**Manuscript title page**

**Title:** Much ado about aboutness

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**Abstract**

Strong non-maximalism holds that some truths require no ontological ground of any sort. Strong non-maximalism allows one to accept that some propositions are true without being forced to endorse any corresponding ontological commitments. We show that there is a version of truthmaker theory available—anti-aboutness truthmaking—that enjoys the dialectical benefits of the strong non-maximalist’s position. According to anti-aboutness truthmaking, all truths require grounds, but a proposition need not be grounded in the very thing(s) that the proposition is about. We argue that if strong non-maximalism can be defended, then so can anti-aboutness truthmaking on the very same basis; one can enjoy the benefits of strong non-maximalism without giving up on the idea that truth is always grounded in being.

**Keywords**

Aboutness; Truthmaker non-maximalism; Truthmaker theory; Ontology; Explanation

**Much Ado About Aboutness**

1. **Truthmaker Theory**

Until recently there was widespread agreement that in some good sense truth—all truth—depends on ontology; on being. Just what this claim amounts to is controversial. So-called truthmaker maximalists hold the following:

**TM** For any true proposition *P*, there exists at least one entity *E* that makes *P* true, an entity in virtue of which *P* is true. (Armstrong 1997, 2004).[[1]](#footnote-2)

Non-maximalist truthmaker theorists, on the other hand, reject TM in favour of a restricted truthmaker principle. Lewis (1992, 2001), for example, following Bigelow (1988), proposes the following:

**TM=** For any proposition *P* and worlds *W* and *V*, if *P* is true in *W* but not in *V*, then either something exists in *V* but not in *W* or else some n-tuple of things stands in some fundamental relation in *V* but not in *W*.

The attraction of TM= is that it avoids needing to supply truthmakers for negative existentials. That’s because, given TM=, a proposition can be true because it lacks a falsemaker. Consider the proposition <there are no unicorns>. Given TM=, this proposition can be true at a world, *W,* and false at a world, *V,* because *V* and *W* differ in the following way: there are unicorns at *V* but not at *W*. Hence, <there are no unicorns> is true at *W* because *W* lacks unicorns. No truthmaker for <there are no unicorns> need exist.

Some non-maximalists agree with maximalists that all truths depend on being; they disagree about what it means to say that truths depend on being. Non-maximalists like Lewis and Bigelow—those we will call *weak non-maximalists*—accept that for some class of propositions, *C*, the propositions in *C* lacktruthmakers: but they contend that those propositions nevertheless depend on ontology. More recently, however, there has been a movement in truthmaker theory that maintains that we should accept that some truths do not depend on being at all. We will call this view *strong non-maximalism*. It is the view that for some class of propositions, *C*, the propositions in *C* lack truthmakers *and* the truth of those propositions does not depend on ontology. Proponents of strong non-maximalism include Tallant and Merricks. Tallant (2009, pp. 422–423)[[2]](#footnote-3) writes:

A popular view in metaphysics is that which propositions are true depends upon how the world is ... In more evocative (as well as ontologically committing) language, truth requires ground ... Here I defend ‘no-ground’ cheating (NGC). The thought is that within particular domains, no ontological ground is needed in order for propositions to be true.

Similarly, according to Merricks (2007):

...this book will show that what we should say about truth’s dependence on being turns on what we should say about being as much as it turns on what we should say about truth. *By the end of the book, I shall have concluded that some truths simply fail to depend on being in any substantive way at all.* (Merricks 2007, xiv. Our emphasis.)

Merricks and Tallant argue that a range of true propositions do not depend on ontology. These include, at least, the following kinds of propositions:

**Modal propositions** e.g., <it could have rained>

**Past-directed propositions** e.g., <Caesar crossed the Rubicon>

**Negative existential propositions** e.g., <there are no unicorns>

Strong non-maximalism boasts a certain advantage: it allows one to accept that some propositions are true without paying anything in the coin of ontology. So, for instance, one can accept that past-directed propositions are true without needing to supply any past entities to make those propositions true. Similarly, one can accept that modal propositions are true without being forced to admit the existence of possibilia. The upshot is that certain ontological positions become easier to defend. One can, for instance, be a presentist without worrying about the need to supply ontological grounds for past-directed propositions. In short, one’s presentism can be rendered easily compatible with one’s commitment to the truth of past-directed propositions; so too for actualism and the truth of modal propositions. Indeed, strong non-maximalism can be used to render pretty much any truthmaker argument against a particular ontological position toothless.

Now, most maximalist and weak non-maximalist truthmaker theorists are likely to balk at the very idea of strong non-maximalism. For some, who endorse what we call a *truthmaker-first* approach, one major advantage of truthmaker theory is that it can be used to determine what one’s ontological commitments ought to be, and hence to put pressure on certain ontological positions. On this view, truthmaker theory pays its way in metaphysics precisely because it can be used to force presentists to provide grounds for the truth of past-directed propositions, or force actualists to provide grounds for the truth of modal propositions and so on. Such truthmaker theorists are likely to dismiss strong non-maximalism out of hand, as a view that is simply outside the bounds of truthmaker investigations; whatever strong non-maximalism is, it is not a candidate truthmaker theory. By contrast, those we endorse what we call an *ontology-first* approach, suppose that one starts with a viable ontology and then uses that to determine what one’s truthmaker theory ought to be. On this view, the role of truthmaker theory in metaphysics is not that of putting pressure on certain ontological positions. Quite the opposite: first, one settles one’s ontological commitments and then one finds a way to render those commitments compatible with truthmaker theory. For *these* ontology-first truthmaker theorists, the strong non-maximalist position is an enviable one, since such a position allows one to adopt a truthmaker theory that is made to measure. The bespoke nature of strong non-maximalism appears to stem from its willingness to give up on the idea that every truth is grounded in ontology. Here, then, is an interesting question: is there a form of truthmaker theory that has the same flexibility as strong non-maximalism to fit with whatever ontological commitments one might have, whilst nonetheless adhering to the idea that truth is always grounded in being?

There is: anti-aboutness truthmaking. The anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist maintains that all truths are grounded in being, but denies that the truth of a proposition must be grounded in the very thing(s) the proposition is about. In short, the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist denies that the following is a constraint on truthmaker theory:

**Aboutness:** Necessarily, x *makes true* *P* only if *P* is about x.

So, for instance, an anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist might accept that <Caesar crossed the Rubicon> is true, but deny that the truth of that proposition is grounded in Caesar or the Rubicon. Rather, the truth of that proposition might be grounded in a fundamentally tensed property possessed by the world now, the property *being-such-that-Caesar-crossed-the-Rubicon*. Similarly, the truth of <it could have rained> might be grounded in an abstract object: a set of sentences, say, rather than a non-actual state of affairs in which there is rain, which is what the proposition seems to be about. Or, if one thinks that some sets of sentences just *are* non-actual states of affairs, one might hold that the truth of <it could have rained> is grounded in some feature of the actual world: perhaps a primitive modalised property like *being-a-world-in-which-it-could-have-rained*, or a relation between universals. Indeed, one need not even be into anything particularly strange, ontologically speaking. One might just hold the view that all truths are grounded in what actually exists. For any proposition that is not about what actually exists, then, such a proposition finds actual grounds, despite a disparity between grounds and aboutness.

