

# A Theistic Defence of Truthmaking Maximalism

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## Abstract

Truthmaking maximalists, namely those who hold that every truth has (at least) a truthmaker, are usually accused of being committed to peculiar entities like negative facts and general facts. In this paper, I will propose a theistic solution to the problem of negative/general truths. According to this proposal, truthmakers for negative truths and general truths are positive and singular facts about God. No negative facts or general facts need be posited.

**Keywords:** Truthmaking, Truthmaking Maximalism, Negative Truths, General Truths, God

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1.

Truthmaking maximalism, namely the thesis that every truth has (at least) a truthmaker,<sup>1</sup> is usually opposed on the ground that there are counterexamples to it. The putative counterexamples include negative truths and general truths. For instance, consider the negative truth <There is no hobbit>.<sup>2</sup> Although it is true in the actual world, it is unclear whether it is true in virtue of some entity existing in the actual world. In fact, one may even think that it is true because of the *non-existence* of some sort of entities, namely hobbits.<sup>3</sup> Universal generalizations, e.g. <all ravens are black>, pose a problem too, as it is unclear whether truthmakers for all the relevant singular truths, e.g. <a is a black raven> and <b is a black raven>, could add up to something that can make the general claim in question true.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The supporters of truthmaking maximalism include Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006) and Jago (2020).

<sup>2</sup> I use <There is no hobbit> to refer to the proposition that there is no hobbit. In this paper, I will work with the assumption that truth-bearers are propositions. The following discussion does not rely on this assumption. The readers are free to replace propositions with other kinds of entities, say sentences.

<sup>3</sup> See Armstrong (2004: Ch.5) for relevant discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See Armstrong (2004: Ch.6) for relevant discussion.

The aim of this paper is to defend truthmaking maximalism from the foregoing objection, which I call “the problem of negative/general truths.” Now a quick solution to this problem is to accept negative facts, e.g. the fact that there is no hobbit, and general facts, e.g. Armstrong’s (1997) totality fact, namely the fact that such and such singular, positive facts are all and only singular, positive facts. However, if one does not like negative facts and general facts, then some other solution will be needed. In this paper, I will not discuss whether negative facts and general facts are ontologically acceptable.<sup>5</sup> Instead, what I will do is to propose a solution to the problem of negative/general truths to those who are determined to not accept negative facts and general facts. According to this proposal, truthmakers for negative truths and general truths are positive and singular facts about *God*. No negative facts or general facts need be posited. In the rest of this paper, I will give an account of this sort in section 2 and consider several objections to this theistic account of negative / general truths in section 3.

## 2.

The theistic solution to the problem of negative/general truths that I am proposing here relies on three assumptions. The first one is that God is an essentially omnipotent being.<sup>6</sup> Second, I assume that an omnipotent being’s

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<sup>5</sup> As Mumford (2007: 16) points out, many truthmaking theorists dismiss negative facts/entities as suspicious on the grounds that facts and entities are taken to be some kind of existents, while negative facts/entities are absences of existents and thereby cannot be any kind of existents. See also Molnar (2000) for similar sorts of worries about negative/general facts.

<sup>6</sup> Alternatively, one may make a stronger assumption that God is a perfect being, provided that essential omnipotence is a perfect-making property.

acts of will are perfectly efficacious, in the sense that it is metaphysically impossible that (i) an omnipotent being wills  $\langle P \rangle$ , but (ii)  $\langle P \rangle$  is not true.<sup>7</sup> The third and final assumption is that God's creation of the universe is a case of *grounding*. In other words, facts about creatures are grounded in facts about God. Unlike the first two assumptions, the third assumption has been more controversial in the theists' circle because God's will to create the universe has usually been believed to bring about the universe by *causing* (rather than *grounding*) the universe's existence. Nevertheless, some philosophers of religion have recently attempted to use the concept of grounding, instead of causation, to articulate the relation between God and his creatures. For instance, both Pearce's (2017) and Deng's (2020) cosmological arguments presuppose that God (or facts about God) is not the uncaused cause but the ungrounded ground of facts about creatures. Also, Segal (2021) suggests that the universe depends on God in the sense that facts about the universe are grounded in rather than caused by facts about God. In this paper, I will join them in the attempt to understand God's creation in terms of grounding.

Given the foregoing three assumptions, I now suggest that the truthmakers for negative truths and general truths are facts about God's will. Let us turn back to the negative truth  $\langle \text{There is no hobbit} \rangle$ . On the third assumption, facts about creatures are grounded in facts about God. As  $\langle \text{There is no hobbit} \rangle$ 's being true is also a fact about creatures, it should be grounded in some fact about God too. I take its ground to be the fact that

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<sup>7</sup> See Pearce and Pruss (2012).

