

In *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 2: 301-308.

On Some Alleged Truthmakers for Negatives

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This paper considers three recent attempts by David Armstrong, Ross Cameron, and Jonathan Schaffer to provide truthmakers for negative existential truths. It is argued that none of the proposed truthmakers are up to the task of making any negative existential truth true and, it will turn out, for the same reason.

1. Introduction

It is well known that negative existential truths pose a serious challenge for those who think that every truth, or even every contingent truth, is made true by some entity. The challenge is to identify an entity or entities, the *existence* of which would ground a truth concerning the *non-existence* of something. But it is hard to see, for example, what entity could make the proposition *that there are no unicorns* true, for it seems that existence of a unicorn is compatible with the existence of every actually existing entity. In spite of this, truthmaker theorists have devised some ingenious solutions to this problem. I am going to consider three such solutions here, namely those given by David Armstrong (2004), Ross Cameron (2008), and Jonathan Schaffer (2010a). I shall not argue that their proposed truthmakers should be rejected for being exotic or “suspicious.”

Instead, I will argue that these entities are just not up to the task for which they were designed, namely that of making negative existential truths true. I show that in each case, we can only account for the existence of these putative entities in terms of the non-existence of anything more. These entities exist *because* of the non-existence of anything more and so they cannot make true certain ‘nothing more’ negative existentials concerning their conditions of existence. These counterexamples, moreover, give us reason to doubt that these putative truthmakers can make *any* negative existential truth true.

2. Armstrong: The Totality State

For Armstrong, the truthmaker for every negative existential truth is what he calls the “totality state of affairs” (2004: 72-6; 1997: 197-201). A totality state is a relational state of affairs that relates a property to the aggregate of its instances. When a certain aggregate of entities are all of the instances of a certain property, those entities are said to ‘total’ that property by standing in the *totaling* relation to that property. The world, according to Armstrong, is the aggregate of existing states of affairs. This aggregate stands in the *totaling* relation to the property *being a state of affairs*, thus forming the biggest totality state. For Armstrong, this state serves as the truthmaker for negative existential truths because it sets a limit on what exists; it ‘says’ no more exists than what is contained in this state (1997: 200). The totality state is supposed to make a truth like *that there are no unicorns* true by excluding unicorns from existing; necessarily, if the actually existing first-order states of affairs total the property *being a state of affairs*, then no unicorns exists, hence *that there are no unicorns* is true.

Armstrong is right that the totality state necessitates that there are no more first-

order states of affairs than those there actually are. Nevertheless, he is wrong to think that there are no more than those states *because* the totality state exists (cf. Merricks 2007: 62). To see why, consider the actual totality state T. T is composed of the actual aggregate of the first-order states of affairs, @, which totals the property *being a state of affairs*. T has the unique feature that it would not exist if there were anything independent of @. So even if @ exists, the *totaling* relation exists, and the property *being a state of affairs* exists, T would not exist if there were some additional states of affairs. Since the existence of something entirely distinct from @ can make the difference between T's existence or non-existence, T's existence is, as it were, determined 'from the outside' and not simply by the existence and arrangements of its constituents. Indeed, we can only explain why T actually exists by reference to the non-existence of anything more than @. This indicates that T exists *because* there is nothing more than @ and *not* vice versa. Although he puts it in terms of truth, Armstrong agrees: "If it is true that a certain conjunction of states of affairs is all the states of affairs, then this is *only true because* there are no more of them" (my emphasis 1997: 198). This asymmetry makes it hard to see how T could be the truthmaker for the negative existential *that there are no more states of affairs than those in @*. After all, it is a plausible constraint on truthmaking that *x* is a truthmaker for *p* only if *p* is true *because x* exists. But if T exists because there are no more states of affairs than those in @, then it is not the case that *that there are no more states of affairs than those in @* is true because T exists. For it is implausible to think that an entity is a truthmaker for a truth—a negative existential in our case—stating a condition for that very entity's existence. Armstrong says, "...higher-order states of affairs, *once in place*, set certain limits to what further lower-order states of affairs there

can be or not be” (my emphasis 1997: 197). This talk of totality states ‘setting limits’ is misleading. Totality states do not ‘do’ anything to make it the case that nothing more exists, for they are ‘in place’ only in virtue of there being no more states than there actually are.¹

