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Truthmaker Maximalism defended

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In a recent paper Peter Milne (2005) attempts to refute Truthmaker Maximalism, the thesis that every truth has a truthmaker, by producing a simple and direct counterexample, the sentence *M*:

M: This sentence has no truthmaker

Milne argues that *M* is true and therefore is a truth without a truthmaker. For suppose that *M* has a truthmaker. Then it is true. If so, what it says is the case, and so it has no truthmaker. So if it has a truthmaker, it has no truthmaker. By *reductio ad absurdum*, it has no truthmaker. But then, since that is what it says, *M* is true. Thus *M* is a truth without a truthmaker.

For this counterexample to be successful, *M* should not be assimilable to the Liar. For in that case the sentence is not clearly a case of a truth without a truthmaker. Furthermore, whatever solution the truthmaker maximalist favours in relation to the Liar and related paradoxes could be applied to *M*.

Dan Lopez de Sa and Elia Zardini (2006) have recently argued that Milne's argument must be wrong since it allows one to prove the negation of basically anything. In this note I shall argue that Truthmaker Maximalism can be defended, contrary to what Milne says, by maintaining that *M* is Liar-like and does not express a proposition.^{1,2} The problem with Milne's attempted refutation is, basically, that it begs the question against Truthmaker Maximalism.

¹ In my 'Why Truthmakers' I argue for something that comes very close to full Truthmaker Maximalism, namely the thesis that a significant class of synthetic propositions, including inessential predications and negative truths, have truthmakers. This is not exactly the same as Truthmaker Maximalism, which I shall here anyway defend.

² I do not mean to commit myself to the claim that denying that the Liar expresses a proposition is the best solution to the Liar paradox, nor do I want to commit Truthmaker Maximalism to that claim. But since claiming that the Liar does not express a proposition is not an implausible solution to the Liar paradox, and this solution seems to be the one that Milne had in mind when he argued that *M* is not assimilable to the Liar, I shall conduct my argument in terms of that solution.

Since it is not implausible that the Liar and similar sentences fail to express a proposition, the truthmaker maximalist can plausibly say that M fails to express a proposition if he can plausibly maintain that M is similar to the Liar. The similarity between M and the Liar is easy to establish, at least for the truthmaker maximalist. Let TM be the unqualified truthmaker principle characteristic of Truthmaker Maximalism:

TM : Every sentence is such that it is true if and only if it has a truthmaker.³

TM makes the predicates ‘is true’ and ‘has a truthmaker’ equivalent. But then M is as paradoxical as the Liar. For if M has a truthmaker, given TM , M is true, in which case what it says is the case and so it has no truthmaker. But if it has no truthmaker, given TM , M is not true, in which case what it says is not the case and so it has a truthmaker. Thus M has a truthmaker if and only if it has no truthmaker. Therefore M is paradoxical. Furthermore, since the paradoxicality of M depends on a principle (TM) establishing an equivalence between ‘is true’ and ‘has a truthmaker’, M ’s paradoxicality is the same as the Liar’s. So M is similar to the Liar and should receive the same treatment as the latter.

But Milne argues against assimilating M and the Liar. Here is what he says:

I have emphasised the parallel between M and gödel sentences. The truthmaker theorist must find some principled point of disanalogy and then exploit it. Let me briefly indicate what I think will not do. The truthmaker theorist might try to chisel apart gödel sentences and M , and try to assimilate M to the Liar Paradox. The difficulty here is that M engenders no outright inconsistency. That there be a truth without a truthmaker is inconsistent with the unqualified truthmaker principle, but, unlike the Liar Sentence, M itself gives rise to no inconsistency when treated as an ordinary sentence and subject to the usual rules of logic. Thus M itself provides little motivation to claim that it fails to express a proposition or to relax our logic so that *reductio ad absurdum* fails to be valid... (Milne 2005: 223)

³ It is possible to be a truthmaker maximalist and reject TM if, for instance, one thinks that while every truth has a truthmaker, there are sentences of which one can say neither that they are true nor that they are not true. Stephen Barker, in unpublished work, defends this view (Barker 2005). But for the purposes of this paper committing Truthmaker Maximalism to TM will do.

It is true that M is inconsistent with TM . But it is not true that, unlike the Liar, M gives rise to no inconsistency when treated as an ordinary sentence and subject to the usual rules of logic. For when one adds the unqualified truthmaker principle TM , M gives rise to the same sort of inconsistency the Liar does. And employing TM in a derivation of a paradoxical conclusion does not mean that one is not treating M as an ordinary sentence or that one is not using the usual rules of logic. One has simply added an extra assumption.

The principled point of disanalogy between M and a Gödel sentence is that the truthmaker maximalist has no principles that could make a Gödel sentence equivalent to the Liar. But the truthmaker theorist does have a principle, TM , that makes M equivalent to the Liar.

Of course, M gives rise to no inconsistency unless one assumes TM or some principle to the same effect. But this shows that in order to be justified in refusing to assimilate M to the Liar one must have *prior* reasons to reject or at least not accept TM . But if so, discussion of M as a counterexample to Truthmaker Maximalism is of little interest, since one has already rejected or refused to accept Truthmaker Maximalism.

In short, if the attempted refutation of Truthmaker Maximalism depends on not assimilating M to the Liar, the attempted refutation should incorporate an independent rejection or refutation of TM . But this is something that Milne does not offer, since he attempted to refute Truthmaker Maximalism by arguing that M cannot be assimilated to the Liar.

Indeed when Milne says that M is not assimilable to the Liar because it engenders no outright inconsistency he is begging the question against Truthmaker Maximalism. For only if one has assumed the falsity of TM can one assert that M produces no outright inconsistency.

It might be objected that there are no independent grounds for taking M not to express a proposition. By why should there be such grounds independent from TM ? The present reply to Milne does not consist in saying that it is independently plausible that M does not express a proposition, but in pointing out that if one allows the truthmaker maximalist his own principles, then there are grounds for taking M not to express a proposition.⁴

⁴ Of course, the truthmaker maximalist might not have independent grounds for TM . But this is another kind of objection against Truthmaker Maximalism.

As Milne points out M is, like Gödel sentences, to all appearances, meaningful (Milne 2005: 222). Let us grant that the sense in which M is, to all appearances, meaningful is the sense in which a meaningful sentence expresses a proposition. That is, let us grant that M does, to all appearances, express a proposition. Does it follow that it does? No. The paradoxicality of a sentence, or its similarity to the Liar, need not be immediately apparent. It might take some work to establish that a certain sentence is paradoxical. If paradoxical sentences fail to express propositions, this means that it might take some work to establish that a certain sentence fails to express a proposition.

It might be objected that there is something wrong with a theory that dictates that an apparently meaningful sentence does not express a proposition. For questions of meaning, by and large, come before questions of theory.⁵ But this should not be thought to imply that, since Truthmaker Maximalism is a theory about the nature of truth, it cannot be used to determine whether a sentence featuring the truth predicate is meaningful or not. For even if questions of meaning come, by and large, before questions of theory, it is not unreasonable to think that a theory having TM as an axiom may have consequences as to the meaning of sentences like M . Furthermore, there is no mystery how such a theory produces such consequences: TM makes M equivalent to the Liar, and so Liar-paradoxical, but if the right thing to say about the Liar is that it expresses no proposition, then this is the right thing to say, for the truthmaker maximalist, about M .⁶

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⁵ As Peter Milne aptly put it in private correspondence.

⁶ Thanks to Stephen Barker, Michael Clark, Penelope Mackie, Peter Milne, Harold Noonan, and Paul Noordhof.

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