God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true.<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to the present proposal, <There is no hobbit> is made true by the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true. Likewise, I suggest that the fact that God wills <All ravens are black> to be true is a truthmaker for the general truth <All ravens are black>. The idea here can be generalised as follows: For every negative/general truth <P>, the fact that God wills <P> to be true is a truthmaker for <P>.<sup>9</sup>

In the literature, the problem of negative/general truths arises partly because truthmaking theorists cannot find entities existing in the world which *necessitate* these negative/general truths.<sup>10</sup> We do not know what entities, except the putative negative facts and general facts, can necessitate truths like <There is no hobbit> and <All ravens are black>. Now the present proposal offers a solution to the problem concerning necessitation as the first and second assumptions require that God's will is perfectly efficacious in the

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<sup>8</sup> One might wonder how this can be a case of grounding. In other words, how can the relation between God's willing and the negative truth be a form of *constitutive* determination rather than causation? There are several available options here. First, one may, following Pearce (2017), take the relationship between creaturely facts and God's act of will to be what he calls "narrative" grounding. Just like an author's creating a story grounds the content of the story, God's act of will may also ground negative truths about creatures, which are taken to be part of the *theistic* narrative according to Pearce's account. Second, some, e.g. Koslicki (2015: 329), might hold that the existence of holes can be grounded in the existence of their hosts surrounding them. In a similar way, God's willings may be understood as constituting the boundaries that surround and ground those hole-like truths, i.e. negative truths. As the following discussion does not rely on any particular account, I will stay neutral on this issue.

<sup>9</sup> One may generalise the idea more by saying that positive and singular truths are also made true by the facts about God's relevant willings. For instance, Lo (2019) has provided a theistic account of properties on which the fact that God wills <*a* is *F*>, where "*a*" is a name of a creature and "*F*" is a natural predicate, is a truthmaker for <*a* is *F*>. I personally do not object to this wider generalisation. However, as the focus of this paper is negative truths and general truths, I will leave the other sorts of truths aside.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Armstrong (2004: Ch.5-6) where he assumes that for every proposition P, if x is a truthmaker for P, then x necessitates the truth of P in the sense that it is metaphysically impossible that x exists but P is false.

sense that God's divine willings necessitate the consequences brought about by them. Given these two assumptions, it is easy to see how the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true necessitates the truth <There is no hobbit>. Since God is essentially omnipotent, his will in all possible worlds is perfectly efficacious. Thus, in every possible world in which the (singular and positive) fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true exists, <There is no hobbit> is true.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, the fact that God wills <All ravens are black> to be true necessitates the general truth <All ravens are black>. Therefore, facts about God's will can serve as the entities that necessitate the truth of negative and general propositions.

It is noteworthy that the foregoing facts about God, namely the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true and the fact that God wills <All ravens are black> to be true, are neither negative facts nor general facts. Due to the scope of this paper, I cannot provide a specific way of demarcating negative facts from positive facts, and general facts from singular facts. However, I would like to point out that facts about God's will are like some typical cases of positive and singular facts except the difference regarding their subjects. Let us note that the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true is nothing more than God's having a propositional attitude, namely will or volition, towards a certain proposition. On the other hand, we may notice that the fact that Amy believes <There is no hobbit> is also a case of a subject's having a propositional attitude, namely belief, towards a certain

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<sup>11</sup> The necessitation will not hold if God is accidentally omnipotent. For if God is accidentally, as opposed to essentially, omnipotent, there will be some possible worlds in which God is not omnipotent. Thus, it may be the case that the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true exists, but <There is no hobbit> is false because the non-omnipotent God's will is not perfectly efficacious in that possible world.

proposition. Likewise, the fact that Billy desires  $\langle$ All ravens are black $\rangle$  is a case of a subject's having a propositional attitude, namely desire, towards a certain proposition. Now if the facts about Amy's belief and Billy's desire are both positive and singular facts, then the facts about God's will in question should also be positive and singular as the only difference between them lies in the agents involved in them. Therefore, there is no reason to think that God's willings will be any less positive and singular a fact than a human's willings.

Recall that the idea proposed in this section is that facts about God's will, say the fact that God wills  $\langle$ There is no hobbit $\rangle$  to be true, are truthmakers for negative truths and general truths. Since these facts are positive and singular facts which both ground and necessitate negative truths and general truths, the problem of negative/general truths may be solved without resorting to any negative or general facts.

