conceptual relativity in many connections, but the best known example is probably the case of Carnap and the Polish logician (Putnam 1987: 18 ff.), where Putnam suggests that there is no way to solve the dispute about how many objects there are in a certain world (consisting of x_1 , x_2 and x_3) because the Polish logician believes in mereology and Carnap does not. Putnam claims that the idea of conceptual relativity is unacceptable to the metaphysical realist because there is no one meaning which can be fixed for the logical terms in question (ibid.). He has emphasised the importance of conceptual relativity as a shared view between himself and Goodman by pointing out that Goodman's most serious arguments for irrealism depend on conceptual relativity (Putnam 1992b: 183). The idea is perhaps less clear in Dummett, but it would seem to emerge from his discussion concerning the lack of a meaning-theory combined with the correspondence theory: if we have no theory of meaning, then we have no explanation of understanding, and without understanding we cannot hope to fix the correspondence relation with a given proposition and the world since any of a number of correspondences satisfies all the requirements. This is the line of thought which is familiar from Putnam's model-theoretic argument as well.

Consequently, all three of these anti-realist accounts have some important similarities, most notably the argument which is based on the critique of the correspondence theory of truth and on conceptual relativity; obviously these two themes are connected as well. As we saw above, Putnam has now changed his views on many issues, but in the Dewey lectures he still thinks that *metaphysical* realism is unacceptable, instead he hopes to find a middle way between the earlier Putnam-Dummett-Goodman view and full-blown metaphysical realism.⁵ It is from Wittgenstein

5 I should also note that even more recently, Putnam (2004) has continued to appeal to the argument from conceptual relativity.

that Putnam believes to have found such a middle way. The problem with this approach is, as Christopher Norris notes, that it still ‘leaves all the same problems firmly in place while purporting to resolve them through a commonsense appeal to our standard (communally warranted) ideas of reality and truth’ (Norris 2002: 89-90).

The main arguments against metaphysical realism that we have discussed have been derived from a semantic notion of truth, which metaphysical realism is supposedly unable to account for, given the problems that the correspondence theory faces. The way around this is to do exactly what Dummett tells us not to do: to start from metaphysics instead of semantics. In the Dewey lectures Putnam concedes that the metaphysical realist is quite entitled to do so. So, in what follows I will switch the order of explanation: we ought to start from realism and then give an account of truth rather than the other way around. The point has of course been forcefully made before by Devitt, but this time the discussion concerning truth will be informed by the latest trends in truthmaking theory. Of course, sometimes theories of truthmaking are taken as a way to explicate the correspondence theory of truth and often that indeed seems to be the case. But what is crucial here is that truthmaking is *compatible* with a realist ontology, and this is the starting point: from a realist ontology to a theory of truth, which is compatible with it. Accordingly, I think that we can give an account of truth which is suitable for the realist and also at least as tenable as the conception of truth as idealised justification or rational acceptability. In the next section we will examine how truthmaking could provide a plausible way to account for truth in a realist ontology.

3. Truthmaking and Realism

Many of the best known theories of truthmaking are very closely tied to certain ontological views. Such is for example Armstrong's theory of truthmaking which is

integrated with his ontology of states of affairs. Naturally this has some important implications for his conception of truthmaking. The most obvious of these implications is that, according to Armstrong, truthmakers are, in general, facts. Of course, as Armstrong (2004: 4) gladly admits, the idea of truthmaking can be separated from the question of what truthmakers in fact are. Here we will be looking into the idea of truthmaking just in this sense: independently of any specific ontology. We will try to see whether truthmaking is well-motivated and if it can plausibly be combined with a realist ontology.

