Truthmakers for Negative Existentials

1. Introduction: We have already seen that absences and nothings cause problems for philosophers. Well, they’re an especially huge problem for truthmaker theorists.

We will examine two sorts of problematic truths. The first is called a ‘negative existential’, because it asserts that something does NOT exist:

(1) There are no unicorns.

The second is called a ‘universal’ (or sometimes ‘general’) truth:

(2) All ravens are black.

Both of these statements assert something about what does NOT exist. At first glance, (2) may not appear to do this, but it does. To see this, let’s take a closer look at (2). What could its truthmaker be?

Intuitively, we might think that the truthmaker for <All ravens are black> is just the set of all actual ravens (which are black). For simplicity, imagine that there are exactly one billion ravens in the world, and all of them are black. Could the trumaker just be those one billion ravens?

Unfortunately, no. For, truthmaker theorists claim that the trumaking relation is NECESSITATING. They say that:

If some truthmaker, T, makes P true, then, necessarily, if T exists, then P is true.

This means that, if the set of one billion actual ravens makes <All ravens are black> true, then it must do so in any situation where that set of ravens exists. But, imagine that tomorrow a white raven is born (and that none of our billion ravens have died). Tomorrow, our set of one billion ravens would STILL EXIST. This means that <All ravens are black> would still be true! This is the wrong verdict. That proposition should now come out false.

By making a claim about ALL of the ravens, what <All ravens are black> is really saying is something like, <These one billion ravens are black, and these are ALL of the ravens in existence—i.e., there are no other ravens>. This last clause is a negative one.

So, (1) and (2) are both negative statements. Furthermore, they are negative existential claims (i.e., they assert that something does NOT exist). If those statements are true (as
they appear to be), then they require truthmakers. But, then, there must be some THING in the world that makes each claim true. But, what sort of THING could make a NEGATIVE statement true?

Think back upon the semester so far. We have in this unit surveyed the things that exist:

(1) **Objects**
   - concrete (e.g., atoms, statues, ships, events, lumps of clay; time? holes?)
   - abstract (e.g., numbers, propositions, unactualized possibles)

(2) **Properties**
   - qualitative (e.g., red, round, heavy, hot)
   - relational (e.g., taller than, next to; laws on the DTA account?)
   - dispositional (e.g., fragility, disposition to produce a red sensation)

(3) **States of Affairs**
   - concrete (e.g., *this tomato’s being red*)
   - abstract (uninstantiated states of affairs—we will learn about these later)

Could any of these things in the world make negative statements true? Let’s see.

**2. Absences:** Could absences be truthmakers? First note that, if absences are to serve as truthmakers, they have to be THINGS. For, truthmaker theory is the view that true propositions are made true by THINGS in the world. It is a view of relation between truth and the world. But, relations need two ‘relata’ (things that are related).

Sure, if absences (e.g., holes) are THINGS, then the problem is solved easily. The truthmaker for *<There are no unicorns>*, for instance, would just be the **absence of unicorns**. However, most philosophers are not willing to treat the LACK or ABSENCE of something as the PRESENCE of something else. Simply put, absences just seem to be nothingness. But, nothing isn’t something.

Alternatively, we might think that there are such things as **negative properties**. Perhaps the world has the property of ‘unicornlessness’, or ‘being the sort of world that contains no non-black ravens’. But, that seems absurd to most philosophers. For one thing, such properties are very bizarre. For another, the properties that things have would be multiplied infinitely. Tomatoes would have the property of being not blue. ...and not purple, and not yellow, and not a carrot, and not an alligator, and infinite others.

**3. Incompatibilities:** Some have proposed that negative claims can be accounted for by logical incompatibilities. For instance, *<This tomato is not blue>* is made true by the POSITIVE state of affairs of the tomato’s *being red*. It just turns out that ‘being red’ is incompatible with ‘being blue’.
This may in fact work for propositions like <This tomato is not blue>, but it does not seem to work for others. For instance, what is the truthmaker for <I do not have $11>? We cannot say that it is the positive state of affairs of my having $10, for this is NOT incompatible with also having $11 (everyone who has $11 also has $10).

Furthermore, it does not seem to help with propositions such as <There are no unicorns> or <All ravens are black>.

4. Closure Clauses: The proposition, <There are no unicorns> is a general claim about everything. It says that, out of ALL the things that exist, not a single one of them are unicorns. Similarly, <All ravens are black> says that these one billion ravens exist, they are black, and out of ALL the other things that exist, not a single one of them is a raven.

