

# Ontological Accounting & Aboutness:

## *On Asay's A Theory of Truthmaking*

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### Abstract

In this paper, I first present an overview of Asay's *A Theory of Truthmaking*, highlighting what I take to be some of its most attractive features, especially his re-invigoration of the ontological understanding of truthmaking and his defence of ontology-first truthmaking over explanation-first truthmaking. Then, I articulate what I take to be a puzzling potential inconsistency: (a) he appeals to considerations to do with aboutness in criticising how well ontological views account for truth while (b) ruling out aboutness from the right account of truthmaking. He argues, instead, that necessitation is both necessary and sufficient for truthmaking (§3.3). I suggest that adding aboutness to one's account in the right way is not just compatible with but important for ontology-first truthmaking. I do all this to invite Asay to clarify his position on these matters. Overall, Asay's worldview displays the fruitfulness of an ontologically serious approach to metaphysics that puts truthmaking centre-stage.

*A Theory of Truthmaking* re-invigorates the original, *ontological* understanding of truthmaking of C.B. Martin, Kevin Mulligan, Barry Smith and Peter Simons (1984), and Gustav Bergmann (1961: 229). It reserves a methodologically central role for *truthmaking*, which Asay understands in two ways: as a relation, and thus a worldly ingredient, and a conception, with significant demands on all theorising. For Asay, truthmaker theorists must follow, first and foremost, the "call for honest [ontological] accounting" (9) (Asay 2011: 25; compare Schipper, 2016: §8.2): that one's beliefs, what one takes to be true, must properly line up with one's ontology, what one takes to exist (80). Asay's picture of ontological truthmaking is ecumenical though also proselytizing: everyone can, and should be, truthmaker theorists, for everyone should be moved by the call for "ontological honesty" (4).

This call must, according to Asay, be met eventually with an "ontological worldview" (263) that accounts for all truths. Asay uses the tools and language of truthmaking to draw a roadmap of ontological positions, at each turn weighing up how well they do in providing the entities needed to account for the relevant truths. What emerges by the book's end is his preferred worldview: an eclectic world populated by past, present, and future entities (defending eternalism), ordinary entities such as tables, chairs, Sichuanese tigers, Fergal the red panda, human beings, and more philosophically controversial entities: properties,

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numbers, and fictional characters. The order amidst the plurality is wrought through Asay's world consisting purely of truthmakers: "To be is to be a truthmaker" (22).

The call for ontological accountability serves as Asay's main argumentative principle. It guides him, in identifying which entities he places in his ontology, but also in articulating the core aspects of his truthmaker theory, answering such questions as what the truthmaking relation is and whether all truths should have truthmakers. Regarding the latter, he defends non-maximalism: that not all truths require truthmakers. Following such philosophers as Schipper (2018: §5) and Mulligan, Simons, and Smith (1984: 315), his main argument is that reflecting on what negative existentials such as 'Dodos don't exist' mean and are about leads us to see that, to account ontologically for such truths, what is required is not that one's ontology contains some (existing) entity or entities but that certain putative entities do not exist (77-89). He says: "To be an atheist about unicorns, say, is not to be a "theist" about "unicorn absences." One should admit unicorn absences only if <There are unicorn absences> is true, not because <There are no unicorns> is" (81).

One of his main arguments for "ontology-first" truthmaking, in opposition to its main rival, explanation-first truthmaking, is that there is a distinction between (*ontologically*) *accounting for truth* and *explaining truth*. On pages 43-44, Asay criticises Rodriguez-Pereyra (2006: 972-973) and others' idea that truthmakers must be exactly adequate or "just right" for the specific truths that they make true (Smith 1999: §§V-VI; Schipper 2020: §1.1). The main criticism, it seems to me, is just that this is not compatible with ontology-first truthmaking. On such a conception, Asay writes,

The question about whether these entities [Jia Jia the panda and Opus the penguin] are the perfectly tailored truthmakers for explaining the truth of <Pandas exist> doesn't arise, since explaining the truth of the proposition is not the concern of ontology-first truthmaker theorists. Their concern is with maintaining an adequate ontology that is appropriate for the stock of truths they accept. [44]