In short: anti-aboutness truthmaking permits the link between aboutness and grounds to be severed. Such a view boasts the same advantages as strong non-maximalism: presentists can—and have—found a way to combine their view with truthmaker theory by adopting anti-aboutness truthmaking; actualists, too. By adopting anti-aboutness truthmaker theory, then, one can fully commit to the idea that truth is grounded in being whilst nevertheless enjoying the same bespoke approach to ontology that the strong non-maximalist enjoys.

Our goal is not to argue in favour of anti-aboutness truthmaking as a general approach to truthmaker theory. Rather, our goal is a more modest one: we wish to show, first, (§2) that in order to defend strong non-maximalism against the four primary objections that the view faces, one must take on four important commitments. Following that we argue (§3) that these four commitments can be used to defend anti-aboutness truthmaking from the three principal objections that the view faces. It follows that if strong non-maximalism can be defended from the pertinent objections, then so can anti-aboutness truthmaking. Finally, in §4 we provide some reasons to prefer anti-aboutness truthmaking to strong non-maximalism. In particular, we argue, first, that anti-aboutness truthmaker theory boasts a meta-metaphysical advantage over strong non-maximalism and, second, that many of us are *already* anti-aboutness truthmakers of one sort or another, with respect to some truths. We go on to suggest that once one is already an anti-aboutness theorist about some truths, there is little reason to also adopt a strong non-maximalist stance towards others.

1. **Four Objections To Strong Non-Maximalism**

As noted, there are four primary objections to strong non-maximalism. Let us consider each in turn, with an eye to determining the commitments that the strong non-maximalist must take on, in each case, in order to defend her view.

* 1. **The Explanation Problem**

The first objection is based on the idea that for every true proposition, the truth of that proposition ought to be *explained* by something. That is, there should be something in virtue of which the propositions at issue are true. If some class of propositions lack ontological grounds, however, then it follows that the relevant propositions are inexplicable. Call this the explanation problem.

To solve the explanation problem, proponents of strong non-maximalism have two broad approaches available. First, they could simply deny the need for this kind of explanation: it is just not the case that the truth of a proposition must always be explained by something.[[3]](#footnote-4) Second, they could concede the need for such an explanation, but deny the inference from: some class of propositions lack ontological grounds, to: the relevant propositions are inexplicable. Rather, proponents of strong non-maximalism can maintain that the grounding status of the relevant propositions comes apart from the explanation for those propositions. The strong non-maximalist can then supply an explanation for the truth of the relevant propositions, just not one that is cast in grounding terms.

Tallant endorses a version of the second strong non-maximalist response to the explanation problem. According to Tallant, past-directed propositions such as <Caesar crossed the Rubicon> lack ontological grounds. Nonetheless, the truth of those propositions can be explained perfectly well. According to Tallant, <Caesar crossed the Rubicon> is true *because* Caesar crossed the Rubicon, where what appears on the right hand side of the ‘because’ does not signal the ontological grounds for the truth of the proposition, but rather, provides an explanation of an entirely different kind. Exactly what this explanation amounts to is unclear. But ultimately, it doesn’t really matter. All that matters is this: Tallant’s version of strong non-maximalism cleaves apart the grounding facts that are associated with a particular proposition from the manner in which the truth of that proposition is to be adequately explained. From a grounding perspective, the proposition is not grounded in anything; it is fundamental. From an explanatory perspective, however, the truth of the proposition is fully explained by how the world used to be, despite the fact that there is no ontology corresponding to this explanans.

* 1. **The Intuition Problem**

The second problem facing strong non-maximalism concerns the basic intuition that truth always depends on being. Strong non-maximalists must flatly give up on this intuition. Not every proposition depends on being for its truth. The strong non-maximalist can ameliorate the cost of giving up this intuition by appealing to her response to the explanation problem. She might argue that while strong non-maximalism does not respect the intuition that truth always depends on being, the truth of a proposition is always explicable in terms of something else. This helps to soften the blow because, one might argue, a prominent reason why the intuition that truth always depends on being seems so compelling is that when truth depends on being there is a very neat explanatory story to be told. If the link between truth and being is severed, however, then it would seem that the explanatory picture we have of the world becomes impoverished, and so we have good reason to hold to the intuition at issue.

By adopting the above diagnosis of why the intuition that truth depends on being seems so compelling, the strong non-maximalist is now in a position to double down on her response to the explanation problem. By cleaving grounding apart from explanation, she can argue that truths are fully explained even though they are not grounded, and so there is no longer any need to satisfy the intuition at issue.

* 1. **The Likeness Problem**

The third objection against strong non-maximalism is based on the following broad principle that potentially governs truthmaking:

**Likeness** For any propositions *P* and *Q*, if *P* and *Q* are alike in relevant respects, then if *P* requires grounds, then so too for *Q* and if *Q* *does not* require grounds, then so too for *P*.

Strong non-maximalism, it could be argued, violates Likeness and so is to be strongly dis-preferred for this reason. Consider the two propositions: <dinosaurs existed> and <penguins exist>. On the face of it, these two propositions are quite similar in relevant respects: both statements involve existential quantification in some manner; both statements are about animals and both statements are about entity types. Now, suppose that one accepts that <penguins exist> is grounded in ontology, whereas <dinosaurs existed> is not, and thus accepts some version of strong non-maximalism for past-direct propositions. Well then, one must reject Likeness: these two propositions are not being treated in a uniform fashion. Call this problem: the likeness problem.

The likeness problem may be solved in one of two ways. First, one can simply reject Likeness as a plausible constraint on truth and grounding. Second, one might accept Likeness but deny that the relevant sub-class of propositions that the strong non-maximalist refuses to supply grounds for are relevantly similar to those propositions for which the strong non-maximalist does supply grounds. With respect to the second option, the strong non-maximalist will need to explain what it is that differentiates the relevant sub-class of true propositions that lack grounds from those that possess grounds. There appear to be three dimensions of similarity for propositions. First, they may be similar with respect to their logical form. So, for instance, <dinosaurs existed> and <penguins exist> both appear to have the same logical form: they are both instances of existential quantification. Second, two propositions may be similar with respect to what it is that they’re about. So, for instance, while <dinosaurs existed> and <penguins exist> are obviously about different entities, they are both about the existence of some entity or other and so may be deemed similar in this respect. Finally, one treats propositions as structured entities and construes similarity in terms of overlapping structure. Consider the propositions <a loves b> and <a hates b>. These propositions can be construed as the ordered triples: <loving, a, b> and <hating, a, b> respectively. So we might say that they are similar (if not the same) types. A similar story can be told for <Suzy is unwell> and <Suzy was unwell>. Both have the structure of an ordered pair: <being unwell, Suzy>.

In a moment, we will consider the second option available to the strong non-maximalist for addressing the likeness problem in greater detail. For now, however, the important point to focus on is just that the strong non-maximalist must take on some further commitment to address the problem: either she must take a stand on whether likeness is correct, or she must take a stand on the similarity of propositions.

