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Author(s): Jonathan Tallant

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Ontological cheats might just prosper

JONATHAN TALLANT

1. *Introduction*

A popular view in metaphysics is that which propositions are true depends upon how the world is (see, for instance, Bigelow 1988; Lewis 1992; Sider 2001). In more evocative (as well as ontologically committing) language, truth requires ground. This thought then gets used to do some serious work. As Sider (2001: 40) has it, '[t]he point of... the principle that truth supervenes on being is to rule out dubious ontologies'. Here, I argue that (at least some) 'dubious' ontologies are theoretically virtuous.

2. *The supervenience thesis*

ST: Necessarily, if $\langle p \rangle$ is true, it would be impossible for $\langle p \rangle$ to be false unless at least one entity which does not exist were to exist, and at least one entity which exists were not to exist. (Bigelow 1988: 126)

On the face of it the supervenience thesis (ST) seems both reasonable and innocuous. Once accepted, though, ST can be used as a weapon against particular positions. Consider, for instance, presentism: the view that only the present exists. The presentist is required by ST to tell us how truths about the past are grounded. Since the presentist denies the existence of the past, they look to lack the ontological ground required for past-tensed propositions to be true. For instance, $\langle \text{Caesar crossed the Rubicon} \rangle$ cannot be true as Caesar does not exist.¹ Since Caesar *did* cross the Rubicon, presentism is a theory in trouble.

One option for the presentist would be to modify ST, thus:

a proposition can be true only if there is or was something in virtue of which it is true. (cf. Westphal 2006: 4)²

The trouble with this 'solution' is that it does not look to really satisfy the intuition that truth has grounds. As Heathwood has it:

it is cheating... It doesn't capture what we have in mind when we demand that for every truth there must be something in reality

1 Though there are, of course, a plethora of ontological resources that presentists have posited to do the grounding work. See Crisp 2007, Bourne 2006, Bigelow 1996, Keller 2004 and Kierland and Monton 2007 for a survey of some of the options. The point of the current proposal is that we can do away with such extraneous ontology.

2 I do not discuss the case of future-tensed propositions, though clearly everything I say could be modified to include them.

(something in the domain of our most unrestricted quantifiers) that makes it true. (Heathwood 2007: 141)³

Here, we have the ‘cheating’ objection. A ‘cheat’ is someone who seeks to preserve truths without properly respecting this grounding intuition (see also Sider 2004: 674).

3. *How to cheat*⁴

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. In this article, I will consider NGC in the modal and temporal cases, and assume presentism and actualism, respectively.

In more detail, the no-ground cheat might tell the following stories:

NGC in the modal case: For every true proposition, there exists, or could have existed, a fact that makes it true.

I explain the truth of ‘there could have been a talking donkey’ as follows. I say that my truthmaking principle doesn’t require there really to be talking donkeys in the domain of my most unrestricted quantifiers to explain why it is true that there could have been a talking donkey. The principle requires only that there could have existed the fact of there being a talking donkey. And of course this fact could have existed, for there could have been a talking donkey. (Heathwood 2007: 141)⁵

NGC in the temporal case: For every true proposition, there presently exists, did exist, a fact that makes it true.

I explain the truth of ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ as follows. I say that my truthmaking principle doesn’t require there really to be Caesar, crossing the Rubicon, in the domain of my most unrestricted quantifiers to explain why it is true that Caesar crossed the Rubicon. The principle requires only that there *has* existed the fact of Caesar’s crossing. And of course this fact has existed, as Caesar *has* crossed the Rubicon.⁶

- 3 You might take this as an argument in favour of the truth-maker thesis *over* ST, since truth-maker, unlike ST, will posit an entity to ground talk about what there is not. However, the unpalatable options available leave many unpersuaded as to the plausibility of the truth-maker thesis. See, for instance, Dodd 2007. For a reason to deny both, see §6 onwards.
- 4 I would not discuss, here, the implementation of ‘suspicious properties’ as a way of cheating since no-ground cheating is preferable to suspicious property cheating on the grounds of ontological parsimony. See Sider 2001: 41 for discussion.
- 5 Heathwood presents this view as one to be rejected. As he correctly notes, to take this line is to flout the thought that all truths need ontological ground. Since that is exactly what I am doing, I do not take that to be much of a criticism.
- 6 Again, I lean heavily on Heathwood’s (2007: 141) formulation.

4. *Where are we?*

All things being equal, though, the proponent of ontological ground clearly has the stronger position at this stage of the dialectic. What we currently lack is any *reason* to think NGC a virtuous position, and it clearly contravenes ST. We allowed, at the outset, that ST seems pretty plausible and intuitive.

