Is Aboutness Commitment Possible?

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Abstract

This paper introduces and evaluates a possible truthmaking argument for a robust conception of aboutness commitment. According to the argument, the pure aboutness-based account of truthmaking and the thesis of Truthmaker Commitment entails that a truthbearer is ontologically committed to what it is about in an appropriate sense of "aboutness". However, this argument encounters challenges, notably an inherent explanatory circularity within the robust conception of aboutness commitment, and a radical inconsistency between its two premises in terms of their underlying motivations. To address these issues, this paper proposes a more moderate conception of aboutness commitment, drawing inspiration from B. Smith's mixed aboutness-based account of truthmaking. According to this moderate proposal, the representationalist notion of intended aboutness, or the anti-representationalist notion of general aboutness, constrains, but does not determine, the notion of ontological commitment, which in turn contributes to a stronger notion of genuine or satisfied aboutness. This modified moderate conception not only sidesteps the explanatory circularity, but also aligns more closely with the objective of providing a fundamental ontology. Therefore, it is recommended as a fitting approach to engaging in the relation between aboutness and ontological commitment.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the prospect of aboutness commitment from the perspective of truthmaking, or of what portion of reality makes what truthbearers (namely representational entities with truth-values) true. What I mean by "aboutness commitment" is roughly the idea that a truthbearer is ontologically committed to what it is about. Put differently, what is required to be a portion of reality for a truthbearer to be true is provided by the target of aboutness of the truthbearer. At first glance, "aboutness commitment" in this sense is intuitively implausible considering lots of cases where a sentence is about, but not ontologically committed to, something. For example, it seems to be the case that "Pegasus is a mythological winged horse" is about Pegasus, which is ordinarily deemed as non-real (Crane 2013: 120). Or, suppose that "Axel" names a particular future adult human being who will be born after 300 years, it seems to be the case that "Axel is a human being" is about, but not ontologically committed to, Axel. Particular ontological debates over fictional or future entities do not matter here. For anything non-real, say, x, it is possible in principle to construct a truthbearer about, though clearly not ontologically committed to, x.

Nevertheless, the idea of aboutness commitment is not so easily refuted, especially when we realize that there are two independently plausible theses—the pure aboutness-based account of truthmaking and the thesis of truthmaker commitment—that could be used for motivating it. I will present a possible truthmaking argument for a robust conception of aboutness commitment, show why it is deeply problematic, and finally propose a more moderate conception of aboutness commitment as a remedy.

2. Motivating a Robust Conception of Aboutness Commitment

To see what an aboutness-based account of truthmaking is like, it is good to start with B. Smith's (1999) notion of *projection*. Smith argues against the *simple necessitation account* of truthmaking, the view that a portion of reality makes a truthbearer true if and only if the former's existence necessitates the former's truth. His counterexamples appeal to so-called "*malignant necessitators*". For example, the existence of Restall's refrigerator necessitates the truth of Goldbach's conjecture (if it is true), but Restall's refrigerator is not generally taken as a candidate truthmaker for Goldbach's conjecture (Smith 1999: 283). After all, this case of necessitation is "malignant" because Goldbach's conjecture, if true, is a necessary truth and thus trivially necessitated by anything irrelevant to its truth.

In light of this, Smith recommends to take *projection* as a relevance constraint on truthmaking. That is, a portion of reality serves as a truthmaker for a true truthbearer not only because the former necessitates the latter, but also because the former is projected by the latter. Smith intends his notion of projection as an explication of the general notion of aboutness. As he writes, "A truthmaker for a given judgment … must be part of that which the judgment is *about*" (Smith 1999: 279). In a later paper, he also claims that his theory "captures the idea that p, if it is to be made true by x, must be about x" (Smith 2002: 231). Return to the above case of Goldbach's conjecture: The reason why Restall's refrigerator is not a truthmaker for Goldbach's conjecture is that the former is not projected by the latter, or that the latter is not about the former in an appropriate sense of "aboutness".