### 3.

I now turn to four objections to the theistic solution to the problem of negative/general truths proposed in Section 2. The first objection concerns aboutness. One might object that a truthmaker for a truth has to be a fact about the subject matter of that truth. For instance, consider the truth  $\langle 1+1=2 \rangle$  and the fact that Socrates is a human. Although the fact that Socrates is a human necessitates the truth  $\langle 1+1=2 \rangle$ , the former does not seem to be a truthmaker for the latter. Why is the former not a truthmaker for the latter? The explanation provided by the objector would be that the fact is

not about the subject matter of the truth. For the fact is a fact about Socrates while the subject matter of the truth in question is not Socrates but numbers, i.e. 1 and 2. Let us see another example. Suppose that (biological) origin essentialism is true, and Cathy is David's biological mother. Then the fact that David exists will necessitate the truth <Cathy exists>. For given the necessity of one's biological origin, it is metaphysically impossible that David exists, but Cathy has never existed, as Cathy has to be David's biological mother in all possible worlds where David exists. (Note that this does not require that Cathy has to exist in all times at which David exists.) However, even if the fact that David exists necessitates the truth <Cathy exists>, it seems very implausible that the former is a truthmaker for the latter. The same explanation could be given here: If <Cathy exists> has a truthmaker, then its truthmaker should be a fact about the subject matter of this truth, namely Cathy, instead of David.

If a truthmaker for a truth, as the objector requires, has to be a fact about the subject matter of that truth, then the truthmaker for *There is no hobbit* and the truthmaker for <All ravens are black> should be about the respective creatures, namely hobbits and ravens. However, since the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> and the fact that God wills <All ravens are black> are facts about God, they are not, the objection goes, facts about creatures. Thus, these facts cannot be truthmakers for negative truths and general truths.

My response to the foregoing objection is that the aboutness requirement is too strict as it rules out some interesting applications of truthmaking. For instance, Armstrong (1997) accepts only sparse, but not

abundant, universals.<sup>12</sup> For Armstrong, facts, or in his own words, *states of affairs*, are (non-mereologically) composed by particulars and universals. Since only sparse universals exist, there is no fact involving any non-sparse universal (as there is none). Now consider the truth <Sydney is a city>. Armstrong surely would not deny the truth of this proposition. However, as he denies the existence of any fact involving non-sparse universals, he cannot accept the existence of the fact that Sydney is a city because the property of being a city is not a sparse universal. Thus, for Armstrong, the truthmaker for <Sydney is a city> cannot be the fact that Sydney is a city. However, this does not mean that for Armstrong, there is no truthmaker for <Sydney is a city>. Instead, he can take facts about micro-physical particles, say their wave functions, which constitute Sydney to be the truthmaker for <Sydney is a city>. The foregoing Armstrongian position seems a coherent one. However, it is ruled out by the aboutness requirement because the putative truthmaker is facts about micro-physical particles rather than a macro-physical city, which is the subject matter of the truth in question. Another position which seems coherent is truthmaking idealism. Some truthmaking theorists suggest that idealists can hold that propositions about material objects are true but made true by mind-dependent entities like one's experiences.<sup>13</sup> Again, this sort of idealism is not allowed by the aboutness requirement, because on this position, the putative truthmakers for truths about material objects are facts about mental states rather than material objects.

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<sup>12</sup> Strictly speaking, he also accepts structural universals and conjunctive universals built out of them. But this subtlety would not affect the point made below.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Daly (2005: 95) and Cameron (2008: 119-120).

The foregoing examples indicate that the aboutness requirement rules out too much. Not only untenable views like that the fact that David exists is a truthmaker for <Cathy exists> but also coherent views like the Armstrongian position are ruled out by it. Thus, I suggest that we should not stick to the aboutness requirement. Of course, this suggestion faces an immediate issue: how can we deny that the fact that David exists is a truthmaker for <Cathy exists> if we give up the aboutness requirement? My answer is that one may say that the fact that David exists is not a truthmaker for <Cathy exists> because the latter is not related to the former in a relevant way. The merely modal connection between them is not sufficient for the truthmaking relation. Some metaphysically substantive link other than necessitation is needed. And I suggest that grounding may play the required linking role here. More precisely, one may say that the fact that David exists is not a truthmaker for <Cathy exists> because the latter is not *grounded* in the former. Likewise, according to this suggestion, the fact that Socrates is a human is not a truthmaker for <1+1=2> because the latter is not grounded in the former.