Permit me to remedy that situation. The argument I will put forward, here, has two parts. The first part (in §5) defends the thought that the same way in which the proponent of ST argues against the need for existent entities to make true talk about what is not, we can argue against the *need* for existent entities to ground talk about the past and what's possible. The second part of the argument (§§6–7) suggests that theoretical virtues, properly considered, speak in favour of taking the NGC route. In the final sections I consider some objections.

5. *Lacks and ground*

Here is one way that defenders of ST might deal with the problem of negative existentials (e.g. <there are no arctic penguins>):

How about negative existential truths? It seems, offhand, that they are true not because things of some kind *do* exist, but rather because counter-examples *don't* exist. They are true for lack of falsmakers. Why defy this first impression?

(Don't say: 'Aha! It's a *lack* that makes it true.' The noun is a hap-
penstance of idiom, and to say that a negative existential is true for a
lack of falsmakers is the same as to say that it's true because there
aren't any falsmakers. The demand for truth-makers might lead one
into ontological seriousness about lacks, but not vice versa). (Lewis
1992: 216)

The key step in the argument, for our purposes, is the last one: that the demand for truth-makers might lead one into ontological seriousness about lacks, but consideration of lacks *will not* lead into ontological seriousness.

Borrowing from the above, consider the following.

NGC temporal: How about past tensed existential truths? It seems, offhand, that they are not true because things of some kind exist, but rather because ontological ground *has* existed. They are true because of what *has* been the case. Why defy this first impression?⁷

Crucially, we might argue, the demand for ground leads one into ontological seriousness about 'the past', but consideration of 'the past' will not lead you into ontological seriousness about *the past*. Is that right? Why should you

7 Similar remarks could be made in the modal case.

believe that consideration of ‘the past’ will not lead one into ontological seriousness?

‘The past’ is, in our pre-theoretical musings, that which has gone; that which has been destroyed and is no more; that which no longer exists – and so on. The natural, intuitive, view is that the past is not a part of what exists. Indeed, presentism, the view that *only* the present exists, is taken to be our intuitive view of time (e.g. Bigelow 1996; Sider 2001: 11). Thus, just as the natural intuition is that ‘lacks’ are not to be reified as existents, so our intuition is that ‘the past’ ought not to be reified, either. So, the same argument by which the proponent of ST denies the need for grounds for negative existentials can be employed in favour of the thought that we do not need grounds in the case of talk about the past.⁸

Of course, this establishes only so much. All that we have here is the claim that consideration of the concept ‘past’, much like consideration of the concept ‘lack’, does not lead us to think that the *past* ought to be reified. Rather, it is only if we consider truth as requiring ground, that we are tempted to reify the *past*. That is a step in the right direction: consideration of the nature of both ‘the past’ and ‘lacks’ seems to speak against their being reified. So, unless you are already committed to demanding ontological grounds, do not reify either lacks, or the past.⁹

6. A benefit of NGC

The most obvious point in favour of NGC is ontological parsimony. Because we ‘cheat’ by not providing ontological ground for talk about absences, negative existentials, times other than the present, and possibilities, we can dispense with a multitude of ontological commitments. Since we regard our best theories as those that are most ontologically parsimonious, we ought to prefer NGC to ontologies that provide grounds.

The natural reply from the seeker of ontological grounds is that although ontological parsimony is a virtue, NGC is not parsimonious. It is cheating! The NGC is trying to claim the virtue of parsimony without doing the necessary work.

But that is *not* true – though the accusation throws into sharp relief the nature of the NGC proposal. What *is* true is that the NGC is not doing the work that the proponent of ontological ground *claims* is necessary. However, the point of NGC is to deny that such work *is* necessary in our ontological

8 I assume, also, that actualism is our intuitive view of modality – only this world exists – and so the no-ground cheat has an argument against the need for ground in the modal case, too.

9 The following argument I put against ST turns on the desire for ontological parsimony. Since requiring truth-makers for all truths is even less parsimonious than ST, so any argument from parsimony against ST will also bite against the demand for truth-makers for all truths.

inquiry. Rather, what the proponent of NGC must argue is that it is better to have complexity in our conceptual framework than it is to have complexity in the world.

