Ontological Justification: *From Appearance to Reality*
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**PROJECT SUMMARY**

The project aims to investigate the notion of justification in ontology. More specifically, one particular hypothesis (so far only sketchily investigated in some preparatory papers) on how to justify ontological conclusions is researched. The investigation focuses on the important notion of truthmaking roles. The view is original and will, if viable, have far-reaching consequences. It entails, among other things, a reinterpretation of the distinction between revisionary and descriptive ontology; a redirection of the ontologist’s attention, at least in the first instance, from the nature of whatever there is to what whatever there is does (a result, I believe, which would make the ontologist’s approach to her subject-matter more like that of the natural scientist’s approach to hers); a more limited view on the arguments available to anyone intent on comparing explanatorily equivalent metaphysical theories, etc.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND/ THE PROBLEM**

The distinguishing mark of twentieth-century analytic philosophy was its turn from traditional metaphysics, and towards linguistically and conceptually oriented philosophical research. The turn was not surprising. In the wake of the kind of critique of the metaphysical enterprise offered by Kant, the logical positivists, and the logical empiricists, to choose as one’s subject matter something epistemologically accessible and thereby scientifically respectable was surely the right thing to do. The world “in itself” was, if at all acknowledged, relegated to the background and treated as something “we know not what” underlying appearances.

The problem which prompted this turn from (an unduly speculative) metaphysics was that both the pre- (and, as we shall see, also some of the post-) turn metaphysicians had set as their goal of investigation to “carve the great beast of reality at its joints”; to so-to-speak get at reality as it is, independently of how it seems to us. But then, asked the critic, what is your evidence? Consider now the distinction between “revisionary” and “descriptive” metaphysics, first introduced by Strawson (1959). According to Strawson, the descriptive metaphysician is one that is content to “describe the actual structure of our thought about the world” whereas the revisionary metaphysician is “concerned to produce a better structure”. Whether or not your goal is a revision of the way we think about (conceptualise) reality (so that it better fits the way things “really are”), your evidence will be the same: the way we think about reality. Now, if you are a descriptive metaphysician, yet intent on revealing the “true” nature of reality, this must be because you think that at least some features of reality as it seems to us reveal (mirror, exactly resemble) reality as it is, independently of how it seems. If, on the other hand, you are a revisionary metaphysician, this must be because you recognise not only a distinction, but also the possibility of a difference between appearance and reality. Your evidence will be the same as that of the descriptive metaphysician (our conceptualisations) but the guidance it can provide will be less secure as it is assumed that appearances may only (misleadingly) indicate, not mirror or exactly resemble, the reality that undergird them. It is clear, then, that both the descriptive and the revisionary approach is problematic. In a revisionary framework, any argument that takes us directly from appearance to reality must be supplemented with elaborate and assumption-laden arguments explaining why such a move is justified as well as what conclusions we may be allowed to draw from this potentially misleading evidence. The descriptive approach is not much better off. Whichever aspect of appearance we decide is our sure guide to reality as it is, this choice must be justified, and such a
justification is not always forthcoming. A common view has been that it is the logical structure of our conceptualisations that reveal the ontological structure of reality (Russell (1956); Wittgenstein (1922), it is also an approach we find implicit in much of contemporary metaphysics). But why should we believe that, although reality is both distinct and probably also different from the way we represent it, it just so happens that the logical form of the latter mirrors or exactly resembles the ontological form of the former?

But if neither experience, nor language, nor thought can straightforwardly vindicate ontological conclusions, what can? Logic and the ordinary theoretical virtues are still available, of course. However (and unfortunately), their regulatory impact is much too weak: an ontology regimented only by their means can hardly earn more than the status of being a “consistent but incredible fairy-tale” (a status assigned by Russell to Leibniz monadology (quoted in Simons, 1998: 382). The metaphysician finds herself in a serious predicament – a predicament, moreover, considered by the critics of metaphysics to be a reductio against metaphysics itself. The conclusion drawn by the critics of metaphysics was that the metaphysician should no longer concern him or herself with the hopeless task of trying to lay bare the “true” nature of reality. At best, metaphysics is “critical”; its concern is a description of reality as it seems to us. Period.