If we require that a proposition' being true has to be grounded in its truthmaker(s), then both the Armstrongian position and truthmaking idealism will not be ruled out as their proponents can say that facts about micro-physical particles/mental states *ground* the truths about macro-physical objects / material objects. Now given the foregoing grounding requirement, the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit> to be true can still be a truthmaker for <There is no hobbit> as the latter, according to the third assumption made in section 2, is grounded in the former even if the former is a fact about God

rather than hobbits. By the same token, the fact that God wills <All ravens are black> to be true can be a truthmaker for <All ravens are black>, though the former is not a fact about ravens. Thus, if we replace the aboutness requirement with the grounding requirement, then the first objection cannot even get off the ground

The second objection is about negative truths about God's will. Consider the negative truth <God does not will <There are hobbits>>. What is the truthmaker for this truth? According to the theistic proposal, its truthmaker is the (positive and singular) fact that God wills <God does not will <There are hobbits>>. However, the existence of this fact entails another negative truth about God, namely <God does not will <God wills <There are hobbits>>>, and so on ad infinitum. Thus, we have an infinite regress here.

I have two replies to this objection. First, we may admit that there is an infinite regress but insist that this regress is not vicious. For consider the following series:

- (1) The truth <There is no hobbit> is grounded in the fact that God wills <There is no hobbit>.
- (2) The truth <God does not will <There are hobbits>> is grounded in the fact that God wills <God does not will <There are hobbits>.
- (3) The truth <God does not will <God wills <There are hobbits>>> is grounded in the fact that God wills <God does not will <God wills <There are hobbits>>>.

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Here we have an infinity of grounding chains, each of which is well-founded (as all these facts about God's will are not grounded in any further fact), rather than a single, infinitely long grounding chain which has no least element. I admit that the latter case is a vicious regress as it requires the failure of metaphysical foundationalism. But is the former case a vicious regress too? The only problem with the former case, as far as I can tell, is that it leads to a proliferation of facts about God's will. However, it is not clear if this problem is really that serious. For arguably it is in an omnipotent being's power to will infinitely many things to hold. If an omniscient being can know all truths, whose number is infinitely many (as there are infinitely many mathematical truths), I do not see why an omnipotent being is not able to have infinitely many willings.

My second reply is that we may block the infinite regress by positing one and only one fact about God's will. It is the fact that God wills <I will nothing more to be true>. Now this fact about God necessitates <God does not will <There are hobbits>>, <God does not will <God wills <There are hobbits>>>>, and so on, as it is metaphysically impossible that the essentially omnipotent God wills not to will more, but still wills more. Thus, this fact may serve as the sole truthmaker for an infinity of negative truths about God. Now one might find that this fact about God closely resembles Armstrong's totality fact as the latter is also a truthmaker for an infinity of negative truths. However, it will be a mistake to think that the fact that God wills <I will nothing else to be true> is also a general fact. For suppose that Emily, after drinking three copitas of dry sherry, decides that she will not drink more. We then have the fact that Emily wills that she drinks nothing more. If we all

agree that this fact about Emily is a positive and singular fact, why not the fact that God wills <I will nothing more> to be true?

As theists are in a position to posit either (i) an infinity of facts about God's wills, or (ii) a single fact about God's totality will, I conclude that the second objection is not successful either.<sup>14</sup>

Let us now turn to the third objection. Suppose that some creatures have libertarian free will, and a minimal requirement for libertarian free will is the presence of alternative possibilities. Given this supposition, there are many negative truths concerning creatures' libertarian free will. However, if all negative truths about creatures are made true by facts about God, and truthmaking requires necessitation, then the alternative possibilities in question will seem to be absent. For example, consider a person, Frankfurt, who is a libertarian free agent (though he does not believe that he is and even comes with up an argument against the principle of alternate possibilities). Further suppose that Frankfurt freely wills to raise his left arm, and thereby the following proposition is true: <It is not the case that Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm>. According to the proposed theistic solution, this proposition, as a negative truth, is made true by some fact about God, say *F*.<sup>15</sup> However, since *F*, as a truthmaker, necessitates the negative truth in question, it is metaphysically impossible that *F* exists, but Frankfurt freely wills *not* to

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<sup>14</sup> Another way of responding to this objection is to insist that all these negative truths are grounded in the same fact about God, namely the fact that God wills <there is no hobbit> to be true, perhaps on the ground that this fact also necessitates these negative truths, i.e. <God does not will <there are hobbits>>, <God does not will <God wills <there are hobbits>>>, and so on. I thank an anonymous referee for pointing out this possible response.

