

# Defending truthmaker non-maximalism

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## Abstract

Mark Jago (2012) argues that truthmaker non-maximalism, the view that some but not all truths require truthmakers, is vulnerable to a challenge from truths which ascribe knowledge of propositions about things which don't exist. Such truths, Jago argues, can only be dealt with using maximalist resources. I argue that Jago's point relies on the claim that the relevant truths require truthmakers, a point that non-maximalists can coherently and plausibly deny. Moreover, I argue that by making use of a safety account of knowledge, non-maximalists can fully answer Jago's challenge.

## 1 Introduction

Truthmaker non-maximalism is the view that some but not all truths require truthmakers (see e.g. Mellor 2009; Simons 2005). Mark Jago (2012) argues that truths which ascribe knowledge of propositions about things which don't exist force non-maximalists to adopt maximalist resources which they want to reject. Jago's argument depends on the view that the relevant truths require truthmakers. I will argue that non-maximalists can coherently and plausibly deny this, and can account for these truths on their own terms.

Following Jago, I shall assume that non-maximalists accept truthmaker necessitarianism: if  $x$  makes a proposition  $A$  true, the proposition that  $x$  exists entails  $A$ . I shall also assume that non-maximalists divide up truths into three categories. 'Positive' truths require truthmakers, whose existence entail their truth. 'Derivative' truths, in Jago's terms, don't require truthmakers; they are entailed by other truths. For example, conjunctions and disjunctions count as derivative; the proposition that  $A$  and  $B$  is entailed by the truth of both the proposition that  $A$  and the proposition

that B, and the proposition that A or B is entailed by the truth of the proposition that A, or the truth of the proposition that B. ‘Negative’ truths are a subclass of derivative truths. They are contradictions of positive propositions, and their truth is entailed by the falsehood of those propositions. Jago’s example of a negative truth, taking inspiration from Lewis (1995), is:

(A) Ern Malley does not exist.

Jago is going to exploit this proposition to create a problem for non-maximalism.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Jago’s argument

Jago argues that some positive truths entail negative ones. Suppose some positive truth P entails a negative truth like A above. Since P is positive, it needs a truthmaker x whose existence entails P. Since P entails A, x’s existence will also entail A. But then x entails that Ern Malley does not exist – it necessarily excludes Ern Malley from existence. As Jago notes (§2), non-maximalists are suspicious of entities that can necessarily exclude other entities from existence, and one of the motivations for non-maximalists is this very suspicion. So, since there are positive truths which entail negative ones, non-maximalists are forced to accept the very entities that maximalists introduce to serve as truthmakers for negative truths in the first place. Non-maximalism is forced to give up its suspicion of maximalist resources. The problem here is not that there are more positive truths than the non-maximalist thought – it is that the truthmakers required for positive truths themselves undermine non-maximalism.

Jago’s example of a positive truth that entails a negative one is:

(K) Max knows that Ern Malley does not exist

Since knowledge is factive, K entails the known proposition A. I agree with Jago that K is not negative, since then its negation would be positive, which it clearly isn’t. But I disagree with his claim that K is positive, and not derivative.

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<sup>1</sup> Some doubt that we can make sense of the distinction between positive and negative truths at all. See Parsons (2006) and Cameron (2007). However, I will not address such concerns here as even if they are right, it will still threaten Jago’s argument, independently of my reply. Jago’s argument relies on a distinction between positive and negative truths – were that distinction to be undermined, his argument would be too. Perhaps the collapse of the distinction would also undermine non-maximalism – but even if this were so, it would not be because of Jago’s specific concern. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Thought* for pointing this out to me.

Jago argues that if K is derivative, there must be a collection of propositions which jointly entail K and should be apt for generalisation to other cases of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> None of these propositions can be positive and individually entail A, because that will lead back to the main problem. However, quoting Dretske, Jago argues that if this is so, the collection itself will not entail K due to Gettier cases (p.913 n.14).

This is because according to Dretske, Gettier problems arise where the kind of condition taken to be crucial for knowledge – justification, evidence, reliably formed belief, and so on – does not entail the known proposition. For instance, one can have a justified but false belief; in Gettier cases, such a belief is turned into a true one by luck, making the belief justified and true but insufficient for knowledge. So a set of propositions is going to be sufficient for knowledge only if the extra condition, be it justification or something else, entails the known proposition. Yet if the extra condition entails the known proposition, then in the case of K our extra condition will entail the negative truth A and the non-maximalist is in the same trouble as before – no ground is gained.

