How Negative Truths Depend on Being

Identifying plausible truthmakers for negative truths has been a serious and perennial problem for truthmaker theory. I argue here that negative truths (in particular contingent negative existential truths) are indeed made true but not in the way that positive truths are. I rely on a distinction between “existence-independence” and “variation-independence” drawn by Hofmann and Horvath (2008) to characterize the form of dependence negative truths exhibit on reality. The notion of variation-independence is then used to motivate a principle of truthmaking for contingent negative truths.

1. Introduction

Negative truths have likely posed the greatest challenge to truthmaker theorists who think that all (or at least all contingent) truths have truthmakers. The challenge is that, prima facie, it is hard to see how a negative truth (e.g., <there are no unicorns>) that is concerned with the non-existence of something could be (or even needs to be) made true by the existence of some entity. To complicate matters, most truthmaker theorists accept Truthmaker Necessitariannism, the view that if an entity makes a proposition true, then necessarily, if

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1 I will abbreviate “the proposition that…” with angle brackets < , >.
exists, then \( p \) is true.\(^2\) This exacerbates the problem for it is quite difficult to identify some entity whose existence is sufficient for the truth of a proposition like \(<\text{there are no unicorns}>\). Indeed, it appears on first reflection that every entity in the actual world, including the entire world itself, is compatible with the existence of a unicorn, an entity whose existence would render \(<\text{there are no unicorns}>\) false.

There are a variety of attempts by truthmaker theorists to provide negative truths with truthmakers. Russell (in)famously suggested in his *Logical Atomism* lectures (1985) that we need to accept the existence of negative facts to ground negative truths. More recently, Armstrong (2004) supplies negative truths with a truthmaker by postulating the “totality state,” the state of the first-order states of affairs being all the states there are (or more specifically, the first-order states standing the “totaling” relation to the property *being a state of affairs*). Martin (1996) and Kusko (2006) have argued that absences or lacks can account for how negative truths are made true, while others have attributed certain novel features to the world as a whole, e.g., Cameron (2008) claims that the world is essentially a world and has its parts essentially and Schaffer (2010a; 2010b) holds that the world is the one fundamental entity, being that on which all its parts depend.

I am not concerned to rebut these putative solutions in this paper, since there is already quite a bit of discussion of them in the literature.\(^3\) Perhaps some of these solutions are viable, I cannot rule this out. Instead, I am going to suggest that it is more profitable to consider contingent negative truths on their own terms than to assume that if these truths are made true, then they must be made true in the way that positive existentials truths are,


viz. by being necessitated by the existence of some relevant entity. In this paper I characterize what I take to be the unique form of dependence on the world exhibited by contingent negative truths. To do this I rely on a distinction between “existence-independence” and “variation-independence” drawn by Hofmann and Horvath (2008) and go on to formulate a principle of truthmaking for negative truths (i.e., a principle setting out necessary and sufficient conditions under which a proposition is made true by something). The approach adopted here allows us to respect the intuitive differences between positive and negative truths and articulate the way in which negative truths are made true by the world, while releasing us from the need to postulate controversial truthmakers to necessitate negative truths.

2. Negative and Positive Propositions

It is at least plausible, though not uncontroversial\(^4\), to think that positive contingent truths like <some dogs exist> and <the rose is red> are made true by the existence of entities, in particular entities that necessitate the truth of these propositions, e.g., the individual dog Fido and the state of affairs of the rose’s being red (or the trope, the rose’s redness), respectively. Is it also plausible to think that negative truths like <there are no unicorns> are made true by the existence of entities that necessitate their truth? Truthmaker maximalists probably think so because they want to have a unified account of truthmaking. I