Formally speaking, Smith's notion of projection is characterized by *modal entailment*: x is projected by p iff p is true and p entails the existence of x. Put

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aside whether this characterization of projection is appropriate, it immediately reminds us of the *entailment account* of ontological commitment, which is the general view that a truthbearer is ontologically committed to *Ks* iff it entails that *Ks* exist (Bricker 2016). This similarity is probably why B. Schnieder (2006) and A. Jiang (2023) both judge Smith's notion of projection as an explication of the notion of ontological commitment. If their judgment is right (I will argue against it later), the notion of aboutness would be closely connected to the notion of ontological commitment, revealing the conceptual possibility of aboutness commitment.

One or another version of the pure aboutness-account of truthmaking has been developed by truthmaking theorists such as P. Audi (2020) and A. Schipper (2018, 2020) since Smith's seminal work. Their accounts of truthmaking are *pure* because truthmaking are regarded as a *pure semantic phenomenon* in the sense that a portion of reality is a truthmaker for a true truthbearer iff the portion of reality is what the truthbearer is about in an appropriate sense of "aboutness". When combined with another promising thesis of *truthmaker commitment* defended by D. M. Armstrong (2004) and R. Cameron (2008, 2010), the pure aboutness-account of truthmaking will give us a plausible argument for aboutness commitment as follows:

The Truthmaking Argument for Aboutness Commitment

(1) What makes a truthbearer true if it is true is exactly what it is about (in an appropriate sense of "aboutness").

(2) *Truthmaker Commitment*: A truthbearer is ontologically committed to what makes it true if it is true.

Therefore,

(3) A truthbearer is ontologically committed to what it is about (in an appropriate sense of "aboutness").

In the above argument, the premises (1) and (2), though somewhat plausible, are still controversial, respectively. But what matters to us is whether their combination is promising in justifying the robust conception of aboutness

commitment, or at least providing some reason for showing that it is less implausible as it initially seems. My answer is "No," based on my evaluation in the following two sections.

3. Representationalism versus Anti-representationalism

The plausibility of the premise (1) and thus the conclusion in the truthmaking argument rests on whether there is a well-justified connection from the aboutness of a truthbearer to a portion of reality (as the truthmaker for the truthbearer and thus as what the truthbearer is ontologically committed to). In this regard, *representationalists* in Schipper's (2018: 3707) sense will deny that there is any truth *really* about anything non-real such as Pegasus on the grounds that aboutness in their view is always a genuine relation that involves real relata. For example, Smith and Ceusters (2015: 3) argue, "the aboutness in question must always be veridical, so that 'being about' is a success verb." If Pegasus is non-real, we may have a fictional truth like "Pegasus is a mythological winged horse" that is *intended to be about* Pegasus, though its intention fails in that case.

By contrast, *anti-representationalists* like Crane (2013) and Schipper (2018) argue that aboutness is not always a genuine relation, thus allowing a truthbearer to be really about non-reality. Nevertheless, there is still some way available to them in establishing the connection from aboutness to reality. For example, Schipper (2018: 3704) introduces the notion of *aboutness-satisfaction*. The aboutness of a truthbearer is not satisfied if what it is about is not a portion of reality. In that case, the truthbearer is a *truthmaker gap* so that it lacks a corresponding truthmaker even if it is true. But if its aboutness is satisfied, then a genuine relation of aboutness would be instantiated, and thus the target of its aboutness would provide a truthmaker for its truth. So a revised form of the truthmaking argument for aboutness commitment would be available to anti-representationalists if the notion of aboutness both in the premise (1) and the conclusion (3) is replaced with the notion of *satisfied aboutness*.

In light of this, whether one is a representationalist or not, it seems that she can always somehow connect genuine or satisfied aboutness to reality. Then, are the premise (1) and the robust conception of aboutness commitment

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thereby well-justified assuming the plausibility of the premise (2)? I doubt so. For aboutness commitment, if it has a good claim to being a conception of ontological commitment, is supposed to provide us with a test or method used for identifying what a truthbearer has to be ontologically committed to for it to be true. Put another way, no candidate conception of ontological commitment should be premised on any prior assumption of what is real in one's ontology. But for the representationalist notion of aboutness to work in identifying the ontological commitment of a truthbearer, we would have to first determine what is real, otherwise we would only have a case of intended aboutness but not of genuine aboutness. Similarly, if we identify the ontological commitment of a truthbearer using the anti-representationalist notion of satisfied aboutness, we would have to first determine when the aboutness of the truthbearer is satisfied; that is, we would have to figure out what there is in reality before implementing the supposed ontological test provided by aboutness commitment.