In order to obtain truthmakers for negative statements, what we really need is a truthmaker for the closure clause; i.e., the claim, ‘and there is nothing else’. In the words of Porky Pig, ‘That’s all folks!’

We have rejected the proposals that there are negative objects (e.g., an absence of unicorns) or negative properties (e.g., unicornlessness). Still, perhaps some POSITIVE objects, properties, or states of affairs could serve as our truthmakers for closure clauses. Let’s look at a proposal for each of these:

(a) Wholes as Objects: Most philosophers think that wholes are grounded in their parts. That is, if there is such a thing as a WHOLE brick wall, it is because its parts (the individual bricks) exist. Jonathan Schaffer proposes that things are the other way around. He says that parts are grounded in their wholes.

He says that wholes are ‘fundamental’. The only real entities are whole things, and parts are merely that—they are PARTS of wholes. So, parts are derivative of wholes. Further, Schaffer believes that the entire world (read as ‘the universe’) is a whole—it is THE whole, in fact. There is only one fundamental thing in existence, and it is the world. All other things are mere parts of it, and are therefore derivative of it.

If that is the case, we get a truthmaker for <...and there are no other things>. Namely, it is the WORLD, which is an ontologically fundamental whole.

(Note: Alternatively, one could hold a Schaffer-like view and say that the set of all ravens is a whole, of which each individual raven is merely a part.)
**Problem:** Is this even plausible? Saying that parts cannot exist without wholes is like saying that bricks cannot exist without brick walls.

Second, it seems strange to say that the same thing that makes <There are no unicorns> true is the same thing that makes <All ravens are black> or <There are no hobbits> true.

(b) **Worldly Properties:** Ross Cameron proposes that the world has a very special kind of property; namely, it has the property of being all there is. For any entire world, that world is essentially worldly. Again, we get truthmakers for closure clauses.

**Problem:** Is this plausible? Isn't Cameron just smuggling in negative properties again? For, it seems like having the property of being all there is is just to have the property of being such that there are no other things. But, that is a negative property.

Also, again, <There are no unicorns> and <All ravens are black> will have the same truthmakers.

(c) **Totality States of Affairs:** David Armstrong proposed that there is a very special kind of universal; namely, the property of alling some other property. When groups of objects ‘total’ or ‘all’ another property, we get what he calls a ‘totality fact’ or ‘totality state of affairs’. For instance, <All ravens are black> is true because the set of one billion ravens ‘totals’ the property of being a raven. So, in this case, there exists a state of affairs that is these ravens being all of the ravens.

**Problem:** What is this so-called ‘totality relation’?

7. **Conclusion:** If we accept that at least SOME truths have truthmakers, but that none of these candidate truthmakers for negative existentials are good ones (and admittedly they are all incredibly bizarre), then one is left with this alternative:

While some truths have truthmakers, not EVERY truth has a truthmaker.

But, this is undesirable for two reasons:

1. **It divides truth into two categories:** Those that are grounded in something, and those that are not. But, it would be very bizarre if some truths were true for some reason, while others were true for no reason at all.
(2) **Ungrounded truths are absurd:** If some truths are not grounded in reality, then there are some truths that are entirely disconnected from reality!

Furthermore, proposals (a), (b), and (c) are not obviously the less attractive option:

(3) **They are not as bizarre as they seem:** Those proposals are really just saying that wholeness, or allness, or completeness, is somehow fundamentally IN THE WORLD. That is, the world has boundaries, and these boundaries are a primitive feature of its existence. We assume such boundaries every time we make statements like ’Everyone in this room is seated’. When we make such a claim, we stipulate that there is a domain under consideration—namely, ALL AND ONLY THE PEOPLE IN THIS ROOM. Proposals (a), (b), and (c) are only claiming that some fact about the domain of our universe is a primitive feature of it.

(4) **The alternative reduces to something similar:** Really, the ONLY true proposition that is in need of a truthmaker is the closure clause, <…and there is nothing else that exists>. That being the case, those who reject maximalism would ONLY need to reject that this truth has a truthmaker. But, then, the options are really between:

(i) That truth is primitive (i.e., there is no reason why it is true).

(ii) That TRUTH is not primitive, but it is true in virtue of the existence of some thing in the WORLD that is primitive (i.e., some fundamental feature of the world that makes it a whole, or a total, or an ALL).

Question: What is the best stance on this issue?