\(^4\) See Dodd (2001), Hornsby (2005), and Lewis (1999) for concerns about contingent predications needing entities to make them true. These philosophers think that truth depends on what exists and how those things are, though they deny that how things are, are entities. Even if you think that <the apple is red> depends on how the apple is and not the existence of some entity (e.g., a state of affairs or a non-transferable trope), the issue of what makes true a negative existential like <there are no unicorns> is still a pressing one. For it’s not clear what such a truth even depends on how things are. Is being such that there are no unicorns or containing no unicorns a way that the world is? Is this a property of the world? Hard ontological questions await us concerning negative existentials whether we think that truths depend on only what exists or on both what exists and how it is.
suspect that it is also because they assume that the dependence of a positive truth like \(<\text{Fido exists}\>\) on the dog Fido is paradigmatic of truthmaking. They assume, in other words, that if every truth is made true, then each is made true in exactly the same way (e.g., by being necessitated by some entities that it is about). But I think that this generalization from the case of positive truths is problematic and is needlessly complicated. The reason it is problematic is familiar. There seem to be no ordinary, non-suspicious\(^5\) entities that are suitable truthmakers for negative existential truths. That is, the only entities that would necessitate the truth of each negative existential appear to be postulated for the sole purpose of providing these truths with truthmakers, e.g., absences, negative facts, or a totality state. We could be justified in postulating such entities if there were compelling reasons to think that every truth needs to be necessitated by some entity, but maximalists have notoriously had a hard time arguing for the thesis.\(^6\)

I said that requiring negative truths to be made true in the same way that positive truths are is needlessly complicated. What I mean by saying that it is complicated is that it forces us to identify some entity whose existence guarantees the truth of a proposition that intuitively represents the non-existence of something; it states that something does not exist. Positive existentials, by contrast, represent some entity as existing; they state that something exists. If this gloss on the difference between negative and positive existentials is correct, then this suggests, intuitively, that if a positive truth \(p\) is true, then \(p\) is true because of the existence of some entity, otherwise \(p\) is false, but conversely that if a negative truth \(q\) is false,

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\(^6\) Merricks, a critic of truthmaker theory, observes, “No one gives much of an argument for Truthmaker. Instead, Truthmaker’s main support comes from something like the brute intuition that what is true depends in a non-trivial way on what there is” (2007: 2). For Merricks, “Truthmaker” is the thesis that every truth is made true by some entity. Even Armstrong, maximalism’s most prominent defender, admits “the truth-maker principle seems to me to be fairly obvious once attention is drawn to it, but I do not know how to argue for it further” (1989: 89). See Dodd (2001; 2007) concerns about motivating maximalism.
then \( q \) is false because of the existence of some entity, otherwise \( q \) is true.\(^7\) To see this, consider the following true propositions

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(1) \text{ There are no unicorns,}
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\[
(2) \text{ There exist dogs,}
\]
and the following false propositions,

\[
(3) \text{ There are no human beings,}
\]
\[
(4) \text{ There exist flying pigs.}
\]
The negative existential (1) is true, but not, it seems, in virtue of the existence of any particular entity, whereas the negative existential (3) is false and false, it seems, in virtue of the existence of human beings.\(^8\) The case is reversed when we look at (2) and (4): (2) is true and true in virtue of the existence of dogs while (4) is false, but not false in virtue of the existence of particular entity. So, true negative existentials (like (1)) and false positive existentials (like (4)) are in the same boat: neither have their truth-values in virtue of the existence of any particular entity. This suggests that we treat true positive existentials and false negative existentials similarly and true negative existentials and false positive existentials similarly. There does seem to be a fundamental and important difference in how positive and negative existentials represent the world. Any account of how propositions are made true should take this into consideration for the truth-value of a proposition not only has something to do with how the world is but also the nature of that proposition, e.g., what it represents and how, its truth-conditions, etc.

I said above that the maximalist needlessly complicates things by requiring every

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\(^7\) Mellor (2003), Cameron (2005), and Simons (2005) would approve. Simons talks about negative existentials as being true by ‘default’ (2005: 255).