* 1. **The Ontological Problem**

The fourth, and final, problem for strong non-maximalism centres around the idea that strong non-maximalism cannot uphold one of the core aims of truthmaker theory: to rule out certain ontological positions.[[4]](#footnote-5) Here is the thought. Suppose one’s opponent denies the existence of some class of entities. For the sake of argument, suppose that said opponent denies the existence of past entities because she accepts presentism. Suppose, however, that one’s opponent continues to accept that propositions about the past are true. In this situation, truthmaker theory can be used to mount an argument against this combination of views. According to truthmaker theory, the truth of a proposition must be grounded in being. So true propositions about the past ought to have grounds. Since past entities don’t exist, and there is nothing in the present that can ground the truth of the relevant propositions, it follows that if there are true propositions about the past, then presentism is false: past entities must exist to ground the truth of past-directed propositions.

In this way, truthmaker theory can be used as a tool for forcing ontological commitments onto someone in virtue of the propositions that they take to be true. Strong non-maximalists flout this aspect of truthmaker theory. If strong non-maximalism is a viable view, then it is just not the case that the truth of every proposition should be grounded. Strong non-maximalism cannot be used to rule out certain ontologies in the same manner as other versions of truthmaker theory because that view allows there to be truth without an ontological basis. Given that, they have a reduced basis upon which to criticise those who would endorse the truth of a claim whilst avoiding any associated ontological commitments that the claim might seem to draw with it.

In short, the difficulty facing the strong non-maximalist is that her version of truthmaker theory is less dialectically powerful than standard versions of the view. Insofar as one thinks that the whole point of truthmaker theory is to probe the nature of the universe via truth, and to thus come to ontology via truthmaker theory, it would seem that strong non-maximalism just is not a brand of truthmaker theory worthy of the name.

To overcome this kind of problem, the strong non-maximalist must advocate a different approach to truthmaking. As noted briefly in §1, there are two broad approaches to truthmaker theory that one may take, depending on how one understands the relationship between truthmaker theory and ontological investigations. First, one might adopt a *truthmaker-first* approach. On this approach, one starts with a viable truthmaker theory and then uses that theory to determine what one’s ontological commitments ought to be.[[5]](#footnote-6) Second, one might take an *ontology-first* approach. On this approach, one starts with a viable ontology and then uses that to determine what one’s truthmaker theory ought to be. In the first case, ontology is a slave to truthmaking; in the second case truthmaking is a slave to ontology. It is only on the first approach to truthmaker theory that the worry under consideration can be made to stick against the strong non-maximalist; on the second approach to truthmaker theory, truthmaking is just not in the business of ruling out certain ontologies.

The strong non-maximalist, then, should adopt an ontology-first approach. Our aim is not to criticise this approach to truthmaker theory. The point is just that strong non-maximalists cannot uphold a truthmaker-first approach, whereby ontology is derived from truthmaker commitments, since the whole point behind their view is that the truth of a proposition need not have any implications for ontology at all.

1. **Strong Non-Maximalism versus Anti-Aboutness Truthmaking**

So far we have considered four difficulties facing strong non-maximalism. We have outlined a range of commitments that the strong non-maximalist must take on in order to overcome these problems. First, the strong non-maximalist must either deny that truths need to be explained, or insist that the explanation for a truth of a proposition is to be cleaved apart from its grounds. Second, the strong non-maximalist must deny a core intuition about truth, namely that all true propositions must be grounded. Third, the strong non-maximalist must either deny that like propositions admit of like grounds, or accept this claim and demonstrate that the propositions they deny are grounded are sufficiently distinct to propositions that possess grounds. Finally, the strong non-maximalist must adopt an ontology-first approach to metaphysics, rather than a truthmaker-first approach. Our goal, as noted, is not to criticise strong non-maximalism. Instead, we aim only to show that the kinds of commitments just outlined can be used to defend anti-aboutness truthmaking from the difficulties that the view faces. It is to this task that we now turn.

To begin with, anti-aboutness truthmaking faces an objection from explanation. It is easiest to grasp the problem by way of a particular example. Suppose that <dinosaurs existed> is true. Suppose, further, that presentism is true and thus that there are no dinosaurs ‘out there’ in the past to make the proposition <dinosaurs existed> true. According to some presentists, the truth of <dinosaurs existed> is grounded in the existence of a tensed property, presently instantiated by the world itself: the property *being a world in which dinosaurs existed*. As some philosophers have noted, on this view of what grounds the truth of <dinosaurs existed>, that proposition is not grounded in the thing(s) that the proposition appears to be about.[[6]](#footnote-7) The proposition is about dinosaurs, and yet in the grounds for the proposition there is nary a dinosaur to be found. Such a view, then, is a version of anti-aboutness truthmaking.

Some have objected to the version of anti-aboutness truthmaking just articulated by claiming that the grounds supplied for truths such as <dinosaurs existed> do not adequately explain the truth of the proposition at issue (Sanson and Caplan 2010, pp. 26-27). Every form of anti-aboutness truthmaking appears to be explanatorily deficient in the manner that Sanson and Caplan articulate. That’s because it would seem that the correct explanation for the truth of a given proposition is tightly connected to what it is that proposition is about. In order to explain fully why it is that <dinosaurs existed> is true an adequate explanation must appeal, in part, to dinosaurs.

The two solutions to the explanation problem that are available to strong non-maximalists will work here as well. First, the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can, like the strong non-maximalist, deny the call for explanation: the truth of a proposition just does not need to be explained in the relevant sense. Alternatively, she can cleave apart the explanation for why a proposition is true from the grounds for that proposition. Accordingly, the proponent of anti-aboutness truthmaking can argue that while the truth of <dinosaurs existed> is grounded in the present instantiation of a tensed property by the world, she can adopt the same explanation for the truth of that proposition as the one advocated by the strong non-maximalist. She can, that is, maintain that <dinosaurs existed> is true because dinosaurs existed, where this explanation has no implication for the grounds of that proposition. The resulting view, then, is one that borrows the explanation for the truth of <dinosaurs existed> from the strong non-maximalist, whilst nonetheless retaining the idea that <dinosaurs existed> is grounded in ontology.

This brings us to the second problem for anti-aboutness truthmaking. Above we saw that strong non-maximalism faces an objection from intuition: in order to accept strong non-maximalism one must be prepared to give up an intuition about truth, namely that all true propositions are grounded. If one accepts anti-aboutness truthmaking, then one need not give up the same intuition. But there is an intuitive cost to the view nonetheless. For some, such as Merricks (2007) and Baron (2013a), it seems intuitively correct to say that the truth of a proposition ought to be grounded in what that proposition is about. In short: the grounds for a true proposition and the aboutness for that proposition ought to align with one another. Anti-aboutness truthmaking flatly denies this intuition: grounding and aboutness come apart.

Call the intuition that truth is always grounded, *the grounding intuition*, and call the intuition that truths are always grounded in whatever it is that they are about, *the aboutness intuition.* The anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can offer the same diagnosis of why the aboutness intuition seems compelling as the strong non-maximalist diagnosis of why the grounding intuition seems compelling. The central reason why it seems that truths should be grounded in whatever they are about is because it is only the thing(s) that a proposition is about that adequately explain the truth of a given proposition. So, for instance, in order to fully explain why it is that <dinosaurs existed> is true, the correct grounding story for that proposition ought to appeal to dinosaurs; since explanation is routed through grounding and only dinosaurs can explain the truth of the relevant proposition. Anything else that one might appeal to as the grounds for that proposition will be explanatorily irrelevant and so will not adequately explain why the proposition is true.