In addition to Armstrong, accounts of truthmaking which are intimately connected with certain, although rather different metaphysical backgrounds have been put forward for example by E. J. Lowe (2005) and David Lewis (2001, 2003), but our main focus here is on how truthmaking could be formulated while making minimal metaphysical commitments. The key question in this regard is whether truthmaking is committed to realism. Several recent accounts suggest that truthmaking is not a specifically realist theory at all, this seems to be a widely shared view in a recent volume on truthmaking (Beebe & Dodd 2005). For instance, Chris Daly (2005) has suggested that the idea of truthmaking could also be combined with idealism and even pragmatism, which, at least in some of its forms, is quite hostile towards metaphysical realism. The compatibility of pragmatism and truthmaking has also been noted by Sami Pihlström (2005). Regardless of this, what I hope to establish is that truthmaking can indeed provide a systematic method of dealing with truth in a rigorously realist way.⁶ This would not only help in

⁶ One might ask: is the truthmaker theory a theory *of* truth or just a truth about truth? Certainly, if we have merely a stripped down truthmaker principle, then we are not dealing with a complete theory of truth. But once the truthmaker principle is combined with an appropriate ontology, then I would be inclined to say that we do indeed have a complete theory of truth, as we can give a full account of the truthbearers and the truthmakers. But the core of truthmaking is the truthmaker principle, and if we can formulate it in such a way that it is compatible with different ontologies, then it is at least a

answering questions about truth as such, but it would offer us a way to address the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman type objection against metaphysical realism.

Before we go into the details of truthmaking theory, a few words about truth itself are in order. I am sympathetic towards the view that Lowe (2005) takes on truth, namely that truth should be conceived in the lines of alethic monism. There seems to be little choice in the matter for a metaphysical realist:

[O]ne fundamental form of monism to which metaphysical realism is apparently committed is what might be called *alethic* monism: a conception of truth which holds truth to be unitary and indivisible. Such a conception of truth is opposed to all relativist views of the nature of truth, whether these spring from philosophical idealism or from one or other form of cultural relativism. (Lowe 2005: 177.)

The idea of unitary and indivisible truth might sound rather mysterious, but the important feature is merely that alethic monism upholds the principle of non-contradiction (Lowe: 188 ff.). In a perfectly clear sense truth is many and quite scattered indeed, as the apparent variety of different truthbearers would seem to suggest, but there are nevertheless some governing features, such as the principle of non-contradiction, which are universal for truth. Truth is unitary and indivisible in just this sense: for every proposition it holds that that proposition cannot be both true and false.⁷

I would hope that most philosophers are quite happy with what has just been said, but Dummett (1991) is presumably one of those who would *not* be happy with it. He

promising starting point for a theory of truth.

7 I will not consider the dialetheist challenge here: in paraconsistent logic it might very well make sense to say that a proposition is both true and false, but whether a paraconsistent logic corresponds with reality is another matter entirely. See Tahko (2009) for further discussion.

would presumably insist that bivalence, which the principle of non-contradiction is usually considered to assume (although I will not discuss the connection between the principles here), is something that we must abandon. I will not pursue this topic here, for as I have already indicated, the order of explanation that we are looking for is reversed compared to that of Dummett's, and hence the issue of bivalence should not be our starting point. However, truthmaking might offer us some help in this regard, for if we could show that the idea of truthmaking is plausible *before* we must make any serious metaphysical commitments, it might turn out that bivalence is not so much a premise, but rather a necessary implication.

Moving on to truthmaking itself, there are a couple of things that, I believe, can be said without much controversy. One of these is that whatever we take the actual truthmakers to be, and, I suppose, even regardless of the nature of the relation between propositions and reality (here taken to be a truthmaking relation yet to be more accurately specified), we can in any case say that the (possible) correspondence between a proposition and the reality, i.e. between the proposition and the truthmaker, is not, in general, a one-one correspondence.⁸ This is the view that Armstrong (2004: 16) takes and, in essence, seems to be what Lowe (2005: 182) would go for as well. The reason for opting for a many-many relation is simple enough: a single truthmaker can quite clearly be a truthmaker for several truthbearers and correspondingly there might be several truthmakers which serve as a sufficient truthmaker for a given proposition. Perhaps it could be argued that there is always some *minimal* truthmaker for each truth, but as Armstrong points out, many truths do also have several minimal truthmakers, such as the proposition <there exists an x such that x is a human being>⁹ (Armstrong 2004: 21).