3. Cameron: The World as Essentially Worldly

Cameron (2008) argues that the one truthmaker for all negative existential truths is the actual world itself. The actual world, he thinks, is constituted by the truthmakers for all the positive truths, and is essentially constituted by them (2008: 294). This entails that the actual world is essentially lacking in unicorns and everything else that does not exist. He is careful to point out that this does not mean that unicorns could not exist, only that no possible world containing a unicorn (or any more or less for that matter) could be a counterpart of the actual world. If this were all to Cameron’s view then he would not have identified a necessitating truthmaker for the proposition *that there are no unicorns*

¹ One might think that this objection supplies the materials for a general argument against states of affairs as truthmakers for any truth, positive or negative. Like the totality state, all the constituents of the state of affairs of the rose’s being red could exist, yet fail to form the state of the rose’s being red. Given how I reason about the totality state, one might think that we need to explain the existence of the rose’s being red in terms of something like ‘its being the case that the rose *is* red,’ and hence conclude that the state does not make it true *that the rose is red*. However, the two cases are importantly dissimilar. First, the existence of the totality state does not require further explanation simply because its constituents could exist yet not form a totality state. It requires explanation because its existence is, as I said, determined from the ‘outside’ by the mere existence or non-existence of anything independent of @. The state of the rose’s being red is not like this and so does not require further explanation. Second, the existence of the state of the rose’s being red is not even explained by its being the case that the rose *is* red since the state just is the instantiation of redness by the rose. Whether the rose is red is simply a matter of whether the state of the rose’s being red exists. But we really do explain @’s totaling *being a state of affairs* by pointing to the non-existence of anything more than @. Third, to be true, positive truths only require that the world *be* as they represent it as being. The state of the rose’s being red constitutes the world’s being as *that the rose is red* represents it as being. On the other hand, truthmakers for negatives must exclude the existence of what these truths represent as not existing. Yet they may not do this *in virtue of* the non-existence of what is represented as not existing. This is why negatives are harder than positives to ground and why the totality state needs more explanation than the rose’s being red. Thanks to Ross Cameron and an anonymous referee for drawing this objection to my attention.

for the following seems possible: there is a world w that contains a unicorn and a duplicate w^- of the actual world $@$ as a proper part. In this world, $@$ has a counterpart (w^-), yet *that there are no unicorns* is false. To avoid this, Cameron holds that the actual world $@$ is *essentially* a world. From this it follows that the only counterparts of $@$ are $@$ itself and any world indiscernible to $@$. Thus in w , $@$ has no counterpart, not even its duplicate w^- . He writes,

Remember the case earlier of the world w that had a proper part, w^- , that is a duplicate of the actual world $@$. That is precisely a case where the actual world has a duplicate that is not itself a world. And while $@$ is the truthmaker for \langle there are no unicorns \rangle , w^- is not such a truthmaker because it is not a world. (2008: 417)

By taking $@$ to be essentially a world and essentially lacking unicorns, Cameron believes he has provided *that there are no unicorns* a necessitating truthmaker. His account crucially relies on having $@$, but not its duplicate w^- , be a world. This is where I think his view faces a problem. There ought to be some account of why $@$, but not w^- , is a world. Here is Cameron's account: "...it is not at all plausible that worlds are intrinsically worlds. The world is the biggest thing. It is a world because there is nothing bigger than it that it is a proper part of" (2008: 417). For him, $@$ is essentially, but not intrinsically, a world. So it looks like we can only explain why $@$ exists as a world in terms of the non-existence of anything more. The problem is that if $@$ is a world precisely *because* there is nothing bigger than it of which it is a proper part, then $@$ does not account for the truth of the 'nothing more' negative existential concerning the conditions of its existence, viz. *that there is nothing bigger than $@$ of which $@$ is a proper part*. Given the plausible explanatory constraint on truthmaking, $@$ does not make this proposition true. Another explanation for why $@$, but not w^- , is a world is that $@$ exemplifies the "totality"

property *being a world* but *w-* does not.² However, this would not help Cameron provide a truthmaker for the proposition *that there is nothing bigger than @ of which @ is a proper part* since @ would still exemplify *being a world* only in virtue of there being nothing bigger than @. So even though Cameron takes the world to be essentially a world, it does not make every negative existential truth true.³