\(^8\) This example casts doubt on the thought that false propositions are only ever false because they lack truthmakers. (See Schaffer, for instance, who says “falsehoods are false because they lack a (successful) truthmaker” (2010b: 317).)
negative existential to have a necessitating truthmaking. This is because there is a perfectly good way in which negative existentials are made true that does not require the existence of an entity that necessitates each one. This form of truthmaking, which I present below, not only relieves us of the need to postulate new entities as truthmakers for negative existentials, but it also takes into account the unique way in which these propositions represent the world.⁹

3. Existence-Independence and Variation-Independence

Let’s keep (1), the proposition that there are no unicorns, as our example of a true negative existential. If I am right that there is no entity that necessitates the truth of (1), then (1) is true independently of each and every existing entity. This kind of independence is what I will call, following Hofmann and Horvath (2008), “existence-independence.” The truth-value of a proposition $p$ is existence-independen of an entity $x$ just in case it does not depend on the existence of $x$; the truth-value of $p$ is whatever it is, no matter whether $x$ exists or not (cf. Hofmann and Horvath (2008: 306)).¹⁰ If $p$’s truth-value is existence-independent of $x$, then this implies that the following situations are possible:

(a) $x$ exists and $p$ is true.
(b) $x$ exists and $p$ is false.
(c) $x$ does not exist and $p$ is true.
(d) $x$ does not exist and $p$ is false.

⁹ Obviously, I am assuming that there is a distinction between positive and negative truths. It is very plausible that there is such a distinction, but it is not uncontroversial. Some worry that we cannot draw a principled distinction between positive and negative truths (Molnar (2000)) and others deny the existence of negative truths (Mumford (2005 and 2007)). Settling these questions is beyond the scope of this paper but fortunately unnecessary since the central question can be framed in terms of truth and falsity. I agree with Kusko who says, “The central question is what makes true propositions true and false propositions false, i.e., how propositions get their truth-values, regardless of whether they are true or false” (2006: 22).

¹⁰ Conversely, $p$’s truth-value is existence-dependent on $x$ just in case $p$’s truth-value is dependent on the existence of $x$: the existence or non-existence of $x$ makes a difference to $p$’s truth-value; it renders $p$ true or false, respectively.
It appears that for all \( x \), (1) is true existence-independently of \( x \). Does it follow that the truth of (1) has no connection to reality, that (1)’s truth ‘floats free’ of being? Not at all. There is a different sense of independence with respect to which (1) is \emph{not} independent of reality. This other sense of independence, again following Hofmann and Horvath, is called "variation-independence" (2008: 306). The truth-value of a proposition \( p \) is variation-independent of some entity \( x \) just in case \( p \)'s truth-value does not change with any possible variation of or change in \( x \); no matter how \( x \) changes, \( p \)'s truth-value does not change.\(^{11}\) While negative existential truths are existence-independent of each and every entity, it is plain that they are not variation-independent of reality as a whole\(^ {12}\); it is not true independently of any possible variation in what there is and how it is. Even though a truth like (1) is not necessitated by the existence of any entity, there are plainly ways in which reality could vary that would change (1)’s truth-value, to wit: if a unicorn came to exist (and the other existing entities came to stand in new relations to the unicorn), then (1) would false.\(^ {13}\)

With the distinction between existence and variation independence in hand, we can articulate the differences between our examples (1), (2), (3), and (4) more perspicuously. The truth-values of (1) and (4) are existence-independent of each and every entity, but not variation-independent of reality as a whole, whereas the truth-values of (2) and (3) are not existence-independent of each and every entity, but are variation-independent of the facts.

\(^{11}\) Conversely, \( p \)'s truth-value is variation-dependent on \( x \) just in case \( p \)'s truth-value does change with some possible variation of or change in \( x \). We should not, I think, include \( x \)'s coming into or going out of existence as a change in \( x \). Hence, \( p \)'s being existence-dependent on \( x \) for its truth-value does not entail \( p \)'s being variation-dependent on \( x \) for its truth-value.