8 I should perhaps add that 'propositions' is merely a placeholder here.

9 Where the angled brackets describe a proposition, following Horwich (1998).

Another thing that ought to be fairly uncontroversial is that truthmaking is some kind of an asymmetrical relation between propositions and something in the world. This something in the world could be facts or states of affairs, as in Armstrong's case, or tropes, or something quite different, depending on your account of truthmakers. The exact nature of the truthmaking relation is not as uncontroversial though: one possibility is that it is an entailment relation between the truthmaker and the truth of the proposition, but it has also been argued that we are dealing with a grounding relation here, in which case truth would be grounded in entities (cf. Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005). There is also the question of whether truthmaking is an internal or an external relation. Armstrong favours the first alternative, and it does at least initially seem more plausible that truthmaking is an internal relation, but the opposite has been suggested as well (cf. David 2005).

Rather than discuss any of these specific problems in detail, I will now turn to the issue of motivating truthmaking in the first place, which is more difficult than many who have actually put forward theories of truthmaking seem to think. It has been suggested by Daly (2005) that there is one issue about which the advocates of different truthmaker theories always agree upon: truthmaking does some explanatory work. This is of course a rather natural source for motivation. Ultimately, it concerns the nature of the truthmaking relation, for whatever explanatory work the truthmaker principle might do, it must surely have something to do with the relationship between propositions and truthmakers. So, what are our options for motivating truthmaking?

According to Daly (2005: 102), there are three options. The first one is what he calls the 'Canadian mountie' theory of truthmakers, the idea of which is to argue from examples and to show that we can, in fact, always find a truthmaker for any given truth. Daly accuses this theory of being *ad hoc*, in that it assumes the truthmaker principle

without giving any justification for it. Presumably the point is that we need more than a working theory of truthmaking to motivate the idea in the first place, and I do agree with this.

The second strategy suggests that the truthmaking theory could help in finding explanations to further ontological problems, such as the theory of universals. Daly (2005: 98-102) argues against Rodriguez-Pereyra's suggestion, namely that truthmakers could explain universals by entailing that it is true that there are some properties which are shared by several distinct particulars. There are other alternatives as well though, one of them being Josh Parsons' (2005) rather plausible idea that truthmaking could be used to motivate arguments concerning propositions about the past and the future and thus might provide some explanatory power when discussing theories of time, such as presentism. However, while I am not against the idea of granting the possibility that truthmaking could help to motivate arguments concerning other ontological problems, I do not believe that this by itself is a sufficient condition for adopting the truthmaker principle; and neither, of course, does Daly.

The third strategy that Daly (2005: 94-98) considers, namely inference to the best explanation, is perhaps the most common. According to this strategy, truthmaking explains our pro-realism intuitions and grasps the core idea of the correspondence theory of truth. Daly considers Armstrong's and Bigelow's theories in this connection. I as well hope that truthmaking could offer a way to characterise a theory of truth compatible with realism. But we have to be careful here, for even if truthmaking is compatible with realism, it does not mean that it would explain why realism is any better than other alternatives. Indeed, it seems that the truthmaker principle is in no way connected with any necessarily realist premises, especially if it is compatible with pragmatism and idealism as well. Daly argues also that the same applies to the

correspondence relation, formulated in the following way (CI):

(CI) $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if things are as $\langle p \rangle$ says they are. (Daly 2005: 96.)