4. Schaffer: The World as the One Fundament

Like Cameron, Schaffer (2010a) holds that the world itself is a truthmaker, but his view differs in important respects. First, Schaffer endorses “truthmaker monism” the view that the world is the one and only truthmaker for every truth, a fortiori every negative existential truth. Second, he defends the monistic thesis that the world—the maximal mereological sum of actual concrete entities—is the one fundamental substance that grounds all of its proper parts (2010b). Schaffer believes that the combination of monism about the world together with truthmaker monism provides a simple and elegant solution to the problem of providing truthmakers for negative existential truths.

Truthmaking, for Schaffer, is “truth-grounding,” i.e., the truth of a proposition is a fact that is grounded in the actual world @, the one fundament. For him grounding does not entail necessitation (2010a: 311, 320), so Schaffer avoids counterexamples based on @

² Cameron would not accept this because he thinks there is no need for such a property since @ is essentially a world. He thinks we only need to admit properties into our ontology to ground accidental truths. See his 2009 post on metaphysicalvalues.blogspot.com.

³ I also think there is a problem with Cameron’s view that @ is essentially a world given his view about how @ is constituted. It is plausible to think that claims about the essential nature of an entity entail necessities (cf. Fine 1994), e.g., if *x* is essentially an *F*, then necessarily, if *x* exists, then *x* is *F*. According to Cameron, the actual world @ is constituted by the truthmakers for each positive truth: “the world—the biggest entity that there is—exists, and is what it is, in virtue of its parts” (2008: 418). If @ exists (and has its identity) in virtue of its parts, then whenever those parts exist, @ should exist (and have its identity). Cameron thinks that an expanded world *w*, which contains all the truthmakers for every actual positive truth plus a unicorn, is a possible world. Given Cameron’s view of how @ is constituted, @ should exist (or have a counterpart) in *w*. And given that essential attributions entail necessities, @ should be a world in *w*: if @ is essentially a world, then necessarily, if @ exists, then @ is a world. It is hard to see how Cameron can be consistent in thinking that @ is essentially a world and constituted by the actual truthmakers for positive truths.

existing or having a counterpart in an expanded world where @ is a proper part of a larger whole containing entities that do not actually exist. This requires an account of why @ grounds the truth of, for instance, the proposition *that there are no dragons* in the actual world but not in an expanded world containing a dragon. Here's Schaffer's response:

[O]ur world cannot be the one fundament of the expanded world, because the one fundament there must also make a dragon. In general, any expansion (any more to the world) requires a different unique fundament – if the worlds in question did not differ, then they would be indiscernible, rather than contracted and expanded. So <there are no dragons> is true at actuality, *in virtue of actuality's being the unique actual fundament*. Once actuality is listed as the one fundamental entity, ground for the absence of dragons is assured (my emphasis 2010a: 321).

This suggests that @ lacks a property in the expanded world that it actually has, namely the property of *being the one fundament*, which seems, for Schaffer, to be the very feature of @ that is supposed to make it suitable to be the actual truthmaker for the proposition *that there are no dragons*. But this putative property, like all other totality properties *being a world*, *being a universe*, and *being all there is*, is gained or lost depending on whether @ is part of a larger whole. All such properties depend for their instantiation on there being nothing of which @ is a proper part. So it is because there is nothing of which @ is a proper part that @ instantiates *being the one fundament*. Once again, we can only explain the existence and nature of the candidate truthmaker in terms of the non-existence of anything more. Consequently, it cannot, given the plausible explanatory constraint on truthmaking, make at least one negative existential truth true, viz. the truth *that there is nothing of which @ is a proper part*. Even if Schaffer does not countenance the property *being the one fundament*, at least part of our answer to the question 'why is @ the one fundament?' must be that there is nothing of which @ is a proper part. Again, it is hard to see how @ could make true this 'nothing more' proposition given that its existence does

not account for why there is nothing more. Note that this criticism does not depend on the fact that @ fails to necessitate the truth of the proposition *that there is nothing of which @ is a proper part*. Even in the *actual* world, @ is the one fundament *because* there is nothing outside of @.