Therefore, the idea of aboutness commitment, whether interpreted from a representationalist or anti-representationalist viewpoint, fails to provide a useful test of ontological commitment due to its inherent explanatory circularity. This does not mean that there is anything incoherent in attempting to connect aboutness to reality. But it shows that any credible approach to understanding this connection has to presuppose some prior conception (and criterion) of ontological commitment.

4. Truthmaker Commitment and Fundamentality

To see another potential worry facing the robust conception of aboutness commitment, it is time to consider the premise (2) that a truthbearer is ontologically committed to what makes it true if it is true. This thesis is mostly proposed by defenders of the ontological approach to truthmaking, which is the view that a portion of reality plays its truthmaker role by virtue of its *ontological contribution* to the truth of the truthbearer it makes true. It is the supposed ontological contribution that explains the core insight of truthmaking that the truthbearer depends on the truthmaker, but not vice versa.

Although there are multiple ways of understanding what the ontological contribution of a truthmaker is (for example, J. Asay (2020), though somewhat unconvincingly, regards it as the necessitation of the truth of a truthbearer by the existence of its truthmaker), a promising proposal inspired by J. Schaffer (2008) and Cameron (2010) is to understand it as providing an *ontological ground* for the truth of the truthbearer in question. In this way, the thesis of Truthmaker Commitment is connected to the notion of *fundamentality* because ontological commitments, according to the proposal, must be provided at least by the truthmakers that ontologically grounds the truth of the corresponding truthbearers and thus are more fundamental than those truthbearers. In advocating for a "radically minimal ontology," Cameron (2010: 250) even goes further to argue that what plays the truthmaker role can only be the entities with real being, or the entities at the ground level of the hierarchy of reality. So ontological commitments in Cameron's sense are commitments to the absolutely fundamental entities.

However, no proponent of the pure aboutness-based account of truthmaking would agree with the above proposal, let alone its Cameronian version. As Audi (2020: 569) nicely presents, the basic idea behind the pure aboutness-based account of truthmaking is truthmaking as *matching*. That is, a truthmaker for a truthbearer plays its role not in terms of any ontological contribution it makes, but rather in terms of the semantic features of the truthbearer highlighted in the guise of aboutness. Audi says, "Truth is guaranteed once we have a truthbearer, the semantic features that constitute its matching a certain fact, and the obtaining of that fact" (Audi 2020: 583). In making a truthbearer true, all substantive work is done by its semantic character so that the obtaining fact is merely an "inert" participant (Audi 2020: 574-575). No further ontological contribution from the truthmaker fact is needed in truthmaking.

Since the proponents of Truthmaker Commitment and the theorists of pure aboutness-based truthmaking radically disagree on whether a truthmaker is supposed to make any ontological contribution in the enterprise of truthmaking, it is difficult to see how the premises (1) and (2) could be coherently used for establishing the conceptual possibility of aboutness commitment in the robust sense, even though the whole truthmaking argument is formally valid. On the one hand, given the proposal concerning

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ontological ground, Truthmaker Commitment is intended to provide a fundamental ontology. On the other hand, however, the pure aboutness-account of truthmaking is not sensitive to the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction. No appropriate "aboutness apparatuses"—in Schipper's (2018) locution—could be used for identifying what is relatively or absolutely fundamental, even if some of them might signify what there is.

Indeed, there is no denying that the proponents of the pure aboutness-account of truthmaking are free to reject the objective of fundamental ontology implied in Truthmaker Commitment, thus accommodating non-fundamental aboutness commitments. But this move may undermine the metaontological role of truthmaking in providing possible *ontological explanations* for truths. If Smith and Simon (2007: 90) are right when they say, "A theory ontologically commits us to those entities whose existence is required to *ontologically explain* its constituent assertions," a concession to non-fundamental commitments would probably impose a theoretical burden on the robust conception of aboutness commitment itself, too.