The apparent problem with (CI), however, is that it appears to be vacuous: (CI) is compatible with just about any theory of truth, and hence its explanatory value cannot be particularly high. Armstrong (2004: ch. 4) claims that the truthmaker principle could say something more than (CI) does – this will effectively be done by combining the correspondence relation with the truthmaking principle and his states of affairs ontology – but Daly is not convinced:

Consider the coherence theorist. He may consistently say ‘If $\langle p \rangle$ is true, it has a truthmaker. $\langle p \rangle$ corresponds to a state of affairs, namely the state of affairs which consists of a relation of coherence holding between $\langle p \rangle$ and the other members of a maximal set of propositions’. Consider the pragmatist. He may consistently say, ‘If $\langle p \rangle$ is true, it has a truthmaker. $\langle p \rangle$ corresponds to a state of affairs, namely the state of affairs of $\langle p \rangle$ ’s having the property of being useful to believe’. It is controversial whether there exist states of affairs. Let that pass. My point here is that the coherence theory and the pragmatic theory are each compatible with the admission of states of affairs. Furthermore, each of these theories is compatible with the admission of states of affairs standing in a correspondence relation to truths. (Daly 2005: 97.)

So, Daly's case against the third strategy is based on the claim that the truthmaker principle does not restrict our choices in terms of ontology in any way and thus truthmaking understood in the lines of Armstrong and Bigelow is just as vacuous as (CI). This is indeed a valid concern, for if truthmaking is understood as a special case of

the correspondence theory, then it seems to inherit all of its original problems. We already saw how devastating these problems are according to the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman line of thought. However, it seems trivial that the truthmaker principle could be combined with different ontologies once we acknowledge the idea that truthmaking is quite separate from the varying answers concerning the actual truthmakers and truthbearers. Furthermore, as I have already noted, Armstrong (2004: 4) seems to have no quarrel with this idea.

Whether or not Daly's objection holds water, I think that Armstrong and other advocates of realist truthmaking theories might be content with a somewhat weakened condition when it comes to the truthmaker principle, namely that the truthmaker principle is the best way to characterise the correspondence relation understood in a realist sense. When put like this, the details of our ontology are still open, as long as it is a realist ontology, but the motivation for truthmaking is still clear: it is the best way to formulate the realist understanding of the correspondence relation. This hints towards a fourth strategy for motivating truthmaking in addition to the three suggested by Daly, and in fact I think that the fourth strategy is closer to how most truthmaker theorists would like to motivate their theories.

The strategy for motivating truthmaking that I will now put forward rests on a very simple point: realism can stand on its own. In other words, we do not need truthmaking (or the correspondence theory, for that matter) to motivate realism. This of course reflects Devitt's (1997) work as well. As we saw in the previous section, the primary objection of the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman line is that realism cannot account for truth. But if we have some provisional reasons to prefer realism over anti-realism, as I believe that we do¹⁰, then the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman type objection could be

¹⁰ I will not attempt to argue for this here, but I think that Devitt (1997) for one has shown that the

refuted simply by giving a plausible, realist theory of truth. Compared to Daly's third strategy, this changes the direction of explanation. It could be said that the fourth strategy does not so much try to provide an explanation, but a justification, although in another sense it can be thought to provide an explanation as well, as we will shortly see. In any case, what is important is that because realism can stand on its own, we can motivate truthmaking with realism – not the other way around.

If we start with a realist ontology and if truthmaking apparently increases the plausibility of the overall theory, then it seems rather straightforward to choose the way to go: realism plus truthmaking is the best theory available. I wish it was that easy. So does Armstrong:

I do not have any direct argument [for truthmaker necessitarianism]. My hope is that philosophers of realist inclinations will be immediately attracted to the idea that a truth, any truth, should depend for its truth for something 'outside' it, in virtue of which it is true. (Armstrong 2004: 7.)