One might think, for instance, that there is an ontological disagreement between those who think that the sum of Jia Jia and Opus is a truthmaker for <Penguins exist> and those who think that only Opus is a truthmaker for that proposition and that Jia Jia is a truthmaker for <Pandas exist>. But, in fact, according to Asay, there isn't a "genuine ontological disagreement" here, since they have the same entities in their ontologies. They only disagree about whether "a certain explanatory relation obtains between the penguin, the panda, and the various propositions" (ibid.). For ontology-first truthmaker theorists, "All that matters is that our ontology is properly populated[, not] which entity "really" explains the truth of the truth-bearer" (ibid.). The contrast that Asay makes is between offering an ontology to balance one's ontological books and explaining truth. As long as there are enough of the right entities in one's ontology to account for all the truths (or rather, what one takes to be true), certain disputes are just not ontologically substantial. Most importantly, it doesn't matter which

truthmakers line up with which truths, as long as each truth is ontologically accounted for. As Asay writes, “Ontological accounting in this sense is a global project—it’s in search of the right equilibrium between our beliefs on the whole and our ontological inventories” (48).

Most truthmaker theorists, including metaphysics-first truthmaker theorists, will be puzzled by Asay’s explication of truthmaking. They might recall that Lewis wrote the following:

[W]ho says that a Truthmaker Principle, whether weakened or not, must yield informative explanations? I say to Martin: *Tu quoque!* [...] The proposition that there is a cat is true just because there is a cat. What sort of explanation is that?—No explanation at all, and none the worse for that. [2001: 611-612]

Lewis’s claims seem to support Asay’s position: explanations are not necessary for truthmaking contra explanation-first truthmaking. However, Lewis generally supports the idea that “roughly speaking, truths must have *things* as their subject matter” (1992: 218) and “Any proposition has a subject matter, on which its truth value supervenes” (2003: 25). Thus, combining the quotes about explanation and subject matter, Lewis thinks that the exactly adequate truthmakers or supervenience-bases-of-truth need not be informative explanantia of truth. Indeed, a truth’s subject matter seems obviously the right place to look, to find a truth’s worldly demands. And, revealing what in the world it is about doesn’t explain anything. What these philosophical actions do is identify what a truth can’t do without.

Asay states later (243):

“There are numbers” cannot be true unless there are numbers. “The number 2 exists” cannot be true unless the number 2 exists. These claims, I hope, are among the least controversial made in this entire monograph. They involve disquotation, and nothing more. [...] Everyone recognizes (or should recognize) that “true” serves as a device of disquotation.

Indeed, if Lewis is right, even disquoting (or semantically descending) within “just because” constructions doesn’t yield informative explanations. But what it does yield is that truthmaking cannot be indiscriminate. We need the exactly adequate and appropriate truthmakers and these are revealed by what the truthbearers in question are about, what their subject matter is. Why else say that one’s ontology requires the number 2 if one accepts that “The number 2 exists” is true?

In Chapter 12, Asay goes on to say that mathematical truths, by being necessary truths, are trivial, and thus made true by everything. However, let’s say that one’s ontology lacks the number 2. One must then either (a) accept that <2 exists> isn’t a necessary truth, because it is not a truth, given that what it says exists doesn’t; or (b) accept its necessity, yielding that one’s ontology is inadequate, because it lacks the relevant truthmaker, the number 2. However, the

first option clashes with the obviousness of mathematical truths. Asay insists that he himself “would still happily accept proof from the mathematicians that there is [an even prime]” (227), even if math is not indispensable to science (Field 1980). One might respond to (b) by insisting that one has plenty of truthmakers in one’s ontology to account for the truth of <2 exists>. For instance, one might say that it is trivially satisfied by everything, because such a “truth makes no demands on the world”, following Cameron (2010: 405), or because everything necessitates necessary truths, following Asay (§3.4, 234ff) and Briggs (2012: 15). But, as Asay himself would say, one would be shirking one’s ontological responsibilities by leaving out the number 2 from one’s ontology. Asay suggests that adding 2 into one’s ontological inventory would be no “strike against that inventory’s parsimony” (234); so just do it!