5. Aboutness and Ontological Commitment

If the truthmaking argument for aboutness commitment fails in the abovementioned ways, one may ask, what is a correct understanding of the connection of aboutness and ontological commitment?

Let us reconsider the story of Smith's (1999) notion of projection. Smith does think that an appropriate account of truthmaking has to be constrained by the element of aboutness for the purpose of precluding irrelevant truthmakers, but does not thereby adopt a pure aboutness-based account of truthmaking. Rather, his account of truthmaking is *mixed*: Truthmaking is regarded as a matter of necessitation of truthbearer by truthmaker plus aboutness. Indeed, there has been generally accepted among truthmaking theorists since G. Restall (1996) that there are well-known difficulties concerning the project of characterizing truthmaking in terms of necessitation of truthbearer by truthmaker. But Smith's mixed account of aboutness is still insightful if the element of necessitation is merely seen as a (though inadequate) way of capturing the ontological contribution of a truthmaker. That is, aboutness is not the whole story of truthmaking. Instead, truthmaking is essentially an

enterprise of ontological explanation filtered through aboutness: Under the constraint of aboutness, a truthmaker for a truthbearer is regarded as ontologically explaining the truth of the truthbearer by providing a relevant and legitimate ground for it. Since the ontological commitment of a truthbearer is exactly what is needed by an appropriate ontological explanation of its possible truth, the truthbearer has to be ontologically committed to its truthmaker.

Such a general account of truthmaking is enough for motivating Truthmaker Commitment, while aboutness is still allowed to play a role in ontological commitment at the same time. Since a truth is ontologically committed to its truthmaker, and its truthmaker is subject to the constraint of aboutness, its ontological commitment would be constrained by aboutness so that what it is ontologically committed to must be within the scope of what it is about. To avoid the explanatory circularity mentioned in the section 3, the notion of aboutness can be weakened so that it is not required to have an indispensable connection to reality anymore. In other words, the moderate notion of aboutness involved in constraining truthmaker and ontological commitment is either the notion of intended aboutness for representationalists, or the notion of general aboutness (not necessarily requiring satisfaction) for anti-representationalists.

To further clarify the moderate conception of aboutness commitment, consider a simple argument from Jiang (2023) that that "is ontologically committed to" and "is about" are not co-extensive. Jiang motivates his point using the two following cases (Jiang 2023: 2):

> *Case 1*: <Every swan can fly> is about swans, but not ontologically committed to them.

> *Case 2*: <Anna is singing> is ontologically committed to human cells (assuming that Anna is a human being), but not about human cells.

It is not difficult to see that the Case 1 does not threaten the proposed moderate conception of aboutness commitment, because the aboutness constraint imposed on ontological commitment is allowed to be insufficient.

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On the other hand, however, the Case 2 clearly violate our requirement that what a truthbearer is ontologically committed to must be within the scope of what it is about.

Nevertheless, the Case 2 is itself rather doubtful: I agree with Jiang that <Anna is singing> is not about human cells, but do not see why it may be ontologically committed to human cells by itself. A core reason provided for his claim is, "It cannot be true unless human cells exist" (Jiang 2023: 2). But such a reason is not well-grounded unless some particular background conditions concerning a human being and her relation to her cells are assumed. Even if <Anna is singing> requires Anna's existence, it is another substantive ontological matter whether her existence requires the existence of her cells. This ontological matter cannot be adjudicated on the basis of the truth of <Anna is singing> alone. Therefore, Jiang does not successfully justify the separation of ontological commitment from aboutness.

6. Conclusion

As we have seen, a promising moderate conception of aboutness commitment is hidden behind Smith's mixed aboutness-based account of truthmaking. That is, aboutness in the proposed moderate sense is a necessary but insufficient constraint for ontological commitment. The moderate notion of aboutness is responsible for constraining, but not determining, the notion of ontological commitment, which in turn contributes to our understanding of a stronger notion of aboutness in the genuine or satisfied sense. Such a picture of aboutness and ontological commitment is immune from the explanatory circularity facing the previous robust conception, while respecting both the objective of providing an (at least relatively) fundamental ontology implied in Truthmaking Commitment and the general insight behind a (mixed) aboutness-based account of truthmaking.

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