The turn had far-reaching consequences. Not only did it banish bad, speculative, metaphysics from the philosophical agenda; for some time, any attempt to say anything about reality as it is, independently of our conception, perception or other form of representation of it, was treated as meaningless nonsense. It is easy to see, however, that such a universally forbidding attitude is self-defeating. If we ban from study the nature of anything as it is “in itself”, how can we study even the nature of our conceptualisations or the nature of our way of linguistically representing reality? An infinite regress looms (Lowe, 2002). For this as well as other reasons (see Maurin 2005e), there was, beginning in the 1960s, a literal re-volution to the traditional “Aristotelian” way of doing ontology, with philosophers (first mainly in Australia but now all over the world of analytic philosophy) starting to formulate, once more, theories about reality as it is, independently of how it seems (defending de re universal realism, eternalism with respect to time, real possible worlds, etc (cf. Armstrong, 1997; Lowe, 1998)).

Like most post-turn metaphysicians, I think it is important that we acknowledge the (to me) obvious truth that at least some ontology is inevitable. Philosophers who believe they can sidestep any such concern too often implicitly adopt and make their findings depend on, substantive metaphysical theses; a fact that may give rise to both confusion and misunderstanding. This said, I also think that metaphysics, like any other philosophical enterprise, relies on meta-philosophical (or, in this particular case, meta-metaphysical) assumptions. These assumptions influence both the value and substance of the metaphysical theories they undergird. They must be justified for the theories which we formulate with their help to be justified and, as the critics of metaphysics once so forcefully pointed out, their justification presents the metaphysician with one of her more difficult (and, I may add, most interesting) problems. For quite some time after the return to the Aristotelian “paradigm”, very little was said about justification in ontology. One big (and important) exception to this rule was (and still is) a lively debate on the role and relevance of science to metaphysical theorising. The consensus among post-turn metaphysicians is now that, to avoid ending up with the kind of “consistent but incredible fairy-tales” characteristic of the rationalist’s metaphysical schemes, ontology must respect and make its findings (as well as the problems it focuses its attention on) “scientifically adequate”. Exactly what the demand of scientific adequacy entails has been a topic for some debate (see e.g. Bird 2007; Mumford 2004).

This is not a project in the metaphysics of science (although the question of what (if any) evidentiary value scientific findings may have in a metaphysical setting will be of relevance to it). It is, rather, a project on justification in metaphysics more generally. Metaphysics, it will be assumed, is something we do, whether we like it or not. Even stronger (but more contentiously), metaphysics supply
the assumptions upon which our best sciences rest (which means that, in the end, the justification of scientific theory depends on the justification of metaphysics). In the last few years, the more general issue of justification in ontology (along with other meta-metaphysical issues) has found its way back on the metaphysician’s agenda. This project intends to contribute to and strengthen this discussion.

MAIN HYPOTHESIS TO BE INVESTIGATED AND FURTHER DEVELOPED

As we have seen, the metaphysician finds herself in a serious predicament. Her only option is to investigate if there is not, after all, something in appearances apt to inform her about at least some of the features characteristic of reality as it is, independently of how it seems. The following research questions therefore call out for an answer: What in reality as it seems can inform us about reality as it is? How can it so inform us?

I intend to investigate and develop an original suggestion (some first sketches of which feature in my 2008a & b) according to which the metaphysician can inform us about at least some aspects of reality as it is, first, because reality as it appears to us is, in a certain well-specified way, relevantly concerned with reality as it is. The sense in which appearance is concerned with reality, moreover, is captured nicely by the today much discussed truthmaker principle (T) (cf. e.g. Armstrong (2004); Beebee & Dodd (2005); Mulligan et al (1984)):

\[ (T) \quad \langle p \rangle \text{ is true iff there exists at least one truthmaker } T \text{ for } \langle p \rangle. \]

Whether or not (T) holds for all truths is disputed (and I will not go into that discussion here). This principle, has independent support although it may of course be challenged (for a defence, see my 2008b). Truthmaker theory regiments, and hence justifies, revisionary theorising by explaining and making plausible the “leap” from appearance to reality on which such theorising depends. It informs us, moreover, about what, in appearance, should concern the metaphysician intent on revealing the “true” nature of reality: the true propositions. True propositions are importantly and relevantly concerned with reality as they are made true by it. But what, exactly, can true propositions tell us about the fundamental structure of reality? A first step towards answering that question is taken, if the truthmaker principle is combined with a well-known atomicity assumption, first found in the work of e.g. Russell and Wittgenstein.