Having diagnosed the source of the intuition in explanatory terms, the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can appeal to her response to the first problem outlined above to ameliorate the cost of giving up on the aboutness intuition. By cleaving apart the grounds for the truth of a proposition from the explanation for why that proposition is true, she can maintain that there is less pressure to satisfy the aboutness intuition. Accordingly, while <Dinosaurs existed> is grounded in the present-tensed property *being a world in which dinosaurs existed*, the truth of that proposition is not explained by the relevant property. Rather, as before, <dinosaurs existed> is true simply because dinosaurs existed. Because the truth of the proposition can be fully explained by exactly what the proposition is about, the resulting view is not explanatorily deficient. By separating grounds from explanation in this way, the anti-aboutness theorist can uphold the aboutness intuition (as it applies to explanation) without thereby committing to the principle that truths must be about their truthmakers.

The third problem facing anti-aboutness truthmaker theory is exactly the same as the third problem facing strong non-maximalism: both views violate Likeness. Anti-aboutness truthmaking violates Likeness because it recommends that only some propositions fail to be grounded in whatever it is that they are about. So, for instance, a presentist anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist will maintain that propositions concerning the present, such as the proposition <penguins exist>, will be grounded in exactly what that proposition appears to be about: namely penguins, whereas the proposition <dinosaurs existed> won’t be grounded in what it appears to be about. Assuming, as before, that these two propositions are alike in relevant respects, it follows that the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist cannot uphold Likeness.

The strong non-maximalist had two broad strategies available for dealing with this kind of problem: deny Likeness, or deny that the relevant sub-class of propositions that are ungrounded are relevantly similar to grounded propositions. The anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can appeal to both strategies as well. She can deny Likeness just as easily, or deny that <penguins exist> and <dinosaurs existed> are sufficiently similar to fall within the scope of Likeness. To see the point more clearly, it is useful to consider the different ways in which propositions might be similar to one another, and thus consider the different ways in which a strong non-maximalist might differentiate some propositions from others. Doing so will reveal how easily the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can make use of the strong non-maximalist’s approach to the problem.

As noted, there are three dimensions of similarity for propositions: logical form, what it is that those propositions are about and propositional type. Consider first logical form. Consider the two propositions: <dinosaurs existed> and <penguins exist>. The objector to strong non-maximalism might argue that these two propositions, at least at the most coarse-grained level, have the same logical form: they are both instances of existential quantification. It is just that <dinosaurs existed> is restricted to past entities, whereas <penguins exist> is not. We should, according to the Likeness principle, treat these two propositions the same. But this is precisely what strong non-maximalists decline to do. They treat the existential quantification in <penguins exist> as ontologically committing but the same quantification in <dinosaurs existed> as not ontologically committing.

Here is what we suppose the strong non-maximalist would say. She will point out that her view about the ungroundedness of past-tensed propositions is linked to her view that the past does not exist: presentism is true. But if presentism is true, she will argue, then <dinosaurs existed> and <penguins exist> do not have the same logical form. According to presentists, the logical form of <dinosaurs existed> is not existential quantification. Instead, all quantification over the past is nested within the scope of a primitive, non truth-functional ‘WAS’ operator. Thus, the strong non-maximalist will contend that since <dinosaurs existed> is not an instance of existential quantification whereas <penguins exist> is, it is reasonable to demand grounds for the latter but not the former.

Just as the strong non-maximalist can appeal to the WAS operator to undercut the claim that the logical form of past and present tensed sentences is the same, likewise the defender of anti-aboutness truthmaking can appeal to the WAS operator to argue that past-tensed sentences have a different logical form to present tensed sentence. In this she agrees with the strong non-maximalist: she merely disagrees with the strong non-maximalist that nothing grounds the truth of the sentence <dinosaurs existed>. She thinks that something grounds the truth, but that it is not dinosaurs.

This brings us to the second respect in which propositions may be similar: in what they are about.[[7]](#footnote-8) The objector to strong non-maximalist might contend that propositions such as <Suzy is unwell> and <Suzy was unwell> are about the same thing: namely, Suzy and her state of health. Hence, given Likeness, and given the apparent similarity in aboutness they either both need grounds, or neither does. What will the strong non-maximalist say to this objection? She will say that the two propositions are not alike with respect to aboutness, since one is about the past and the other is about the present. If one rejects the existence of the past, however, it follows that talking about the past is very different to talking about the present. Thus the strong non-maximalist will claim that she has reason to treat the two kinds of sentences differently and thus to hold that one class, but not the other, requires grounds. The friend of anti-aboutness truthmaking can say the same. What justifies her claim that past-tensed tensed are not grounded in whatever it is that they seem to be about is that those sentences are about the past. It is precisely because the past does not exist that these propositions cannot be grounded in whatever it is that they are about. Present-tensed propositions, by contrast, can be so grounded because the present exists.

This brings us to the third way in which propositions can be similar: their type. As noted, to individuate propositions by type we treat propositions as structured entities and construe similarity in terms of overlapping structure. Here again we can imagine the strong non-maximalist responding that given that she thinks that the past does not exist, she thereby thinks that tense matters when it comes to the structure of propositions. So, for instance, compare <Suzy was unwell> to <Suzy is unwell>. Because Suzy exists in the present but she does not exist in the past a strong non-maximalist might argue that the two propositions must therefore have different structures. While <Suzy is unwell> may be plausibly construed as a structured entity that has, as a part, Suzy herself, <Suzy was unwell> cannot be plausibly thought to have this structure. That’s because there is no past Suzy to stand in the ordered pair <Suzy, being unwell>, whereas there is a present Suzy who can participate in that ordered pair. Because of this difference in the structure of the two propositions, the strong non-maximalist maintains that there is a principled distinction to be drawn between them, one that can carry the burden of the strong non-maximalist’s claim that only some propositions possess grounds.

Now, we do not exactly know what the strong non-maximalist should take the structure of <Suzy was unwell> to be. Whatever the structural difference amounts to, however, the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist can appeal to the same structural difference to motivate her view. Because there is no past Suzy, she can maintain that the truth of <Suzy was unwell> should not be grounded in what it seems to be about, namely Suzy herself, because past Suzy does not exist. <Suzy is unwell>, by contrast, can be grounded in the standard manner.

We come now to the final problem facing anti-aboutness truthmaker theory. As with the likeness problem, the ontological problem described above arises for both strong non-maximalism and anti-aboutness truthmaker theory. *Prima facie*, anti-aboutness truthmaking is not particularly useful for arguing against ontological positions. The reason why anti-aboutness truthmaking is not useful for arguing against ontological positions, however, is somewhat different to the reasoning that applied to strong non-maximalism. Indeed, what to say here depends, we think, on the kind of anti-aboutness theory under consideration.

One kind of anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist will place no restrictions on which entities can ground the truth of which propositions. Such a theorist will always be able to find *something* that is capable of grounding the truth of the relevant propositions. She can even posit some new entity to do this work, as some presentists do. For instance, she can posit a tensed property of the world, or a haecceity, or an abstract time or one of God’s memories. Indeed, once the link between aboutness and grounding has been severed, the options for grounding the truth of a proposition are rather wide: pretty much anything will do, so long as it is capable of guaranteeing the truth of the proposition. But if it is as easy as that to find grounds for the truth of some proposition, then the anti-aboutness theorist has the same difficulty as the strong non-maximalist, insofar as she will struggle to put pressure onto certain ontological positions via her truthmaker theory. In both cases, the views have an increased flexibility to accommodate a variety of ontologies. But that very flexibility renders the views toothless when it comes to arguing against ontological views.