5. General Remarks

I have been arguing that the putative truthmakers that Armstrong, Cameron, and Schaffer propose—the totality state, the world, the one fundament, respectively—cannot make certain negative existential truths true, namely the ‘nothing more’ truths concerning their conditions of existence: Armstrong’s totality state cannot make it true *that there are no more states of affairs than those in @*; Cameron’s world and Schaffer’s fundament cannot make it true *that there is nothing bigger than @ of which @ is a proper part*. Here I’ll say more about why this is the case and argue that these putative entities are unfit to make *any* negative existential truth true.

What the actual totality state/world/fundament have in common is that they display something like what Sider calls “border-sensitivity”: “A property is border-sensitive iff whether it is instantiated by an object depends on what is going on, intrinsically, outside that object at its borders” (2001: 358). Obviously, this notion does not apply precisely to their proposed truthmakers because nothing is actually going on ‘outside’ of these putative entities (there is no ‘outside’). Nevertheless, the mere existence of anything ‘outside’ of them *would* make a difference for the existence or nature of these putative entities. As such, they exhibit a kind of border-sensitivity, namely a *counterfactual* border-sensitivity: they would not exist or they would not be what they

are if there were to exist something outside of and distinct from them. Conversely, they exist or are what they are only if there is nothing outside of or distinct from them.

Armstrong's totality state would not exist if there were anything that is not a constituent of @; Cameron's world would not be a world if there were anything bigger than it; Schaffer's world would not be a fundament if there were anything more than it.⁴

It is a necessary condition for the existence of the totality state/world/fundament that there be nothing more than what there actually is. But this is no mere necessary condition. The satisfaction of this condition is partly *constitutive* of these entities: what it is to be the actual totality state is for @ (= the actual first-order states of affairs) to be *all* the states there; what it is to be the actual world is for @ (= the actual truthmakers for positive truths) to be the *biggest* thing there is; what it is to be the actual fundament is for @ (= the actual world as a whole) to be the *one and only* fundamental entity. These ways of characterizing these entities are really just different ways of saying that @, and *nothing more*, exists. Negation is, as it were, built into these entities because they are essentially border-sensitive; they are essentially dependent on the non-existence of anything more.

This should lead Armstrong, Cameron, and Schaffer to hold that the non-existence of anything more is, in some sense, *prior* to the existence of their proposed truthmakers. Obviously, 'the non-existence of anything more' does not refer to an existing entity to which the totality state/world/fundament stands in a relation of ontological dependence. Perhaps, then, we should say that the satisfaction of the

⁴ It is clear that Cameron's world and Schaffer's fundament are not intrinsically worlds and fundaments, respectively, which is why they would not be what they actually are if there were any more entities. But it is less clear that Armstrong's totality state is not intrinsically a totality state. One might think that it is intrinsically a totality state if one adopts Lewis' (1986) view of intrinsicity, but deny this if one adopts Cameron's (2009) essentialist view of intrinsicity. Fortunately, I do not think much hangs on this for my purposes. The fact that the totality state is border-sensitive in the sense that it would not exist if there were anything more still helps support the thesis that the totality state exists because there is nothing more.

condition ‘that there is nothing more’ is ontologically prior to the existence of the candidate truthmakers. At the very least, the priority is *explanatory*: an account of what these entities are and why they exist makes essential reference to the non-existence of anything more that what actually exists. These entities exist *because* there is nothing more, not vice versa. This is why they fail to make the ‘nothing more’ truths true.