\(^{12}\) I’ll use ‘being,’ ‘reality as a whole,’ and ‘the world’ interchangeably in this paper. More on how I am using ‘the world’ below.

\(^{13}\) Hofmann and Horvath (2008) draw the existence/variation independence distinction to defend the notion of metaphysical analyticity. They suggest that analytic truths are variation but not existence independent of reality, just the reverse of what I’m suggesting for negative existential truths. I am unsure whether they would endorse the use to which I’m putting their distinction.
about particular dogs and humans, respectively.\textsuperscript{14} Identifying these two forms of independence goes some way towards legitimating the disparate treatment of truthmaking for positive truths and negative truths, but we are still left with the task of articulating what it is for a negative truth to be made true, something we can do by formulating a “principle of truthmaking,” i.e., a principle setting out necessary and sufficient conditions under which a negative existential truth is made true by something.

4. Truth Supervenes on Being

The fact that negative truths are existence, but not variation, independent of reality suggests that a principle in terms of supervenience—a “truth supervenes on being” (TSB) principle—is appropriate for contingent negative truths.\textsuperscript{15} The idea of supervenience is (roughly) the idea that there is no difference in one thing (or set of things) without a difference in another thing (or set of things). On the face of it, the view that negative truths are variation-dependent on reality seems just to be the idea that negative truths supervene on reality. But it is widely acknowledged that supervenience, like other generic modal relations (e.g., necessitation), only indicate patterns of covariation, i.e., they only indicate that one thing is always the case when another is. As such, it sometimes fails to capture the ontological priority of one thing to another or the asymmetrical dependence of one thing on another (after all supervenience is an \textit{anti}-symmetrical relation).\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, TSB principles are often rejected for failing to capture the intuition that truth depends on being because being and

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Hofmann and Horvath (2008: 306). The truth-values of (2) and (3) are, however, not variation-independent of reality as a whole, since reality could change in ways that would change the truth-values of (2) and (3).

\textsuperscript{15} See Bigelow (1988) and Lewis (2001) for influential TSB principles. Merricks (2007), Bennett (2011), and Dodd (2001) should be consulted for critique and discussion of TSB principles.

\textsuperscript{16} See Bennett and McLaughlin (2011), Kim (1994), and Horgan (1993) on how supervenience falls short in capturing the nature of ontological dependence.
truth symmetrically supervene on each other. The idea that there is no difference in truth without a difference in being is essential to our account of how negative truths are made true, but it needs to be supplemented.

The thesis that negative truths are variation-dependent on reality, recall, is the thesis that the truth-value of a negative truth would change with certain possible variations or changes in reality (in particular with changes in what exists). This should be understood to mean, I think, that it would only be in virtue of a change in being that there would be a change in the truth-value of \( p \). This claim contains two important components: (1) Only a change in being can render a change in a negative truth \( p \), i.e., changes in what exists alone (and not, for instance, changes in the truth-values of other propositions) would be responsible for a change in \( p \)'s truth-value and (2) that \( p \)'s truth-value would change only in virtue of a change in being (hence, being would not change in virtue of a change in \( p \)'s truth-value) indicates that \( p \) asymmetrically depends on being for its truth-value. Obviously, not every change in being would render a change in \( p \)'s truth-value; being would have to change in a specific way, namely by containing an entity in virtue of which \( p \) would be false: \( p \)'s false-maker (more on this to follow). So in addition to the thought that there is no difference in negative truth without a difference in being we need the idea that it is in virtue of changes in what exists alone that \( p \)'s truth-value would change.