Thus, this kind of permissive anti-aboutness theorist should simply give up on the idea that truthmaker theory is in the business of solving ontological disputes, or indeed determining what our ontology should be. Rather, she should say that we settle our ontology first and then, from there, take on whatever commitments we need to take on in order to render truthmaker theory viable.

1. **Which Truthmaker Theory?**

By comparing strong non-maximalism with anti-aboutness truthmaker theory, we can see that the very resources one might use to defend strong non-maximalism are available to the anti-aboutness truthmaker theorist to defend her view. The question thus arises: which of these two approaches to truthmaking is to be preferred? In this section we will outline and defend two arguments in favour of anti-aboutness truthmaking over strong non-maximalism. The first argument appeals to the distinction drawn previously between ontology-first and truthmaker-first approaches to metaphysics (§4.1). The second argument (§4.2) demonstrates that a number of popular theories in metaphysics are already implicitly committed to some version of anti-aboutness truthmaker theory.

**4.1. The Meta-metaphysical Argument**

Here is a rather quick argument in favour of anti-aboutness truthmaker theory over strong non-maximalism. Consider, again, the distinction drawn above between two broad approaches to metaphysics: ontology-first and truthmaker-first. According to the truthmaker-first approach, we ought, in the first instance, to establish how truthmaking works, by thinking about the way in which truth depends upon ontology. Then, once we work out what is true, we can use our truthmaker theory to extract our ontological commitments from the truths about our world. By contrast, according to the ontology-first approach we ought first settle our ontological commitments, and only then are we in a position to establish how truthmaking works. In other words, the ontology-first approach asks that we settle our ontology and then fit our theory of truthmaking to the ontology; the truthmaker-first approach asks that we settle our truthmaker-theory first and then fit our ontology to the truthmaking.

Both strong non-maximalism and anti-aboutness truthmaker theory fit most naturally with ontology-first approaches. The difference between the views, however, is that anti-aboutness truthmaker theory can be rendered compatible with a truthmaker-first approach. In short, then, anti-aboutness truthmaker theory is agnostic about the distinction between ontology-first and truthmaker-first approaches to truthmaking in a manner that strong non-maximalism is not. The ‘neutrality’ of anti-aboutness truthmaking between truthmaker-first and ontology-first approaches is a reason in its favour: the view is not as hostage to the whims of meta-metaphysics as is its competitor, strong non-maximalism.

Why is this neutrality a good-making feature of anti-aboutness truthmaker theory? As we have discussed, for some truthmaker theorists the name of the game is to put pressure on certain ontological positions—presentism, actualism and so on—by demanding that proponents of such views supply an ontological basis for the propositions they take to be true. The idea is that one cannot first determine what exists, without, in the process, determining, for at least some propositions, whether those propositions are true and in virtue of what they are true. If one takes this to be a primary role for a theory of truthmaking, one will consider the ontology-first approach implausible. Our aim is not to defend the view that a plausible truthmaker theory ought put pressure on certain ontological positions. However, we think that many truthmaker theorists hold this view, and thus prefer a truthmaker theory that is meta-metaphysically neutral between truthmaker-first and ontology-first approaches.

It might be objected, however, that anti-aboutness truthmaker theory is not, in fact, as meta-metaphysically neutral as we have suggested. The trouble comes this way: given anti-aboutness truthmaker theory, truths need not be *about* their truthmakers. But if truths need not be about their truthmakers, then truth radically underdetermines ontology, and it is hard to see how truthmaker theory could be an effective tool for ruling out certain ontologies.

The worry is as follows. According to the truthmaker theorist, a proposition, *P*, is true, if and only if we can ‘map’ that proposition to some truthmaker, *T*. Now consider any arbitrary set of propositions and any arbitrary set of entities from one’s ontology. The problem, says the objector, is that without what we might call an *aboutness constraint* on truthmaking, for any such set of propositions and entities, there is some mapping between the members of the former, and the members of the latter. There are mappings that are bijections, where each proposition gets mapped to a single entity in one’s ontology (and *vice versa*). There are mappings in which a single entity in one’s ontology gets mapped to every proposition in the set in question. And so on. But, says the objector, what makes one mapping better than any other? What constraint can anti-aboutness truthmaker theory place upon such mappings?

According to the anti-aboutness theorist, we do not require, as a constraint on this mapping, that propositions are mapped to the states of world that they are *about*. However, it is not the case that, in the absence of an *aboutness constraint*, any way of mapping propositions to truthmakers is as good as any other. As is well known, truthmakers must *necessitate* the truths that they make true. Accordingly, it is not the case that just any ontology can be mapped to a set of truthmakers in the absence of an aboutness constraint on truthmaking. Rather, only an ontology of entities that necessitate the relevant truths is a candidate for such a mapping. So it doesn’t follow from anti-aboutness truthmaking that truthmaker theory is completely unconstrained.[[8]](#footnote-9)

One might object that a necessitation constraint is insufficient if not paired with an aboutness constraint, by pointing out that even if it is conceded that only ontologies containing necessitators for a set of true propositions can be mapped to those propositions, the space of possible ontologies is still radically unconstrained. A case in point: in the literature on presentism and truthmaking, we find a rich menagerie of entities that are capable of making past-directed propositions true. Primitive tensed properties, sets of sentences, laws of nature, memories in God’s mind, Haecceities (and more besides!) are all offered by various presentists as truthmakers. Anti-aboutness truthmaking provides no criteria for selecting between these various ontological options. Worse, because defending anti-aboutness truthmaking requires giving up, to some extent, on the idea that the truth of a proposition ought to be explained by its grounds, explanation cannot be used to make the selection.

The objection is that even if we narrow our focus onto ontologies that come packaged with necessitators, anti-aboutness truthmaking still underdetermines ontology and so it is difficult to see how an anti-aboutness truthmaker theory can be used to develop a truthmaker-first approach to metaphysics; in the end it may be as metaphysically partisan as strong non-maximalism. The anti-aboutness theorist might take this objection as motivation to provide some further constraint that enables that theory to retain its meta-metaphysically neutral status. Of course, the constraint cannot be an aboutness constraint and it cannot imply the same. However, we think that the necessitation constraint is enough to render the anti-aboutness theory able to satisfy the motivations behind the truthmaker-first approach.[[9]](#footnote-10)

We noted above that even if we require that a truthmaker must necessitate the truth of those propositions it makes true, knowing what is true radically underdetermines our ontology because of the range of entities fit to necessitate those truths. However, this is not a unique problem for the anti-aboutness theorist. Even those truthmaker theorists who endorse an aboutness constraint cannot use their account of truthmaking to determine whether they ought endorse an ontology of states of affairs, or of tropes, or universals and particulars, or of other kinds of entities which the relevant truths are both about and necessitated by. This is a shortcoming accepted by truthmaker theorists, and it is not taken to render the theory unable to impose significant ontological consequences. For instance, traditional truthmaker theorists are in a position to reject behaviourism, given that they think that propositions of the form <X believes that P> are about mental states and not behaviours. But that leaves wide open what the truthmaker for <X believes that P> is: a functional state; a brain state; a map-like representation and so on.