Truthmakers are supposed to account for and explain their truths: entity *x* is a truthmaker for proposition *p* only if *p* is true *because x* exists. But it is implausible to think that *p* is true because *x* exists, when *x* depends for its existence on what *p* represents as being (or not being) the case. Since the candidate truthmakers depend on and are explained by the non-existence of anything more—exactly what the ‘nothing more’ truths represent—they do not plausibly account for these truths. Hence, they do not make them true.

Up to this point I have only been arguing that the alleged truthmakers cannot make *every* negative existential truth true. If I am right, then this is enough to disqualify them from being truthmakers for negative existentials. The ‘nothing more’ negative existentials are *contingent* truths and any plausible account of truthmakers for negative existential truths should at minimum provide a truthmaker for every contingent negative existential truth. For even if some truths need no truthmakers (e.g., necessary truths), it is implausible to think that some but not other contingent negative existentials are excluded from the scope of truthmaking.

The further question is whether the proposed truthmakers can make *any* negative existential truth true, e.g.,

- (1) There are no unicorns.

If what I have argued above is correct, then there is good reason to think that these alleged truthmakers are *not* fit to make any negative existential truth true. It is untenable, I think, to hold that the totality state/world/fundament makes (1) true, yet that it fails to make true a proposition concerning the conditions of its existence, namely the ‘nothing more’ truth. If these entities do not make the nothing more truth true, then they do not make (1) true because what it is for there to be nothing more than what there actually is, is for there to be no unicorns, no dragons, no Hobbits, and so on. Insofar as the totality state/world/fundament are dependent for their existence on there being nothing more, they are *partially* dependent on there being no unicorns. So even if the totality state/world/fundament necessitate the truth of (1), they do not make it true. The same point can be made in terms the explanatory constraint mentioned above. If the totality state/world/fundament makes (1) true, then (1) is true because the totality state/world/fundament exists. But if, as I’ve argued, the totality state/world exists because there are no more entities than there actually are, it is implausible to think that there are no unicorns because the totality state/world/fundament exists. Part of what explains why the totality state/world/fundament exists is that there are no more entities than those that actually exist. Since unicorns do not actually exist, the non-existence of unicorns partially explains why the totality state/world/fundament exists. Armstrong’s, Cameron’s, and Schaffer’s accounts get the explanatory priority wrong: the totality state/world/fundament exists (in part) because there are no unicorns, not vice versa. Thus, none of their candidate truthmakers can make (1) true.

Caplan and Sanson (2010: 25-30) argue against certain presentist solutions to the

problem of truthmakers for past truths in a parallel way to the argument presented here.⁵ They object to presentists who postulate irreducibly past directed properties like *having been pale* in order to ground truths about the past, like *that Arnold was pale*. What they object to is that the truth of the proposition *that Arnold was pale* is not properly explained by Arnold's now having the property *having been pale*, because they think Arnold's now having the property *having been pale* is appropriately explained by Arnold's once having had the property *being pale*. "The only reason," they write, "that Arnold's now having the property *having been pale* has any bearing at all on the truth of the proposition that Arnold was pale is that, if Arnold now has the property *having been pale*, then he once had the property *being pale*" (2010: 27). The analogous point to be made about the totality state/world/fundament as truthmakers for (1) is that their existence does not appropriately explain the truth of (1) because the only reason these entities have any bearing on the truth of (1) is that they exist only if there are no unicorns. Again, even if the existence of the totality state/world/fundament necessitates the truth of (1), they do not explain its truth since what partially explains their existence is that there are no unicorns.

I have argued that the truthmakers for negatives proposed by Armstrong, Cameron, and Schaffer are unfit to make any negative existential truth true. My argument targets their candidate truthmakers because of the special nature of these putative entities; we can only explain what they are and why they exist in terms of non-existence, which renders them ineligible to ground negative truths concerning their own conditions of

⁵ Thanks to Ross Cameron for suggesting this comparison.

existence and consequently negative existential truths in general.⁶

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⁶ Special thanks to Ross Cameron, Casey Hall, Mark Bernier, and an anonymous referee for comments and/or discussion on this paper.