At this point you might be concerned that we have not really said anything about how a proposition like (1) is actually made true by what in fact exists. Negative truths like (1) are existence-independent of every existing entity, we have determined, which means that for any existing \( x \) the truth-value of (1) is whatever it is, no matter whether \( x \) exists or not. Nevertheless, the world, as it were, holds fixed the truth of (1): necessarily, given all and only

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17 Bigelow’s (1988) and Lewis’ (2001) principles have been criticized for this. See Merricks (2007), Dodd (2007), and Rodriguez-Pereyra (2005).
the entities that exist, (1) is true.\(^\text{18}\) This does not, of course, entail that those entities necessitate the truth of (1), but because the world contains entities that are what they are and not unicorns (whether accidentally or essentially) the truth-value of (1) is fixed as true, subject only to particular changes in the world. Another way to put the point is this: (1)’s truth-value is not independent of the satisfaction or fulfillment of the truth-conditions, which are simply \textit{that there be no unicorns}. If any thing satisfies (or grounds the satisfaction of) these conditions, it is the world itself.\(^\text{19}\) I find this plausible for two reasons. First, the world, as I said, contains only entities that are what they are and not unicorns (whether accidentally or essentially). (1)’s truth-conditions are satisfied because, as Armstrong puts it, “everything that exists is different from a unicorn” (2004: 71). In fact, any world which does not contain a unicorn satisfies (1)’s truth-conditions; indeed, these conditions are even satisfied in a world in which only the proposition that there are no unicorns exists (if such a world is possible). Second, whatever a proposition is \textit{about} is relevant to the satisfaction of its truth-conditions. If a negative existential like (1) is about anything, it would seem to be about the world as a whole. (1) concerns the non-existence of unicorns simpliciter, i.e., it concerns there being no unicorns in our most unrestricted domain of quantification, namely the world itself. No proper part of that domain is going to be relevant to whether there is or is not, say, a unicorn outside of that proper part (assuming, as we are, that nothing necessitates the truth of (1)).

\(^{18}\) Bennett (2011) offers (but does not defend) the following TSB principle:

\begin{quote}
Worldwide local TSB: necessarily, each true claim is such that, necessarily, given all \textit{and only} the entities that exist and the properties that each of those entities has, then that claim is true.
\end{quote}

While this principle is no doubt true, it makes the truth of (2) supervene not only on the actual entities and their properties/relations but also on their being \textit{the only entities there are}. Assuming, as we are, that there are no totality properties or negative entities that make it the case that the existing entities are the only entities there are, there is no existing entity that necessitates the truth of (1).

\(^{19}\) Caputo (2007) holds that it is a constraint on truthmaking that a truthmaker satisfy or ground the satisfaction of the truth-bearer’s truth-conditions.
Being what (1) is about, the world is therefore relevant to the satisfaction of (1)’s truth-conditions. Not only is the world the thing, a change in which would render (1) false, it is also the thing that upholds or fixes the actual truth of (1) by satisfying its truth-conditions.

In light of the foregoing analysis, I suggest the following principle for contingent negative existential truths:

(PSBN) For any x and contingent negative existential p, x is a truthmaker for p iff x satisfies p’s truth-conditions and it would only be in virtue of a change in x that p would be false, viz. a change such that at least one entity would exist, which actually does not, in virtue of which p is false.20

This principle captures the asymmetrical variation-dependence between each negative truth and the world beyond it. To account for the ways in which being would have to change for a negative truth to change its truth-value TSBN employs the notion of a proposition being ‘false in virtue of’ the existence of an entity. Hence, we need a principle of false-making to supplement TSBN. Fortunately, such a principle is not hard to formulate. Consider again our example (1), the proposition that there are no unicorns. If (1) were false, it would be made false by the existence of a unicorn. Not only does the existence of a unicorn necessitate the falsity of this proposition (i.e., necessarily, if a unicorn u exists, then (1) is false), but this proposition also represents the non-existence of a unicorn. Hence, the principle of false-making FM:

(FM) For any entity x and contingent negative existential p, x is a false-maker for p iff x is one of the entities that necessitates the falsity of p and that p represents as not existing.