So, while the anti-aboutness theorist must accept that truth underdetermines ontology, in this respect she is in the same boat as the truthmaker theorist who endorses an aboutness constraint. Admittedly, her ontology is *less* constrained by truth than is the ontology of the latter theorist—in that she cannot rule out, for example, the menagerie of entities proposed by presentists to necessitate past truths—but it is nonetheless constrained, in a way that the strong non-maximalist’s is not. One cannot, on this account, simply hold fixed the truth of some proposition, *P*, and then find *something* in one’s ontology onto which to map *P*. Rather, what *P* *can* be mapped to will be delimited by which states of the world necessitate *P*.

In sum, anti-aboutness truthmaking is not toothless as a truthmaker-first approach to metaphysics. The anti-aboutness theorist, by demanding grounds which necessitate the propositions a theorist takes to be true, puts pressure on views like presentism to posit *something* to do the requisite truthmaking work. By drawing out a commitment to outlandish ontological posits, anti-aboutness truthmaker theory exposes these views to criticism regarding whether such posits are plausible additions to our ontology. From there, the task of judging which entities exist, amongst those that can necessitate the truth of all the true propositions is not one to be done by truthmaker theories, but by further ontological debate. Nevertheless, it is clear that anti-aboutness truthmaking is capable of playing the primary role of a truthmaker-first approach to metaphysics, and that this is an advantage over strong non-maximalism.

**4.2. You Probably Need It Anyway**

We suspect that some strong non-maximalists may not be moved by the above consideration, in which case anti-aboutness truthmaking and strong non-maximalism remain at a stalemate.[[10]](#footnote-11) There is, however, another route to anti-aboutness truthmaking, this time not based on general but rather on specific ontological considerations. In what follows we contend that anti-aboutness truthmaking is implied by a variety of specific ontological positions, focusing our attention on the metaphysics of modality and the metaphysics of fictional objects. These are not the only areas of ontology in which anti-aboutness truthmaking is invoked or argued for: we take it that views in the metaphysics of modality and the metaphysics of fiction provide a representative cross-section of first-order ontological inquiry.[[11]](#footnote-12) The immediate conclusion we argue for is that a variety of possible worlds ontologies (of both the concrete and abstract variety), as well as a variety of meta-fictionalist (i.e. operator-based fictionalist) views, are implicitly committed to anti-aboutness truthmaking. In doing so, we say nothing to argue for or against these views. We also do not intend to argue directly against strong non-maximalism: a wide range of options remain open to the non-maximalist vis-à-vis the metaphysics of fiction and modality. However, we take at least two noteworthy results to emerge from the discussion. First, truthmaker theorists (of any stripe) cannot simply proceed on a ‘pick-and-choose’ basis when it comes to ontological disputes; rather, a range of disparate ontological views are systematically ruled out, at least for those who endeavour to hold onto the principle that truths must be about their truthmakers. Anti-aboutness truthmakers have no such restrictions. Second, those who happen to adopt any one of the aforementioned views will thereby already be anti-aboutness theorists. These results may not sway many strong non-maximalists, but we take them to be surprising results nonetheless.

We will begin by considering modal discourse, followed by fictional discourse, in each case arguing that a variety of views in each domain imply anti-aboutness truthmaking.

**4.2.1 Truthmakers for Modal Truths**

Many who take modal discourse seriously hold that possible worlds play a role in making true modal claims. On this view, <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman> is true in virtue of there being a possible world in which Trump is a fisherman (and not the other way around). This view can be articulated as the following claim:

**(M)** At least some modal truths are made true (in part or in whole) by possible worlds and/or the constituents thereof.

It is worth noting at the outset that there are a good number of possible worlds theorists who reject (M) because they think possible worlds are merely models of, and not ontological grounds for, modal claims. These possible-worlds theorists typically argue that modal claims do not require truthmakers.[[12]](#footnote-13) To re-iterate, our concern here is not to directly argue against these strong non-maximalists. Rather, our present concern is specifically with those ontologically serious possible-worlds theorists who already accept (M). Advocates of (M) face two questions concerning the nature of possible worlds:

(1) Are possible worlds concrete or abstract entities?

(2) Do entities in other worlds represent entities in the actual world by being *identical* to them, or by being non-identical entities that represent them in some other way?

The four combinations of answers to these two questions correspond to well-known ontologies of worlds. Taking firstly the concrete worlds options, we have:

1. *Concrete transworld identity* (a.k.a. ‘modal realism with overlap’), according to which possible worlds are concretely existing spatiotemporal entities, while entities in the actual world are identical to their otherworldly surrogates (cf. McDaniel 2004, Yagisawa 2009).
2. *Concrete counterpart* *theory* (a.k.a. Lewisian modal realism), according to which possible worlds are concretely existing spatiotemporal entities, and actual entities are non-identical to otherworldly entities.

Turning to the abstractionist options, a slight complication arises concerning the question of how otherworldly entities represent their actual counterparts. Concretist transworld identity theorists can straightforwardly take the representation relation to consist in identity, since all worlds are concrete, and (granting the concretist’s ontology of overlapping worlds) actual entities literally inhabit multiple worlds. Abstractionists have a harder time saying that concrete entities in our world literally inhabit other worlds, since (for the abstractionist) other worlds (and their inhabitants) are abstract. One way to get out of this problem is to posit an 'abstract actual world'—call it @—distinct from (but corresponding to) the *concrete* actual world. The identity between actual and otherworldly entities can now be construed as an identity between entities in @ and otherworldly entities. For the abstractionist who rejects transworld identity, this problem does not arise. However, there is still good reason for the counterpart-theoretic abstractionist to posit an abstract @, because she still needs to give *some* account of how entities in other worlds represent actual entities. There are two options available: First, one might hold that the representation occurs as a brute fact (i.e., that for some actual entity x and some otherworldly entity y, the fact [y represents x] is a brute fact). While this view is attractive for non-reductionist defenders of ‘primitivist modality’, others of a more reductionist bent opt to reduce the representation relation to something else, e.g. *similarity* relations. Abstractionists who take this second route have a much easier time of obtaining objective similarity between counterparts if ‘actual’ entities are taken to be abstract entities in @, as opposed to concrete entities. In sum, the two options for the abstractionist are:

1. *Abstract transworld identity*, according to which possible worlds are abstractly existing entities, and actual entities are identical to their otherworldly surrogates.
2. *Abstract counterpart* theorists, who believe that possible worlds are abstractly existing entities, but that actual entities are non-identical to their otherworldly surrogates.

We claim that of the four approaches thus canvassed, the latter three violate the aboutness constraint. We'll begin in reverse order, starting with (iv). There are two ways in which the ontology of (iv) violates aboutness. First, propositions such as <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman> are about Trump; and whatever else they may be about, they do not seem to be about individuals non-identical (albeit similar to) Trump. But by endorsing counterpart theory, and rejecting that otherworldly counterparts are *identical* to the actual-world Trump, (iv) appears to be committed to the truthmaker for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman> involving a non-identical counterpart of Trump. Second, propositions such as <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman>, whatever else they may be about, do not seem to be about an abstract entity. But by treating worlds and their constituents as abstract, (iv) appears committed to the truthmaker for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman> involving an abstract entity, namely, Trump’s otherworldly counterpart. If we are talking about a defender of (iv) who also endorses an abstract account of @, the problem is intensified, since not only is Trump’s counterpart in w2 abstract; Trump in @ is abstract too.