According to the “atomicity assumption”, only atomic truths are ontologically significant, since they are made true by reality directly. Molecular propositions, by contrast, have a truth value that depends entirely on the truth value of their constituents, and on the manner in which these are (logically) combined. They, consequently, require no special truthmakers but can sponge off the truthmakers of their constituent atomic propositions (all of this can be debated, of course: the claim that, e.g. universally quantified and negative propositions can have their truth decided by their constituent atomic propositions has been challenged – I will disregard that discussion here, but see my 2008b). The atomicity assumption adds to our regimentation of the ontological investigation by further restricting its relevant object for study. Reality, it is now said, minimally contains whatever is required for the truth of the logically atomic propositions. It is therefore only by studying these, and not molecular truths, that information about the fundamental structural features of reality can be procured.

According to the classical logical atomists, identifying the logically atomic propositions affords us a direct route from appearance to reality because the logical form of the former mirrors the ontological form of latter (“Propositions show the logical form of reality”, says Wittgenstein (1922: 4.121)). On this view, therefore, it is precisely those categories disclosed by logical analysis that ought to be posited in ontology. As we have seen, however, the “mirror-assumptions” on which this approach
rests are difficult to justify and should, I believe, be abandoned. Now, all is not thereby lost. Logical atomism can be portrayed as a “two-tiered system” (Simons, 1992: 158). Its first tier involves identification of the formally atomic propositions – the atoms of our conceptualisations – by means of logical, conceptual and linguistic analysis. To obtain the second tier, not only formally, but also substantially, atomic propositions must be identified. Substantially atomic propositions are those that are made true by entities that are likewise “atomic”. What the “mirror thesis” does is that it tells us that the formally and substantially atomic propositions coincide. Adding the mirror thesis is equivalent to saying that “if a sentence has or could have more than one truth-maker, then it is logically complex” (Mulligan, et al. 1984: 298-99). It is this running together of formally and substantially atomic propositions that, I believe, renders classical logical atomism less suitable for regimenting ontological theorising. Luckily, the distinction between formally and substantially atomic propositions can be preserved; and if it is, the substantially atomic propositions will form only a privileged subset of the formally atomic propositions. To illustrate this, consider the (let us suppose) formally atomic proposition <This is red>. Given the science of colour, it seems reasonable to suppose that although this proposition is formally atomic, it will nevertheless require complexity of its truthmakers. Formally atomic propositions, consequently, can turn out to be substantially complex; and whether or not they are cannot be decided with recourse only to logical analysis. To hold that formal and substantial atomicity come apart is to hold that logical and ontological form come apart, and hence to reject the mirror thesis. I take it that in order to be able to justify our ontological conclusions we must reject the mirror thesis. This means that my hypothesis, so far, is that ontological theorising can be justified if set in a truthmaker theoretical, atomistic, but non-mirroring framework (compare Heil’s rejection of what he calls the Picture theory (2003)).

Truthmaker Theory justifies the search for clues in language as to the fundamental constitution of reality by telling us that there is a relevant (and strong) connection between the two: true propositions are relevantly concerned with reality because they are made true by it. However, Truthmaker Theory does not tell us exactly what we should look for in language when formulating an ontological theory. To be able to regulate, and hence justify, ontological theorising, Truthmaker Theory as it is characterised in (T) is therefore not enough. It is not enough, because, as it stands, it cannot help us to discriminate between different ontological theses. All it tells us is that truth depends on reality, not how it does so. We need to know what, about the true propositions, is capable of informing us about the fundamental constitution of reality. We do not want to say that their form (logical or otherwise) mirrors or pictures the form of reality. We want to be able to say something, however, or else it seems that the enterprise of ontological theorising will be grind to halt. Let me end this paper by sketching one way in which (T) might perhaps be supplemented.

I suggest that what we should look for in true propositions is this: the roles that whatever in reality makes them true must be able to play. The framework assumption that I believe should complement Truthmaker Theory is therefore this: the ‘roles’ that appear to be roles that whatever exists must be able to play for propositions to be true, are roles that whatever exists must be able to play. Neither form nor content is mirrored; truthmaking roles are. Consider a simple example. <Lin exists>, let us suppose, is a true proposition. It appears to require for its truth something which plays the roles we associate with entities like Lin. What roles are those? Further study may reveal that the roles that whatever makes true propositions like <Lin exists> should be able to play include the types of role normally associated with what is sometimes called a concrete individual. We should not immediately conclude that the world must, therefore, include entities that belong to this category; at least, we need not conclude that the world is fundamentally made up from entities of this kind. We should continue to investigate. What roles are associated with concrete individuals? Suppose that the answer to this question will provide a list of roles including, for example, the power to exist through time, the power to change, the power to monopolise one’s position in space-time, and so on. Suppose
that the list is finalised. Then we may conclude that whatever there is must be such that it (or complexes built up somehow from it) can play these roles, because whatever there is must, minimally, be able to fulfil its truthmaking function. Examples may be multiplied.