20 Compare the second conjunct of TSBN to the second disjunct of Bigelow’s (1988: 133) version of TSB: If p is true, then either at least one entity exists which would not exist, were p false, or at least one entity does not exist which would exist, were p false. Crucially, my principle includes the phrase “in virtue of” which signals the presence of asymmetrical dependence.
Thus far I have been saying that only changes in ‘being,’ ‘reality as a whole,’ ‘the world,’ etc. would be responsible for changes in the truth-value of a negative existential. This is because I think ‘the world’ makes true each contingent negative existential truth, i.e., the ‘x’ in TSBN stands for ‘the world.’ The term ‘the world’ is notoriously ambiguous and to make matters more complicated a number of other truthmaker theorists (namely Cameron (2008) and Schaffer (2010)) also hold that ‘the world’ serves as a truthmaker but seem to use the term quite differently. So let me say something about how I am using ‘the world.’

By ‘the world’ I do not mean an abstract entity (composed of propositions or states of affairs) that is actualized. I take ‘the world’ to refer to whatever is the sum (or collection\(^\text{21}\)) of everything that exists (or, if you like, what exists and what properties and relations are instantiated). Perhaps ‘the world’ refers to different sums (or collections) at different times, though I do not want to presuppose a particular view of temporal reality here (e.g., presentism, growing block, or eternalism). What I do want to say is that it is possible for the world to change, i.e., it is possible for the ‘the world’ to refer to a different sum (or collection) of entities than it in fact does. The world can change in (infinitely) many ways: it can gain parts, lose parts, and its parts can gain or lose properties/relations, etc. But when we say that a negative existential truth like (1) would change its truth-value only in virtue of a change in the world, what is it exactly that changes in the world? Most obviously, the world as whole would have changed intrinsically by gaining a proper part it did not have, namely a unicorn.\(^\text{22}\) Proper parts of the world would change too with the addition of a unicorn. Such an addition would bring about an extrinsic or “Cambridge” change in those proper parts of

\(^{21}\) If you don’t think all the existing entities compose something, then let ‘the world’ be a plural term denoting the collection of existing entities. I won’t weigh in on this matter here. See van Frassen, Simons, and Varzi for discussion.

\(^{22}\) I write in terms of the world as a whole changing in time, but we need not make any temporal references to make the point: it is possible for the world to vary by simply having one or more entities than it actually does.
the world insofar as those entities would come to instantiate new properties and relations they previously did not have. To illustrate more generally, suppose the world W is composed of two proper parts x and y. Now suppose some entity z comes into existence. W gains a new proper part; it is now composed of x, y, and z and so has changed intrinsically. Parts x and y, however, have not changed intrinsically, only extrinsically insofar as they come to stand in new relations R₁ and R₂, respectively, to z. According to TSBN, W would be the truthmaker for <there is no z>, for it was the thing that changed the truth-value of this proposition. It is important to note that the adherent of Necessitarianism cannot accept that the world could change by the mere addition of some entity, for she thinks that any addition of an entity x necessitates the removal of another entity y, which is the necessitating truthmaker for the negative existential <x does not exist>. I think this is a drawback of Necessitarianism, for it does at first glance seem possible for the world to expand or contract by the mere addition or subtraction of something (cf. Merricks 2007: 71).

The idea that the world is the truthmaker for each negative existential truth is not novel. Cameron (2008) and Schaffer (2009; 2010) both hold this position, but for different reasons than I do. Cameron thinks that the world is the truthmaker for every negative existential truth because he thinks the world has its parts and properties essentially. Hence, for him the world essentially lacks unicorns and Hobbits. Schaffer thinks the world alone is fit to be the one truthmaker for every truth because he holds that the world is ontologically prior to all of its parts, i.e., it grounds all of its parts. Thorough discussion of these views is

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23 In Lewis’ terms, Necessitarians must adopt a “two-way difference-making” principle: if two worlds W and V differ, then at least W contains an entity x that V does not and V contains an entity y that W does not (2001: 609). This is opposed to a “one-way difference-making” principle that he prefers: two worlds W and V can differ simply by V containing more entities than W.