It is not surprising that many philosophers are not satisfied with this. Hence, we should somehow be able to decouple truthmaker theory and realism, as Beebe & Dodd have also pointed out:

Suppose that some formulation of truthmaker theory does indeed succeed in capturing realist intuitions. The question arises, how can truthmaker theory now legitimately be put to use in an argument *for* realism (about a particular domain) and *against* anti-realism? If truthmaker theory itself enshrines a commitment to realism, then presumably the

burden of proof is on the anti-realist. In fact, even Putnam (1994: 498) acknowledges the appeal of realism.

appropriate anti-realist reaction to such an argument is simply to deny whatever truthmaker principle is being used as a premise in that argument. If a given truthmaker principle is to pull its weight in arguments against anti-realism, then we had better have reasons, independently of our commitment to realism, for believing that the principle is true. We wonder whether such reasons are to be had. (Beebe & Dodd 2005: 16.)

So, the task that Beebe and Dodd have given us is to put forward a truthmaker principle that, unlike other suggestions, would be able to capture our realist intuitions while not being compatible with anti-realism. Even if we were to succeed in that, we would still have to show that there are reasons, independently of our realist intuitions, to believe that our truthmaker principle is the correct one, as otherwise the use of truthmaking in arguments against anti-realism will just be question-begging. Perhaps this can be done, but I will not attempt it here. I have conceded above that (at least most) truthmaker theories fail to cash out our realist intuitions without leaving room for other interpretations; and, perhaps, the ones that might just be able to do this are not quite as plausible.¹¹ Yet, does this matter? After all, each of these suggestions is certainly compatible with realism as well. Thus, even though truthmaking might be an ontologically neutral way of talking about truth, and indeed because of that, we can combine it with a realist ontology – and if we can do that, we have a very efficient argument against the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection. This is because their objection is, in essence, that one *cannot* combine a realist ontology with a plausible theory of truth, as we saw in the previous section. But it seems that this can be done. The only thing that is required is that the truthmaker principle is in fact plausible, and here its compatibility across ontologies is a major advantage.

How should we go on about showing that this weakened version of truthmaking is plausible? Our task is surely considerably easier than it would be if we tried to come up

¹¹ However, if this route is taken, my money would be on Lowe's (2005) suggestion.

with a truthmaker theory which captures our realist intuitions and *only* our realist intuitions. Now we need only to come up with a truthmaker principle which is plausible, useful and compatible with realism. The primary challenge is to show that the truthmaker principle is not undermined by the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection. If it proves to be compatible with pragmatism or idealism in addition to realism, then all the better, as this only contributes to its usability and plausibility. Of course, when understood like this, truthmaking gives us very little motivation to go for realism, contrary to what many proponents of truthmaking might hope, but we are not looking for motivation for realism in truthmaking, we are looking for a way to combine realist intuitions with a plausible theory of truth. What would a plausible truthmaker principle look like, then? The usual formulation goes roughly like this:

(TM) Necessarily, if $\langle p \rangle$ is true, then there exists at least one entity α such that $\langle \alpha \text{ exists} \rangle$ entails $\langle \langle p \rangle \text{ is true} \rangle$. (Beebe & Dodd 2005: 2.)

The nature of the truthmaking relation, here suggested to be an entailment relation, is perhaps the most controversial part of (TM). Other problems occur when certain truths, such as necessary truths or negative truths are considered. There have been numerous attempts to deal with these problems, but the details of each solution depend, often heavily, on the details of the ontology that one wishes to combine with truthmaking, and accordingly these problems are not something that we can discuss here. However, a somewhat neutral way to address the problems involved with entailment is to replace entailment with (metaphysical) necessitation: in every possible world where a truthmaker for a certain proposition exists, that proposition is true.¹²

I listed some key features of the truthmaker principle earlier and at least some of

¹² This is the line that both Lowe (2005: 185) and Armstrong (1997: 115) take.

them would also seem to hold in regard to the general principle that we are now looking for. So, we can for example without much risk of controversy say that truthmaking is an asymmetrical many-many relation. Also, as Rodriguez-Pereyra (2005: 20-21) suggests, we seem to have the intuition that truth is asymmetrical, and the truthmaker principle fits this intuition perfectly. The way that Rodriguez-Pereyra puts it is that truth is grounded: the truth of a proposition depends on what reality is like, and the relationship between truth and reality is of course asymmetrical, for reality does not depend on the truth of the proposition. As he points out, this by itself does not commit us to realism, for an idealist could just add that the reality or the world and the entities in it are not mind-independent (*ibid.*).