Before we consider a possible response to these arguments, we should note that, if they work, they apply not only (iv) but also to (ii) and (iii). For (ii) posits individuals *non-identical* to Trump, and (iii), like (iv), posits *abstract* entities representing Trump. Thus, out of the four approaches thus canvassed, only the first, so-called ‘modal realism with overlap’, appears to avoid violating aboutness, since on that view alone is the truthmaker for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman> identical to the concrete, actual Trump.

A possible response to these arguments may stem from the observation that they are similar in spirit to Kripke's famous 'Humphrey objection' to Lewis’ modal realism.[[13]](#footnote-14) Does Lewis’ reply to Kripke rebut the present objections as well? The salient part of Lewis’ reply is that

Insofar as the intuitive complaint is that someone else gets into the act, the point is rightly taken. But I do not see why that is any objection, any more than it would be an objection against ersatzism that some abstract whatnot gets into the act. What matters is that the someone else, or the abstract whatnot, should not crowd out Humphrey himself. (Lewis 1986, p. 196)

Lewis’ first point reinforces our own; he recognizes that the fact that someone (or something) else ‘gets into the act’ is not a problem specifically for modal realism but for abstractionist (ersatzist) accounts of possible worlds as well. That is what we argue: both abstractionists and Lewis-style concretists violate aboutness. As for Lewis’ second point, it should be noted that we are *not* claiming that Trump's counterpart 'crowds out' the real Trump from the truthmaking base of <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman>. Rather, we are claiming that even if Trump is *part of* the truthmaking base for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman>, the ontological role played by otherworldly (and/or abstract) entities in the truthmaking story is enough for the aboutness criterion to be violated. In fairness, however, whether one accepts this claim will depend on one's interpretation of the aboutness constraint on truthmaking. Recall the constraint:

**Aboutness:** Necessarily, x *makes true* *P* only if *P* is about x.

The aboutness criterion, it seems, can be plausibly extended as follows:

**Partial Aboutness:** Necessarily, x is a part of the truthmaker for *P* only if *P* is partially about x.

Partial Aboutness seems to follow from Aboutness. Suppose Partial Aboutness is accepted then, taking as an example concrete counterpart theory (i.e. view (ii)), we take it that two plausible ways of cashing out the truthmaker story are as follows:

1. Trump's otherworldly fisherman counterpart (qua counterpart of Trump) is *one of* the truthmakers for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman>, or
2. Trump’s otherworldly fisherman counterpart is a *partial* truthmaker for <Donald Trump could have been a fisherman>.

Our present claim is simply that on either of the above readings of the truthmaking story told by counterpart theory, there is a violation of either the aboutness or the partial aboutness criterion respectively. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for (iii) and (iv). So, those who accept either of (ii), (iii) or (iv) appear to implicitly endorse a form of anti-aboutness truthmaking.

**4.2.2** **Truthmakers for fictional truths**

Fictionalist accounts crop up in a wide range of metaphysical debates. The fictionalist aims to provide an account of a discourse about Fs that does not involve commitment to the existence of Fs, by drawing an analogy between that discourse and fictional discourse. For instance, the fictionalist about mathematical entities argues we can utter sentences such as ‘2+2=4’ without being committed to the existence of numbers, just as we can utter sentences like ‘Sherlock Holmes lives on 221B Baker St’ without being committed to the existence of some entity, Sherlock Holmes. But fictionalist strategies are faced with the task of explaining *how* sentences can function in this way. As with modal discourse, some fictionalists argue that no fictional claims require ontological commitment. Our concern is only with those ontologically serious fictionalists who take fictional claims to require some ontological commitment.[[14]](#footnote-15) Two options for ontological commitment are as follows:

1. *Realists* accord some positive ontological status to *fictional objects* such as Sherlock Holmes. There are different ways of cashing out this positive ontological status: Fictional objects may be non-actual, possible objects (Lewis 1978), actual but non-concrete abstract objects (van Inwagen 1977), or non-existent Meinongian objects (Parsons 1980). In any case, realists straightforwardly account for apparent non-trivial fictional truths about Fs by positing Fs and taking those claims to be literally true.
2. *Meta-fictionalists* accord some positive ontological status to *fictional works* (as distinct from fictional objects), like Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories. Meta-fictionalists account for the apparent non-trivial truth of fictional claims about Fs by invoking an ‘according to the fiction’ operator, whereby claims of the form <According to the fiction, *P*> (as opposed to literal claims of the form <*P*>) can be true even if every proposition *P* in the fictional discourse is false (or lacking in truth-value), due to the discourse being about (non-existent) Fs.

Strictly speaking the two views are independent of one another, but for present purposes we will focus on realism and an anti-realist version of meta-fictionalism (we will call anti-realist meta-fictionalism ‘meta-fictionalism’ for convenience in what follows).

Let’s begin by noting that at least some realist theories appear to provide truthmakers that straightforwardly satisfy the aboutness criterion. Meinongians take <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> to involve reference to a non-existent object, Holmes, who is non-existent but nevertheless has positive ontological status (by having *being*). According to standard truthmaker theory, Meinongian objects are not truthmakers, since truthmakers are existing entities; however, given a suitably modified truthmaker theory, Meinongian objects appear to satisfy the aboutness criterion, since <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> is intuitively about Holmes. Arguably, defenders of an abstract-object account of fictional objects do not fare so well, since <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> is intuitively not about an *abstract* Holmes. (This intuition may be easier to see if we consider that <Holmes is taller than Tom Cruise> cannot be about an abstract Holmes, since an abstract Holmes cannot stand in ‘taller than’ relations to real people). Likewise, defenders of a possibilist account of fictional objects may appear to violate aboutness, in that whereas <Holmes could have lived on 100 Baker St> is (arguably) about what Holmes does in another world, <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> is *prima facie* about what Holmes does in this world. These are not knockdown arguments, but our point here is simply that not every stripe of realism obviously satisfies the aboutness constraint: Realists have work to do to avoid anti-aboutness truthmaking.

Let us now turn our attention to meta-fictionalism. It is tempting to argue that meta-fictionalists violate aboutness in the following way. According to the meta-fictionalist, it’s the *fictional work* of Arthur Conan Doyle, and not the fictional object Holmes, that is the truthmaker for <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> (and likewise for <Holmes is taller than Tom Cruise>, although the latter would involve Tom Cruise as part of the truthmaking base). But surely in <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St>, and <Holmes is taller than Tom Cruise>, it is not so much a fictional work, but rather Holmes, which is part of the truthmaking base for each proposition. Therefore, anti-realist meta-fictionalism violates aboutness.

However, a reply to this argument is available to the meta-fictionalist. Recall that the meta-fictionalist holds not only the *ontological* thesis that sentences such as ‘Holmes lives on 221B Baker St’ are made true by fictional works; she also holds the *semantic* thesis that, from a descriptive point of view, sentences uttered in fictional discourse express meta-fictional propositions of the form <According to the fiction, *P*>, for any *P* in the target discourse. Thus, according to the meta-fictionalist, the fictional sentence ‘Holmes lives on 221B Baker St’ does not literally express <Holmes lives on 221B Baker St>; rather, it expresses <According to *F*, Holmes lives on 221B Baker St> (where F stands for Doyle’s fictional work). Furthermore, it is only the former proposition is about Holmes; the latter proposition is indeed about Doyle’s fictional work. Hence, fictional works as truthmakers do not violate Aboutness.