N.B. the account does not force us to accept Lewis’s (1986: 87) Humean prohibition against necessary connections between distinct existences; we can still hold that all positive truths are made true by entities that necessitate their truth.
not possible in here and my point, at any rate, is not to show that these views are incorrect.\textsuperscript{24} My point is simply that the account of the world given here does not require us to hold either controversial position. We can account for how negative existentials depend on the world without thinking that the world essentially lacks unicorns or thinking that there is only one truthmaker. All my view says is that the world is everything that exists and that changes in what exists would be responsible for changes in the truth-values of negative existentials. My view does require us to treat truthmaking for negative truths differently from truthmaking for positive truths, but this seems to be justified given what we said above about the different ways in which these propositions represent the world and given the fact that treating them as we do positive truths inevitably requires controversial ontological commitments.

5. Objections

I have claimed that negative existential truths do not have necessitating truthmakers, but that they still depend on being as per TSBN. I foresee a number of objections to this claim.

Objection 1: If negative truths are existence-independent of and merely variation-dependent on what exists (and hence not necessitated by anything), then we must abandon the central idea of truthmaker theory, that all truth depends on what exists. The present account does this; therefore, it abandons the central idea of truthmaker theory.\textsuperscript{25} Response: Nothing in the mere idea that truth depends on what exists implies that every truth depends on what exists in the very same way nor does it imply Necessitarianism. The central

\textsuperscript{24} See my XXX where I argue against Cameron and Schaffer’s candidate truthmakers.

\textsuperscript{25} I imagine Armstrong objecting this way. See his (2004: 69-71).
motivation for truthmaker theory, as I understand it, is that truth is not brute, but a dependent feature of true propositions, dependent on what exists in the world. The present account of how negative truths depend on being respects and explicates this thought, for it maintains that every negative truth has a truthmaker (the whole world, the totality of what exists) that it asymmetrically depends on for its truth-value. It just so happens that this dependence takes a different form than the one exhibited by positive truths. Negative truths are not brute, nor do they “float free” of being as they would if they were both existence and variation-independent of reality. But they are not. If the objector remains unhappy with this response, then I put this question back to her: if negative truths are made true in the way positive truths are, then what are their truthmakers? What necessitates the truth of <there are no unicorns>? It seems that she will be forced to postulate some novel and likely suspicious entity to satisfy her demand for truthmakers. Moreover, the objector must overlook seemingly obvious differences in the way positive and negative truths represent the world, differences that at least provide prima facie justification for treating negative truth differently from positive truth.

Objection 2: Merricks (2007) imagines a truthmaker theorist arguing that we can absolve negative existentials from needing necessitating truthmakers on the grounds a negative existential “denies the existence of something. So there does not seem to be something (or some way things are) that a negative existential is about” (2007: 84). He objects, saying

This argument is just special pleading. But for special pleading, the reasoning behind this argument would release counterfactuals of freedom from the demand for grounding in what there is and how it is. For counterfactuals of freedom are not about any actual action (or feature) of an entity. So there does not seem to be something (or some way things are) that a counterfactual is about. Thus, this reasoning suggests [TSB accounts] should release counterfactuals of freedom from the requirement that existing things (or those things being a certain way) ground
their truth. (2007: 84)

I have suggested that we treat negative truths differently from positive truths (in particular by providing them with a principle of truthmaking that does not require them to be necessitated by anything) on the grounds that they represent the world differently, so Merricks would apply this objection to the present account. However, I do not think my account has the result that other truths, like counterfactual truths (or past truths or modal truths), are absolved from needing necessitating truthmakers. The problem with Merricks’ argument is that it relies on an unjustified shift from ‘p denies the existence of some thing’ to ‘p is not about any existing thing.’ It does not seem that the former is synonymous with the latter, nor does the former seem to entail the latter: I see no reason to think that <there are no unicorns> is not about some existing thing just because it denies the existence of some thing, for it is, as I’ve claimed, plausibly about the world and its not containing a unicorn. Regardless, I am not trying to absolve negative existentials from having necessitating truthmakers on the grounds that they are not about anything. My grounds are that they deny the existence of some thing. Counterfactuals are not like this: they do not deny the existence of some thing. So even if neither negative existentials nor counterfactuals are about any thing, it does not follow that I must absolve the latter from needing necessitating truthmakers just because I absolve the former.