<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the truthmaker for <Frankfurt freely wills to raise his left arm> should be taken to be a fact about Frankfurt, say the fact that Frankfurt freely wills to raise his left arm, instead of some fact about God. For arguably, creatures' *libertarian* free will is not necessitated by any external things, including facts about God.

raise his left arm. In other words, given the existence of *F*, Frankfurt cannot do otherwise. Therefore, the objector contends that the theistic solution is incompatible with libertarianism, or more precisely, with the principle of alternate possibilities, which is arguably an essential element of libertarianism.

It is noteworthy that this objection, if it is successful at all, is not an objection only to the theistic solution here, but a general objection to all truthmaking maximalists. For every truthmaking maximalist has to say that <It is not the case that Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm>, if true, has a truthmaker which necessitates its truth. Given the existence of this truthmaker, be it a totality fact about the whole world or a negative fact about Frankfurt himself, it is also metaphysically impossible that Frankfurt does otherwise. Thus, the objection, if it is a successful one, is a problem for all truthmaking maximalists indeed.

I believe that there is something wrong with the foregoing objection. The objector seems to wrongly apply the principle of alternate possibilities to the current case. First of all, it is fair to say that when we say that Frankfurt is able to do otherwise in the current case, what we mean is that given the initial segment of the world, call it *s*, which is up to but *not* including the temporal point, call it *t*, when Frankfurt freely wills to raise his left arm, there is some metaphysically possible world *w* such that (i) *w* has *s* as its initial segment (or has an initial segment which is a duplicate of *s*), (ii) the actual laws of nature hold in *w*, but (iii) Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm at *t* in *w*. Now if the negative truth <It is not the case that Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm (at *t*)> has any truthmaker, the truthmaker

should exist at  $t$  but not at any temporal point within  $s$ .<sup>16</sup> Since the truthmaker for <It is not the case that Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm (at  $t$ )> does not exist in the initial segment  $s$ , truthmaking maximalists do not have to say that Frankfurt is unable to do otherwise because his ability to do otherwise only requires that  $s$  contains nothing which excludes the possibility that Frankfurt freely wills not to raise his left arm at  $t$ . As the truthmaker for <It is not the case that Frankfurt freely wills *not* to raise his left arm (at  $t$ )> does not exist in  $s$ , the existence of this truthmaker (at  $t$ ) does not undermine Frankfurt's ability to do otherwise. Truthmaking maximalism is not incompatible with libertarianism. Thus, the third objection fails too.

The final objection is a version of the problem of evil. Suppose, contrary to reality, that there were no effective vaccine against COVID-19. According to the proposed theistic solution, the negative truth <There is no effective vaccine against COVID-19> is made true by the fact that God wills <There is no effective vaccine against COVID-19> to be true. However, if God is also omnibenevolent, it seems that God should not have such a willing. For the lack of an effective vaccine would lead to a great amount of evils, say loss of lives. If so, then the theistic solution will be incompatible with the claim that God is omnibenevolent.

I have two replies to this objection. The first is to bite the bullet. That is, the proponents of the theistic solution may accept that God is not omnibenevolent since God wills something evil. However, they will insist that the only assumption made by them about God's attributes is that God is

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<sup>16</sup> Otherwise some contingent truths about the future will be necessitated by facts existing in the past.

essentially omnipotent, and the theistic solution does not require the additional assumption that God is omnibenevolent. As their goal is to defend truthmaking maximalism, there is no need to stick to God's omnibenevolence. The God who helps truthmaking maximalists avoid the problem of negative / general truths might not be the one described by classical theism.

The second reply is to appeal to some existing attempts to tackle the problem of evil.<sup>17</sup> For instance, one may accept skeptical theism, namely the view that we, as limited cognitive agents, (at least sometimes) cannot understand the reasons behind God's actions or wills. According to skeptical theism, there may be some reason why an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God wills <There is no effective vaccine against COVID-19> to be true even though we have no idea about what exactly the reason should be.

I will not give out a specific account of how God's omnibenevolence can be reconciled with the theistic solution proposed here because it requires a full treatment of the problem of evil which I am not able to provide here. However, as there are plenty of responses which one may find in the literature of the problem of evil, this objection, it seems to me, does not pose any more serious challenge to the theistic solution proposed here.

To conclude, I have proposed a theistic solution to the problem of negative / general truths and replied to four objections to it. This completes my defence of truthmaking maximalism.

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<sup>17</sup> See Tooley (2021) for an overview of various proposed solutions.

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