### 3 Knowledge and safety

Jago is therefore presenting a challenge to non-maximalists: find a collection of propositions which jointly entail K and therefore jointly entail A, and which are such that no one proposition in that collection is positive and entails A. The burden of proof, however, is on Jago to show that in any of the non-maximalist's candidate collections, there will always be some positive proposition which entails A. Even so, there is very good reason to think that non-maximalists can push back and answer Jago's challenge.

To make things easier, suppose non-maximalists opt for a collection of three propositions, which jointly entail K: A itself, B the proposition that Max believes that Ern Malley does not exist, and C which is the third condition on knowledge. The challenge is to find a condition C which does not entail A, or else is not positive, and such that A, B and C jointly entail K.

First, non-maximalists should not require C to entail A. Doing so would require any knower to have evidence, justification, or some kind of belief state which logically entailed the known proposition. This would entail a wide ranging scepticism,

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<sup>2</sup> Jago claims that these propositions must also be *necessary* for cases of knowledge. This is unnecessary, since if an entity is a truthmaker for a proposition, it needn't be the *only* truthmaker for the proposition, and therefore needn't be necessary for the proposition's truth. Moreover, the Gettier cases Jago will use only aim to establish the insufficiency of proposed conditions for knowledge. So we only need to think about whether the relevant propositions are sufficient for knowledge.

since almost no knower is ever in such a position, at least not with regard to contingent truths. Whatever non-maximalists say, they need not and should not require C to entail A – they should be fallibilists (see Cohen 1988). Note that not requiring C to entail A does not mean denying that knowledge is factive, since we can still say that A, B and C *together* entail A. And they will, because A will entail itself!

However, this route leaves Jago's Gettier challenge open: if C doesn't entail A, then A, B and C will not entail K due to Gettier cases. How non-maximalists respond here is up to them, but one possible route is a safety account (see e.g. Sosa 1999) which takes C to be a subjunctive conditional 'Max believes that Ern Malley does not exist  $\Box \rightarrow$  Ern Malley does not exist' which is just the same as 'B  $\Box \rightarrow$  A'. This proposition does not entail A. In the situation where Max is an authority on Ern Malley's existence, Ern Malley does exist (so A is false), and Max does not believe that Ern Malley doesn't exist (so B is false), then the subjunctive conditional is true because in the closest world where B is true, so is A. But in that situation, A itself isn't true. So the candidate for C does not entail A, and even if it is positive it doesn't present a problem for non-maximalism. In any case, it is still unclear why we should take the counterfactual C as a positive proposition; it seems plausible to think C is derivative, being a conjunction of propositions about possible worlds or other entities.

Jago takes the safety condition to entail A because 'safe beliefs are true' (p.913). If Max's belief is safe it is true, but C doesn't say that Max has any belief, just that if he did it would be true. C doesn't entail A by itself, only when conjoined with B, the proposition that Max believes that Ern Malley does not exist. So even if C is positive, it doesn't entail A.

Moreover, safety accounts at least have a chance of avoiding Gettier cases. If the subject in a Gettier case has a true belief made true by luck, the safety theorist simply argues that their belief is not safe. This is because they would still have it in nearby worlds where luck didn't make their belief true, and so in such nearby worlds they would have a false belief, and would violate the safety condition. So Gettier cases can perhaps be avoided in this way; lucky beliefs aren't safe. This has been argued at greater length by Pritchard (2008) and Rabinowitz (2014, §4.a).

Even if non-maximalists don't accept a safety account, they can still argue on fallibilist grounds that whatever C is it must not be required to entail A, on pain of entailing scepticism. This is enough to answer Jago's challenge, so long as non-maximalists are at least willing to attempt answering Gettier cases. In any case, the burden of proof is on Jago to show that C must be positive, or must contain some positive proposition which entails A.

## 4 Conclusion

So Jago's challenge can be met, and non-maximalism doesn't need to accept his example of a positive truth which entails a negative one. Jago's general challenge is still a threat: if there are positive truths which entail negative ones, they pose a problem for non-maximalism. Non-maximalists, however, are likely to treat any putative cases as derivative truths, conjunctions one of whose conjuncts is the negative proposition in question. So it remains to be seen whether there are any genuine cases of positive truths which entail negative ones.

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