The truthmakers are here taken to be entities of some kind, but it is certainly a matter of debate what *kind* of entities they are. It might also be objected that, say, a pragmatist would not be happy about the commitment to ‘entities’. So how could pragmatism be compatible with truthmaking? Pihlström suggests the following:

Later pragmatists, including Hilary Putnam and Nelson Goodman (among whom the latter never wanted to describe his views as pragmatist, though), have more explicitly revived the idea of truthmaking, or (in Goodman’s case, more radically) *worldmaking*. Truths and the world (or, in Goodman’s pluralist and relativist theory, *worlds*) they are true about are, according to these neopragmatists, human constructions, “made” by us in the course of our experiential and symbolic ways of representing and acting. (Pihlström 2005: 114.)

I will not speculate whether this amounts to a commitment to entities, although at least arguably the truthmakers in the pragmatist picture – human constructions – could be considered to be entities as well. In any case, Pihlström goes on to suggest that ‘Putnam can, with some qualifications, be reinterpreted as a truthmaker theorist of some

sort' (2005: 120), and this by itself is a very interesting result. If Pihlström is right, it appears that Putnam and Goodman will not have a quarrel with the core idea of truthmaking.

Even if we take truthmakers to be entities, there are several alternatives, such as Armstrong's facts, or, if your ontology allows them, tropes, as suggested in Mulligan, Simons and Smith (1984). There is not much that I can say about the nature of the truthmakers, given that I am not defending any particular theory, but rather the general appeal of the truthmaker principle. However, it seems to me that the apparent complexity of truth would suggest that truthmakers must be spread out in several different categories rather than just one – that of facts for example. This complexity manifests itself in the variety of things we consider to be true: mathematical theorems, laws of physics, that Hesperus and Phosphorus are identical, and so on. Introducing a further category of facts to account for all truthmakers is not ontologically parsimonious, more plausibly the truthmakers are just the very entities that a given true proposition concerns. This line of thought has also been noted by Beebe & Dodd (2005: 9) and it is exactly what Lowe (2005: 182 ff.) argues for as well.

There might be ways to formulate truthmaking in a manner that does not commit us to entities at all, such as McFetridge's (1990) suggestion that every true sentence must have an explanation of *why* it is true. This would seem to release us from the commitment to *entities*, but it also distances us from the original idea of truthmaking. In fact, it appears that this takes us back towards a vacuous principle. McFetridge's version, though, is another attempt to combine truthmaking and our realist intuitions so that we would have an argument against anti-realism¹³, which, as you will recall, is not what we require. But perhaps there is an intermediate version between (TM) and a

13 See Liggins (2005) for details of how this might be done.

seriously weakened version such as McFetridge's. Consider (TM*):

(TM*) Necessarily, in all possible worlds where $\langle p \rangle$ is true, there exists something α that makes $\langle p \rangle$ true.

Here the entailment relation has been replaced with metaphysical necessitation. (TM*) is obviously compatible with realist ontologies, in which case it is likely that we would want to add that what makes $\langle p \rangle$ true is the existence of an entity of some kind. A pragmatist, on the other hand, could replace α with 'human construction', as suggested in the passage quoted from Pihlström above. Whether or not this avoids the commitment to entities is another question, and in fact I am inclined to think that it does not, but this is an ancillary issue. As for idealists, they could presumably interpret existence so that it does not require *material* existence, although I am not aware of any idealist accounts which would employ truthmaking explicitly.

