Fitch's paradox and truthmaking: Why Jago's argument remains ineffective

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1. Introduction

Recently, there have been several attempts to use the kind of reasoning found in Fitch's knowability paradox to argue for rather sweeping metaphysical claims: Jago (2020) uses such reasoning to argue that every truth has a truth-maker, and Roberto Loss (2021) does so to argue that every fact is grounded. This strategy has been criticized by Robert Trueman (2021), who points out that the same kind of reasoning could be used to establish entirely opposite conclusions. In response, Jago (2021) has offered a revised argument that is meant to avoid Trueman's objection. I will argue that this revised argument is in fact undermined by an objection quite similar to Trueman's.

2. The story so far

Fitch's knowability paradox shows that 'every truth is knowable' entails 'every truth is (at some point) known' (Fitch 1963, cf. Salerno 2009). And since the argument relies only on a few general properties of knowledge – that knowledge is factive and distributes over conjunction – analogous reasoning is available in various other contexts as well. Thus, for instance, Jago points out that 'every truth possibly has a truthmaker' entails 'every truth has a truth-maker' via Fitch-like reasoning (Jago 2020: 43).

  Jago goes further, however, and argues that the claim that every truth possibly has a truthmaker can be supported by an inductive argument (provided that the relevant modality is mere logical possibility/consistency):

> consider some representative truths: Obama is male; wombats are marsu-pials; 1 + 1 = 2; there is no greatest prime number, scarlet things are red. (Now add many more of your own.) For each, it's logically possible that a truthmaker for it exists. The examples cover specific and general, concrete and abstract, contingent and necessary, analytic and synthetic cases. . . . So we have a good inductive base for claims about truth. Reasoning induct-ively, we defeasibly infer the general claim. (Jago 2020: 42)

  By combining Fitch-like reasoning and this inductive justification for the key premiss, then, Jago arrives at an argument for truthmaker maximalism. Likewise, Loss (2021) uses a combination of Fitch-like reasoning and inductive justification to argue that every fact is grounded, and analogous arguments will be available whenever we have a notion that is factive and distributes over conjunction, and it

is logically consistent to suppose that the notion applies to a range of truths like those in Jago's inductive base (assuming, of course, that we are not also aware of any counterexamples). Since these requirements are rather minimal, quite a lot hinges on whether this style of reasoning is generally acceptable.

Trueman (2021) argues that these arguments cannot be dialectically effective since we can use analogous reasoning to establish contrary conclusions. From the inductively supported premise that every truth might possibly be a truthmakerless truth, we can, for instance, use Fitch-like reasoning to show that *no* truth has a truthmaker.[1] In the latest instalment in this debate, Jago (2021) concedes that his initial argument falls victim to Trueman's objection, but goes on to provide a revised argument that he claims is immune to this 'tit for tat strategy'.

Rather than demonstrating that every truth has a truthmaker, this argument aims to show that, for every truth, there exists an entity that necessitates it (where to say that an entity *x* necessitates a truth A is to say that, necessarily, if *x* exists, then A is true.) While this is not a direct argument for truthmaker maximalism, it does, Jago claims, remove the main source of resistance to maximalism, since many reject this view precisely because they are suspicious of the idea that there are entities that necessitate the truth of negative existential claims such as 'there are no unicorns' (Jago 2021: 438).

Since necessitation is factive and distributes over conjunction, the Fitch-like reasoning is still available. Moreover, the central premise – that every truth is possibly necessitated by something – can be inductively supported in exactly the same way as before. The key point, however, is that the premise that would be needed to similarly argue, à la Trueman, that no truth is necessitated by anything has straightforward counterexamples. It is, for instance, not logically possible for 'The Eiffel Tower exists' to be true without there being something that necessitates it (namely the Eiffel Tower).