It is worth noting that the response just given on behalf of the meta-fictionalist hangs on the viability of the meta-fictionalist’s descriptive semantic thesis about the meaning of fictional claims. Meta-fictionalists who do not make such a claim are unable to provide this response.[[15]](#footnote-16) Generalising, we can say that meta-fictionalists about Fs can only preserve aboutness if they are prepared to claim (like the meta-fictionalist about fictional objects) that, descriptively speaking, discourse about Fs *in fact* amounts to meta-fictional discourse. We take it that not all meta-fictionalisms are equal in this regard; some domains of discourse are much more amenable to a meta-fictionalist descriptive analysis than others. And whereas fictional object discourse is (as we have seen) relatively plausibly interpreted through a meta-fictionalist lens, mathematical discourse (to take one example) is much less amenable to such an interpretation.[[16]](#footnote-17) If so, mathematical meta-fictionalists cannot give the fictional object meta-fictionalist’s above reply, because the mathematical meta-fictionalist should not say that our mathematical claims as a matter of fact express meta-fictional propositions; rather, they express propositions about numbers. But the argument that failed against fictional object meta-fictionalism now runs successfully: Meta-fictionalists about mathematics take the mathematical fiction (or parts thereof) to be the truthmaker for <2+2=4>. But <2+2=4> is not about a mathematical fiction, it is about numbers. Therefore, mathematical meta-fictionalism violates Aboutness.

The argument we have just run in the case of mathematical meta-fictionalism can be applied to meta-fictionalism in other domains, such as meta-fictionalism about ordinary objects, moral values, and so on. Meta-fictionalists (of an ontologically serious bent) in any of these domains, then, must endorse anti-aboutness truthmaker theory.

1. **Conclusion**

In sum, those who are inclined to reject both maximalism and weak non-maximalism need not go down the strong non-maximalist route of completely severing the link between ontology and truth for some class of propositions. For, the view of anti-aboutness truthmaking is available, and offers similar benefits without this cost. We have argued that similar objections can be levelled at each view, and that similar responses are available on both fronts. Thus, at the least, we hope to have shown that the views are on a par. However, we have also presented reasons to prefer anti-aboutness to strong non-maximalism. Anti-aboutness truthmaker theory is advantageous as it allows one to retain a more meta-metaphysically neutral stance than does strong non-maximalism. Furthermore, there are many popular metaphysical views which tacitly sign up for anti-aboutness truthmaking. In other words, many of us are anti-aboutness theorists in some domain already. Thus, insofar as we prefer a unified theory of truthmaking, we should prefer anti-aboutness to strong non-maximalism.

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1. Truthmaker maximalism is also defended by Cameron (2008) and by Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006) (who defends the view against Milne (2005)). The nature of the truthmaking relation between *E* and *P* is controversial; we remain officially neutral on the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. In what follows we will engage only with this earlier work of Tallant. His later work, (2018), takes up some of these issues. Nothing we say here is intended to create problems for what he says in this later work. Since that work is book length, we cannot go into all of the details here. So we restrict ourselves to considering his earlier position on the matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Asay (2018) argues that truthmaking does not require explanation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See for instance Sider (2001 p 40 and 2004 p 674); Heathwood (2007 p 141). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Asay (2013a, 2013b, 2017) appears to adopt a truthmaker-first approach, seeing truthmaker theory as a way of doing ontology. Armstrong (2004) also seems to adopt this broad understanding of truthmaker theory, ultimately endorsing a criterion of ontological commitment that is cast in truthmaking terms. Baron (2013b) uses Armstrong’s criterion to reframe the debate between mathematical nominalists and mathematical Platonists. The ontology-first approach appears to be adopted by Caplan and Sanson (2010) and Tallant (2009a, 2009b). At times, Fine (2012) also appears to be a proponent of this view, especially given his general criticism of truthmaker theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Merricks (2007) and Baron (2013a) make this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The notion of aboutness we deploy here is the one advocated by Merricks, and is similar to what Crane calls a ‘liberal’ way of understanding aboutness (Crane 2013, p 7). Note that there is, as yet, no rigorous definition of aboutness on offer, for which Merricks has been taken to task by Schaffer (2008) and McDaniel (2011). Still, the idea is intuitive enough and an intuitive grip on aboutness will do for present purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Asay (forthcoming) for a defence of the necessitation constraint on truthmaking. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The original incarnation of this paper sought to develop a further constraint on behalf of the anti-aboutness theorist. Thanks to an anonymous referee for convincing us that the necessitation constraint is sufficient. The below discussion is based upon feedback from that referee. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. In particular, we suspect that those who have already cast their lot with the ontology-first camp will not care for an ‘ontologically neutral’ truthmaking principle, since such neutrality is generally taken to be a virtue only of *meta-*ontological theses (which need to be neutral in order to play their role of adjudicating between substantive ontological questions). Since many in the ontology-first camp regard truthmaker theory as a substantive ontological thesis in its own right, they will likely regard its lack of neutrality as nothing out of the ordinary. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Crane (2013) is one notable proponent and defender of a broadly anti-aboutness approach to truthmaking with regard to a wide range of truths. While we cannot give Crane’s arguments the attention they deserve, we wish to note here that Crane’s ontological position is framed as a comprehensive answer to “the problem of reconciling the manifest truths about the non-existent with the fact that truth is dependent on being” (Crane 2013: 85). While Crane details anti-aboutness approaches to specific classes of truths, especially truths of fiction (cf. Crane 2013: 75-84), the non-specific nature of his solution makes his approach applicable to other classes of truths (e.g. mathematical truths, negative existentials). Crane’s approach, then, is one instance of anti-aboutness truthmaking which outstrips the classes of modality and fiction we discuss in this section. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Some non-committal ways of engaging in possible worlds talk, such as fictionalism about possible worlds, will fall under the umbrella of the fictionalist strategies we consider in the following section. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Kripke's objection was that <Humphrey could have won the election> should not be made true by a counterpart of Humphrey, since Humphrey "could not care less whether someone *else*... would have been victorious in another possible world" (1980, p. 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Pretense* accounts of fictional discourse are one such non-ontologically committing view. However, note that the strategy of pretense theory is often partially combined with some form of ontological commitment to fictional objects and/or works, due to internal difficulties that arise within pretense theory concerning extra-fictional claims such as <Holmes is not as popular as Santa>. According to such ‘partial’ pretense theorists, fictionalist discourse about Fs by and large involves *pretending* to believeclaims about Fs, not actually believing (or even asserting) them, but there are some exceptional cases (such as extra-fictional claims) which do involve genuine belief. Our claims in what follows do not apply to thoroughgoing pretense theorists, but they will apply (in part or in whole) to partial pretense theorists. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Cf. Brock (2016) for a discussion of the merits of such a non-descriptive (or, in his terms, *revolutionary*) construal of meta-fictionalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. This doesn’t mean, of course, that mathematical meta-fictionalists cannot provide a meta-fictionalist analysis of mathematical claims. It just means that such analyses must be couched in terms other than that of providing a descriptive theory of mathematical discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)