Naturally, we need to add something to (TM*) to give it any explanatory power, as the nature of the truthmaking relation depends on what α is. Indeed, (TM*) is just the spine of truthmaking as we need to say something about α to determine *how* it makes $\langle p \rangle$ true. Most importantly, if we wish to avoid the objection that the principle is vacuous, something more must be said. However, the relative weakness of (TM*) is exactly why the principle *is* so plausible across ontologies: it can be interpreted as a family of relations that covers all possible kinds of truthmakers. The story is complete only when (TM*) is combined with a certain ontology, but the basic idea of truthmaking persists.

The problem with even weaker versions of the truthmaker principle, such as McFetridge's, is that they are too distant from the original idea of truthmaking, and

indeed almost vacuous – the truthmaker principle, I take it, concerns the relation between the truth of a proposition and the *existence* of something that makes it true. In this weakened, but not too weak form, i.e. (TM*), the truthmaker principle should appear plausible regardless of one's ontology, but still grasp the core idea which makes it so appealing in the first place.

But how does (TM*) fare against the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman objection? Well, as we saw above, there are some good reasons to think that at least Putnam and Goodman can be interpreted as being rather sympathetic to the core idea of truthmaking. As we recall, Putnam's case against the correspondence theory is based on the idea that there will be infinitely many correspondence relations between propositions and the world. (TM*) does not inherit this problem: the anti-realist can simply interpret 'the world' in such a manner that it includes only human constructions, that is, the world consists of a subject's interests and knowledge, and for a proposition to be true in a world is for an appropriate human construction to exist. Obviously, on this view, there are as many worlds as there are individuals, as Goodman's notion of *worldmaking* suggests. The key here is that (TM*) does not suffer from the notorious 'myth of comparing signs directly with unconceptualized reality' (Putnam 1983c: 83). For the anti-realist, the truthmaker relation is simply the one between a proposition and the *conceptualised* reality, the appropriate human construction. However, if we have independent reasons to prefer realism, we can use the very same formula to establish the truthmaker relation between a proposition and the mind-independent reality.

For Dummett's part, we saw already in the previous section that he is sympathetic to the core idea of truthmaking, as he thinks that the principle according to which 'if a statement is true, there must be something in virtue of which it is true', is 'a regulative principle which all must accept' (Dummett 1991: 331). This principle, quite like (TM*),

leaves open what the truthmakers are, as well as what the nature of the 'in virtue of' relation is. (TM*) as well leaves open the nature the truthmakers, but the truthmaking relation itself is expressed with the help of metaphysical necessitation. Accordingly, (TM*) preserves the status of a general, regulative principle, but it says more than Dummett's regulative principle and is thus also less vacuous than Dummett's principle.

So, I believe that we have good reasons to think that the idea of truthmaking on a general level is a plausible one. It also seems clear that this idea can be combined with realism in a coherent manner. What I must emphasise is that truthmaking is not, or does not have to be, an explanation for our realist intuitions. Perhaps it does increase the appeal of realism, for the explanatory power of the complete theory (realism plus truthmaking) is certainly greater with truthmaking than without it. However, the question of realism is independent of the question of truth. But if the anti-realist's strongest case against realism is realism's inability to deal with truth, as it seems to be according to the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman line of thought, then adopting the truthmaker principle is no doubt the best possible response to this objection. In the light of this, the possible applicability of the truthmaker principle to the anti-realist's ontology merely corroborates the realist's case, as then we have some common ground in regard to this particular issue.

In conclusion, what I hope to have established is that, as seems to be the consensus in recent literature concerning truthmaking, the truthmaker principle can be combined with ontologies across the board, and that if this is the case, then one classic and very influential objection to metaphysical realism, the Putnam-Dummett-Goodman line, is not a threat to metaphysical realism. Indeed, these critics of metaphysical realism themselves express some sympathy towards the core idea of truthmaking, and thus it seems thoroughly implausible to claim that the metaphysical realist could not account

for truth in a similar manner.

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