Thus, the no-ground cheat thinks it is better to say that:

NGC-ST: a proposition is true if and only if, either: (a) there exists an entity that makes that proposition true; or, (b) there does not exist an entity and that makes the proposition true; or, (c) there could have existed an entity that would make the proposition true; or, (d) there has existed an entity that makes the proposition true . . .

rather than endorse a theory that commits to ontological grounds in each of the relevant domains of discourse.¹⁰

Clearly, NGC-ST is a more theoretically complex view than ST. But, claims the proponent of NGC, all things considered, these brute and ungrounded truths look preferable to ontological complexity.

7. *Balancing the books*

Is that right, though? Granted, we might suppose there is a ‘weights and balance’ consideration here. We might suppose that the no-ground cheat is right about ontological simplicity, if only to the extent that we have an obligation to draw up the best theories we can and then see which of them is preferable. And, certainly, ontological parsimony and theoretical simplicity are both virtues that need to be considered. But that is not what we have done here. Here, we have suggested that the no-ground cheat has a way of declaring certain truths brute; noted that this is more ontologically parsimonious; and then declared them victor. Where are the weights and balances?

The no-ground cheat’s response is simple. It is certainly true that the ST offers us an extremely elegant theory. (It looks all the more elegant in comparison with what NGC offers: for each domain in which we cheat we require an addition to the supervenience thesis. This culminated in NGC-ST.)

But NGC has a striking virtue: the *world* is a very simple place. The proponent of NGC need offer no ‘other times’ (or suspicious properties) or possible worlds, sets of propositions or any of the other putative truth-makers for modal or temporal discourse. Following Melia, then:

I prefer the hypothesis that makes *the world* a simpler place. For sure, all else being equal, I prefer the theory with the simpler ontology . . . the

¹⁰ Like others (e.g. Nolan (1997: 260)), I remain unpersuaded that there are truths about fiction, such that <Sherlock Holmes solved the mystery of the creeping man> is *true*. Of course, such propositions are true *according to fiction*, but that is, I assume, consistent with said propositions being false. In any case, should this prove unsatisfactory, it should be possible to modify NGC-ST so that truths can terminate in how the world is *according to the fiction* and where we treat this as another way in which truth can terminate that *does not* require ground. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue.

simplicity I value attaches to the kind of world postulated by the theory – not to the *formulation* of the theory itself. (Melia 2000: 473)¹¹

Since the no-ground cheat will *always* have a simpler world than someone who does not cheat, so their view posits a simpler world and is preferable. We exchange ontological complexity for complexity in our account of when propositions are true.

To put the point another way: Ockamistic considerations require us to not multiply entities beyond *necessity*. In response to the ST, I have suggested, we *could* make our statement of when propositions are true, more complex, rather than positing additional ontology.¹² Thus, there is no *necessity* to introduce further entities.

By way of reply, perhaps this is not quite fair. After all, the proponent of NGC-ST *has not* shown that their ontology is simplest. Instead, they have just refused to offer us any ontology. To that extent, then, they are not theorizing and we cannot assess whether or not their view *really is* simpler than that of their opponent.

To argue such *might*, I think, be to misinterpret NGC-ST. There are two ways we could interpret NGC-ST. We could consider it a refusal to stipulate the ground of particular truths. We could hear NGC-ST as, ‘there is some ground for the truth of <p>; I’m just not telling you what it is’. If that was the intention of the proponent of NCG-ST, then the argument would stick. Cheating would be bad metaphysics.

But the other way of interpreting NGC-ST is as a claim that there are particular truths that do not require grounds. That is a strong claim about the nature of (some) truths. That *is* theorizing, it is just not ‘ontologizing’ – where the latter requires that true propositions have ground.

As to the *rest* of the cheat’s ontology: I lack the space here to offer a fully fledged cheats charter for metaphysical commitment. Cheating, for our purposes, should simply be treated as a way to get ahead of a direct rival. Suppose, by way of illustration, that we have two nominalists, who deny the existence of abstracta, whose only disagreement concerns the existence of possible worlds and times other than the present (reductively analysed, or otherwise).¹³ The nominalist who cheats, rather than posits worlds and times, will have the preferable ontology.¹⁴

11 See also Melia 1995.

12 Of course, there may be other reasons to add to the world. In particular, see below for considerations of explanatory adequacy.

13 Clearly, though, a thorough-going naturalistic metaphysic committed to underpinning our best physics seems an optimal target: see, e.g. Ladyman and Ross 2007 for an *attempt* to hit this target.