Similarly, if one is going to reject maximalism, as Asay (75-84) does, on the basis that negative existential truths are not about entities existing but things not existing, then it looks as if one accepts that exactness is indeed appropriate for truthmaking and for ontological accounting. If one didn’t have specifically the number 2 in one’s ontology despite the truth of <2 exists> or included some inappropriately existing entity in one’s ontology to make true a negative existential truth, then one wouldn’t have one’s ontological books in order. In fact, in engaging with the deflationist, Asay (132) seems to agree:

The basis for my claim that penguins make “There are penguins” true is that it’s metaphysically necessary for the sentence, *given what it means*, to be true if penguins exist. [...] [I]t’s metaphysically necessary that if a penguin exists, then there are penguins (because “There are penguins” *means that* there are penguins). I take it that such knowledge is grounded in my understanding of what penguins are, *and what the sentence means*. [emphases added]

The penguins look like targeted truthmakers to me! We include *specifically* penguins in our ontology because of what the truth means and what it is about. They seem then to be crucial for ontological accounting, for any account which lacks them would be incomplete. From what he says here and elsewhere, it seems that Asay would agree that what a truth specifically requires of the world must be the case. And to find this out, one should look at its meaning and aboutness.

Similarly, when arguing that negative existential truths are truthmaker-gaps, he says that such truths “lack truthmakers because that is the ontologically responsible attitude to take towards them when we inspect them and see what they say about the world” (89). He clearly appeals to the relevant truths’ aboutness to identify specifically what one’s ontology should contain or what it should not contain. He criticises maximalists for appealing to “highly theoretical and abstract principles about truth and truthmaking in general” (80) and for not looking at the particular cases of truth, such as negative truths, and seeing what demands they make on ontological accounting.

There is, thus, a puzzling tension in Asay's book. (a) He *criticises* the explanatory paradigm's "'localized" focus on [answering]: what is the particular piece of being that matches up with this particular truth?" (80), calling "issues about precise matching [...] moot from the perspective of ontology-first truthmaking" (43), and insisting instead on ontology-first truthmaking's "'global" approach that looks for overall harmony between our alethic and ontological commitments" (80). While (b), he often employs arguments which appeal to localisation when he criticises various views for "shirking their ontological dut[ies]" (35).

Plausibly, ontological projects require "overall harmony". But how can there be overall harmony if the specific truthmakers that specific truths are about are missing from one's inventory, even if one identifies something else irrelevant as a truthmaker?

I suggest this: explicitly embrace Smith's (1999: 274) "Two Sides to Truthmaking", "corresponding to the two directions of fit between judgement and reality", and Schipper's (2018: §4) emphasis on truthmaking and aboutness's *complementariness*. Pointing out that something is needed in one's ontology because that's what the truth is about, is not to fall into an explanatory paradigm, to want to explain truth, but to discover what would bring harmony to one's ontology.

Despite all this, Asay explicitly argues that necessitation is both necessary and sufficient for truthmaking (§§3.1-3.3). However, if  $\langle p \rangle$ 's being about  $p$  matters for whether  $p$  makes  $\langle p \rangle$  true, as Asay clearly agrees, then why explicitly reject an aboutness-picture of the truthmaking relation (57)? He argues that truths about fictional characters and numbers are trivial truths, necessitated, and thus made true, by the actions of authors and interpreters and by everything and anything, respectively. However, he (257-258) insists, against Cameron (2012: 192-193), that the fictional characters (e.g. Hamlet) exist, this being guaranteed by the existence of the processes of creation and interpretation, and "are equally good truthmakers, [there being] no good reason to deny them that status" (258). He, similarly, insists on the existence and truthmaking status of numbers. To make them palatable metaphysically, he says that each number and Hamlet "are an ontological "addition" that comes at no extra ontological cost" (ibid.), no "strike against that inventory's parsimony" (234). Puzzled, one might point out that they are then suspiciously epiphenomenal, non-causal, entities which Asay posits merely because failing to do so would conflict with the disquotational nature of truth. One might ask: why else are they needed except to play the role of truthmakers, which we have discovered by disquoting and by reflecting on what the truths are about? That they are what the relevant truths are about comes with important further reasons for believing in them, for instance, that they are grounded in experience, that they coordinate and focus our epistemic attitudes. These are all good reasons for believing in the existence of something when we are doing descriptive metaphysics, as Asay (6) explicitly claims he is. But a reason for believing in something's existence is not really an *explanation* of the truth that the thing exists. It is fuel for demanding that ontological accounting requires such entities.