One important research question here concerns the kind of investigation required for the proper identification of truthmaking roles. Classical conceptual analysis seems to play a role, but it appears that this will not suffice. Instead, it seems as if an extended investigation is required. Perhaps something along the lines described by Strawson (1959, 9-10), as follows: “Aiming to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure, it can take far less for granted than a more limited and partial conceptual inquiry. Hence, also, a certain difference in method. Up to a point, the reliance upon a close examination of the actual use of words is the best, and indeed the only sure, way in philosophy. But the discriminations we make, and the connexions we can establish in this way, are not general enough and not far-reaching enough to meet the full metaphysical demand for understanding”. To get more precise than this, more research must (and will) be done!

If viable, this suggestion will have far-reaching consequences. It will involve, among other things, our giving up many well-entrenched patterns of reasoning in ontology. On this view, appearances will at most justify conclusions about truthmaking roles – not (or at least, not directly) conclusions about the sort of entity that plays them. Once the truthmaking roles have been identified, therefore, only purely philosophical arguments can decide what the fundamental constitution of reality actually is (or can be). And philosophical arguments can only take us that far. If rival ontological theories posit entities equally apt to fulfil their truthmaking function, not much can be said in favour of one theory over the other. We have already made use of the evidence provided by representation. We are left to make our discriminations purely on such grounds as the ordinary theoretical virtues. Suppose it turns out, for instance, that reality must contain entities able both to characterise individual things and to make distinct things the same. Suppose, also (and plausibly I believe) that these are roles for which both e.g. a universal realist and a trope theorist can supply suitable actors. How, then, do we choose our theory? Perhaps trope theory should be preferred, because it is the ontologically simpler theory (assuming, of course, that trope theory can be developed as a one-category theory, and that universal realism cannot). But simplicity is a double-edged sword. Whether or not trope theory is the simpler theory will depend, among other things, on whether ontological simplicity trumps theoretical simplicity. According to e.g. Armstrong, it does not: universal realism should be preferred precisely because it is the theoretically simpler theory (Armstrong 1997: 23).

TO DO

Exactly how the project evolves and what questions will end up in focus is hard to predict with any precision. Bear in mind, therefore, that the just listed examples are just qualified guesses.

The main-focus of my research will be on the notion of truthmaking roles. In a certain sense truthmaking roles will replace reasoning in terms of the ordinary categories. True, ontology is category theory. But what kinds of things there are will, on this suggestion, no longer be decided directly by what kinds of things there (after careful logical or other analysis) appears to be. Truthmaking roles, therefore, if correctly identified, will provide the metaphysician with more fine-grained information about reality by not only telling us what kinds of things there are, but also what kinds of things these kinds of things do. But how do we best and most systematically procure information about truthmaking role? It is to be expected that my investigation of the notion of truthmaking roles will make necessary further investigations into how this notion stands to other, related, notions. Some such notions come directly to mind: causal roles, semantic roles, functional roles etc.
It is to be expected, moreover, that identifying the relevant truthmaking roles will require us to take a close look at our best sciences. One example: <this is red>, although formally atomic, seems to require complexity from its truthmakers. This is because mature science tells us that, whenever it is true that something is red, what there is must be such that it can reflect, emit light of particular wavelengths (etc.). This brings the current project in contact with the metaphysics of science. While investigating the relationships between the scientific and metaphysical enterprise I hope to benefit from collaborations with some of the metaphysicians of science involved in the project “Metaphysics in science” listed below.

Another interesting consequence of the above sketched suggestion is that it in a certain sense changes the rules for theory-comparison in ontology. Two acceptable ontological theories will, ex hypothesi be such that they both provide the requisite entities able to fulfil their truthmaking rules. This means that every argument from appearance is ruled out. Only arguments from theoretical virtue matter (e.g. simplicity, economy, elegance, ad hoc-avoidance etc). A thorough investigation of the role of the theoretical virtues, as well as a thorough investigation of at least some of these virtues will be conducted as part of the main-project.