14 Thanks to an anonymous referee for comments on this.

8. *Bad ontologies?*

If we have done away with ST, how can we defend ourselves from views that we take to be *obviously* false? Consider, for instance, the spatial analogue of presentism: Hereism, the view that only the ‘here’ exists. Hereism is, I assume, *obviously* false.¹⁵ One way we could have resisted Hereism is by appeal to ST: after all, the Hereist will find it hard to ground true propositions about places other than the ‘here’. If NGC is permitted, though, then we cannot bring that case against them. The Hereist can just cheat. In fact, on the assumption that ontological simplicity is preferable, Hereism would look a better view than its commonsense counterpart (perhaps we could call that ‘Here-and-there-and-everywhere-ism’).

There are still reasons to resist the thought that only the ‘here’ exists, though. First, the thought that only the ‘here’ exists seems highly unintuitive. If we allow that intuition preservation is a theoretical virtue (perhaps to only a small degree), then we would have some reason to think that spaces other than the ‘here’ exist. Such an argument does not require a commitment (implicit or otherwise) to ST.

Second, there are explanatory burdens in play. In the Hereist case, there is a requirement to say, precisely, in what the ‘here’ consists. Perhaps that is just a single spatial point. If that is right, then there is an explanatory burden on the Hereist to say how the feeling or sensation of being spatially extended comes about if there exists only a single point in space. In the absence of such an account, the theory remains inadequate as an explanation of the data – in this case, our experiences.¹⁶

The other option for the Hereist would be to allow that the ‘here’ is extended in some way. In that case they owe us a more precise account of quite what that ‘here’ consists in: where, for instance, is the boundary of the ‘here’? Without an account of the boundary of the ‘here’ they have no theory that can be properly evaluated. And, of course, on both accounts of the ‘here’ (point-here and extended-here), we would need some explanation of why it seems to us that objects exist at places *other* than the ‘here’. After all, it appears to us that we can see places other than those that are ‘here’. Absent answers to such questions, Hereism is not yet a viable position.

Of course, if these challenges could be met, then we *might* have an argument in favour of the non-existence of places other than the ‘here’. Indeed, if all that could be achieved, then it seems that considerations of explanatory adequacy and ontological parsimony *would* militate in favour of Hereism (the argument from intuition notwithstanding). But *unless* such a theory is

15 Though, see Hinchliff 1996.

16 Indeed, McKinnon (2003) has argued that presentism, the temporal analogue of Hereism, cannot explain our experiences of temporal passage and so is to be rejected. Notably, the presentist is also required to explain how it is we have the sensation of being *extended* in the specious present.

forthcoming, we have good reasons not to adopt Hereism, despite the benefits of NGC in other domains. The lesson, then, is that there are ways of weighing theories other than by consideration of how they propose truths are grounded.

9. *Explanatory power*

The final thought to be considered, here, is that NGC offers us insufficient explanatory power: that, somehow, providing grounds of the sort specified by ST gives us a better explanation of the world than NGC.

It is, though, hard to see how to prosecute that line. The proponent of NGC must, like everyone, offer brute truths. That is, truths for which there is no *further* explanation.¹⁷ The proponent of ST must posit these, too. However, for the proponent of ST, most of these terminate in how the world is.¹⁸ There is no further explanation for the truth of propositions *other* than how the world is. The proponent of NGC, on the other hand, has *some* of these terminate in the world, but adds further categories of brute truth (modal, temporal, etc.) that do not terminate in how the world is. Instead, explanation of these truths terminates in how the world *could* be, how the world *was*, etc.

But all that the NGC does, then, that the proponent of ST does not, is introduce further conditions in which truths need no further explanation (the past-tense case, the modal case, etc.). To argue that this is then reason to give up on NGC in favour of ST would, thus, require us to prefer theoretical simplicity over ontological simplicity: to prefer fewer ways of the explanation of a truth terminating, over more ontology. That, given Ockamistic considerations, is to have things the wrong way around. Starkly: we have a choice in how we explain the truth of propositions. We can posit more ontology to do the work, or we can make the concept of truth more complicated by admitting of different ways in which explanation can terminate. It seems only right to leave the world as simple as can be.

10. *Conclusion*

On the assumption that ontological simplicity is preferable – and it surely must be where explanatory adequacy is also preserved – NGC is not only a live option, but a good one to boot. To borrow from Russell (1919: 71):

17 See Cameron 2008 for further discussion.

18 Those exempt are negative existentials.

NGC has all the benefits of theft over honest toil but perhaps theft is not such a bad thing.¹⁹

*University of Nottingham
Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK
jonathan.tallant@nottingham.ac.uk*

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19 Thanks to Daniel Nolan, Ross Cameron and Andrew Fisher for discussion.