Thus, Asay should, and implicitly in his methodology seems to, accept a role for aboutness and meaning in ontological accounting. However, Asay rejects any role that truths' aboutness or meaning plays *in the right account of the truthmaking relation*. In defending the sufficiency of necessitation (§3.3) from the problem of trivial truthmakers (e.g. that Biden's toes necessitate and thus make true  $\langle 2 \text{ exists} \rangle$ ), he argues that "Necessary truths are ontologically indifferent: they have no dependence on ontology" (58). We already saw that  $\langle 2 \text{ exists} \rangle$ , even if trivially made true by everything, also requires targeted ontological accounting. His best case to get rid of aboutness and meaning from truthmaking are necessary truths such as  $\langle \text{If snow is white, then snow is white} \rangle$ , about which he suggests "that it is perfectly plausible that they lack relevant truthmakers[, that is] offering a "trivial" truthmaker for them (or none at all) is theoretically sufficient, considering the aims of ontology-first truthmaker theory" (58). However, question: on what basis would we be able to say that some trivial truthmaker or no truthmaker is sufficient? The answer: on the basis of what it is about! What we discover when we discover that this truth requires only trivial truthmakers or none at all, is plausibly that such truths *are about* trivial truthmakers, perhaps some trivial, structural features which the world has by having anything at all. He is explicit that accepting there to be non-trivial truthmakers for necessary truths requires "the explanation-first perspective" (59), which he takes to be inappropriate for truthmaking. However, why think that an aboutness constraint on truthmaking requires there to be non-trivial truthmakers here?

Thus, I am puzzled as to why, given how he argues, Asay does not accept truthmaking's connection to aboutness. Schipper (2018) doesn't think that truthmaking *is* aboutness. They are merely complementary. He writes: "Truths are made true by the parts (or aspects) of reality *which they are about*" (2018: 3694). But if they are about some entity not existing (e.g. 'Pegasus doesn't exist'), then nothing needs to exist for them to be true. Asay's trivialism about mathematics and fictional entities is compatible with Schipper's (2016, 2018, 2020, 2021) aboutness-focused picture. He could say that the number 2 is the direct truthmaker and what the truthbearer is directly about, but he doesn't rule out that everything else is necessary as the truthmaking's background conditions, what  $\langle 2 \text{ exists} \rangle$  is *indirectly about* and the truth's indirect truth-necessitators.

An aboutness-picture seems to conflict with Asay's. But it should be emphasised: no one thinks that truthmaking *is* aboutness or involves aboutness. For one, the directions of the relations differ: aboutness goes from truthbearer to potential truthmakers. Truthmaking goes from truthmakers to (true) truthbearers. That is, they go in opposite directions. So, the claim is not that aboutness is part of truthmaking but that they generally go hand-in-hand. Aboutness-based truthmaking is also thoroughly an exercise in metaphysics. These are real-world relations. When the relations hold, they hold between things in the world—this is not merely an explanation; it is metaphysical accounting. This is generally compatible with Asay's picture, despite his explicit dissociations (§3.3).

One worrying difference which he does not speak to at all is that his picture of necessitation-as-sufficient seems to yield a causal picture of truthmaking. Causation on almost all accounts is a necessitation relation (cf. Anscombe 1971). On almost all accounts, truthmaking isn't causation (even Asay agrees: "truthmaking and causality are indeed different kinds of grounding" [254]). But, if necessitation is necessary and sufficient for truthmaking, then Asay must say that all causes are truthmakers. But, clearly, if an ontologist came along and said that their ontology consists only of the initial state of the universe and necessitating, deterministic laws, we wouldn't be satisfied with their ontological accounting. We also want dinosaurs and humans in our ontology: our palaeontologists have clearly discovered truths about dinosaurs. As Asay clearly does throughout his book, insisting on the world containing the entities our truths are about seems then to be a minimal further requirement on truthmaking as ontological accounting. If Asay's response is that a truth's aboutness *sometimes* doesn't reveal what the truthmakers are that need to be included to balance the ontological books, I would request him to tell us which truths these are. Throughout the book, he explicitly says that both the contingent and the trivial truths seem to require *specific* truthmakers, in addition to their other necessitators. As with other kinds of accounting, ontological accounting needs to keep the receipts and invoices, indicating specifically which things need to be accounted for in one's ontology. The ontological IRS will want to see those, too.

#### Acknowledgements:

I thank first and foremost Paul Snowdon for all his advice, encouragement, and comments on this paper. I am grateful to Robert Schipper for reading two drafts of the paper, Tim Crane for his support, inspiration, and encouragement, and Brent Madison, Christian Skirke, and, especially, George Hull for their helpful advice. I also thank Jamin Asay for writing *A Theory of Truthmaking*. Peking University's Start-up Fund (Project number: 7100603418) was a valuable source of funding.

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