Objection 3: Truthmakers are supposed to explain the truths they make true. But if negative truths are not existence-dependent on and not necessitated by their (alleged) truthmaker (the world), then they are not explained by the existence of their (alleged) truthmaker and so have we have reason to doubt that the world really makes negative truths
true.\textsuperscript{26} Response: One hears that ‘truthmakers explain their truths’ quite often, but the notion of explanation is not typically defined in any detail (what are its relata? Must the explanans always entail or necessitate the explananda?), so this objection is somewhat hard to evaluate. Nevertheless, there is something odd about the objection with respect to negative existentials since it is often observed how difficult it is to ‘prove a negative,’ i.e., to prove that something does not exist and hence why some negative existential is true. Explanation is at least partly an epistemic notion because it is something in which rational agents like us engage. The reason it is hard, if not impossible for creatures like us to prove that there are no unicorns or to explain why (1) is true, is that to do so we would not only have consider every existing entity \(x\) and determine that \(x\) is not a unicorn, but we would also have to determine that the entities we have considered are \textit{all} the entities there are.\textsuperscript{27} Coming to determine this last bit is what makes it so hard for us to explain the truth of any negative existential. None of this is to say we cannot \textit{know} certain negatives; it is only the explanation or proof of their truth that is difficult. If anything, we need some explanation of why it is difficult to explain the truth of a negative existential. The best explanation for this is that negative existential truths do \textit{not} have necessitating truthmakers; they only depend on being, as per TSBN. So the fact that we cannot fully explain the truth of negative existentials if they have no necessitating truthmakers seems not to be a problem.

6. Conclusion

\textsuperscript{26} Molnar (2000) holds that an entity cannot explain a truth unless it necessitates the truth. Cameron (forthcoming) Bigelow (1988), Daly (2005), Liggins (2005), and Schaffer (2010) connect truthmaking to explanation.

\textsuperscript{27} This, of course, would not be a problem for a being like God since presumably God knows what entities there are and that those entities are \textit{all} the entities there are. This is because knows what entities he created and when he stopped creating entities. God need not have created a “that’s all” fact to explain why there are no unicorns; he only needed to create what he did and then stop. See Chalmers (1996: 85-87) and Heil (2000: 238-40) for similar remarks.
Negative truths differ from positive truths with respect to how they intuitively represent the world and therefore, I have argued, require a different account of how they depend on being for their truth. This dependence, which I am calling “variation-dependence”, contrasts with the kind of dependence, existence-dependence, exhibited by positive truths. Variation-dependence indicates the presence of supervenience, which lead us to formulate the principle TSBN for negative truths. TSBN provides a substantive account of the asymmetrical dependence of negative truth on being. The advantage of this account over others is that is tailored to the specific form of dependence exhibited by negative truths and it allows us to provide negative truths with a plausible truthmaker, obviating the need to postulate new and unfamiliar entities to ground negative truths.

I want to conclude this paper by reflecting on the (apparently) inconsistent quartet posed by Molnar (2000: 84-5).

(i) The world is everything that exists.
(ii) Everything that exists is positive.
(iii) Some negative claims about the world are true.
(iv) Every true claim about the world is made true by something that exists.

These four theses, he claims, are each intuitively correct, yet it is hard to see how they could all be true. My response is not to reject any of these. Rather, it is to allow truthmaking to take a variety of forms; “is made true by” in (iv) need not refer to one and the same relation for all truths. Negative truths are indeed made true by something, just not in the same way that positive truths are.

References