In the case of necessitation, then, Trueman's exact strategy is not available. As I will now show, however, it is still possible to use a combination of Fitch-like reasoning and the kind of inductive justification that Jago relies on to establish the negation of Jago's conclusion – that is, that there are truths that are not necessitated by anything.

3. A Fitch-like argument for unnecessitated truths

Let '*Ent* A' abbreviate 'A is entailed by a truth that is not necessitated by anything'. Now, since only truths are entailed by truths, we have:

(F) $Ent\,A \rightarrow A$

Note, moreover, that since A & B entails both A and B, and entailment is transitive, any truth that entails A & B also entails each conjunct. Hence, if A & B is

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1   This is a slight oversimplification. Since *lacking a truthmaker* does not necessarily distribute over conjunction, Trueman in fact relies on a variation of the Fitchean reasoning that was initially employed by Loss (2021: §2).

entailed by some truth that is not necessitated by anything, this unnecessitated truth will also entail both A and B individually. In other words, we also have:

(D) $Ent\,(A \& B) \rightarrow (Ent\,A \& Ent\,B)$

Since, then, Ent is both factive and distributes over conjunction, we can use Fitch-like reasoning to show that

(P) $A \rightarrow \Diamond Ent\,A$

entails

(C) $A \rightarrow Ent\,A$

(C), however, entails that there are truths that are not necessitated by anything. So, if we can provide a Jago-style inductive justification for (P), then we will have an argument for the negation of Jago's conclusion that is entirely analogous to his own.

To provide such an inductive justification, we can just piggyback on the one Jago provides: for any truth, p, in Jago's inductive base, consider the claim $p \& u$, where u is the claim 'there are no unicorns'. It is surely logically possible that u is a truth that is not necessitated by anything. And since nothing necessitates $p \& u$ if nothing necessitates u, it follows that $p \& u$ is itself possibly a truth that is not necessitated by anything, provided that p is consistent with the hypothesis that u is an unnecessitated truth – which clearly holds for all the truths in Jago's inductive base.[2]

So, for any true claim, p, in Jago's inductive base, we have a true claim, $p \& u$, which entails p, and is possibly not necessitated by anything.[3] In other words: (P) is true of all instances in Jago's inductive base.

Might there still be counterexamples to (P)? Well, if every truth *is* necessitated by something, then we certainly have a counterexample, since it is contradictory to suppose that 'every truth is necessitated by something' is entailed by a truth that is not necessitated by anything. However, if Jago claims that this is a legitimate counterexample to (P), then his opponent is equally justified in claiming that, for example, '"there are no unicorns" is a truth that is not necessitated by anything' is a counterexample to *his* central premiss. Indeed, Jago considers precisely this kind of response and insists that it begs the question to treat such claims as counterexamples in this context (Jago 2020: 43).

(P), then, can be inductively supported in exactly the same way that Jago supports the claim that every truth is possibly necessitated by something. And

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2 Formalized (using '$Nec\,A$' to abbreviate 'there is an entity that necessitates A's truth'), the point is that $\Diamond(p \& u \& \sim Nec\,u)$ and $\Box(\sim Nec\,u \rightarrow \sim Nec(p \& u))$ jointly entail $\Diamond((p \& u) \& \sim Nec(p \& u))$.

3 Actually, $p \& u$ need not be true for the purposes of this argument; it suffices that it is *possibly* true.

since (P) entails, via Fitch-like reasoning, the existence of truths that are not necessitated by anything, we see that the kind of reasoning that Jago employs can equally be used to establish the negation of the conclusion he argues for.

The lesson, however, is not just that we can 'balance the scales' by arguing for the opposite conclusion. Rather, the fact that we can use this kind of reasoning to argue from essentially the same premises (the relevant inductive base) to contradictory conclusions, should make us sceptical of this argumentative strategy *in general*. I will end, therefore, by briefly suggesting a possible diagnosis for why these arguments are generally problematic.

The general problem, I would suggest, is that the Fitch-like reasoning undermines the inductive justification for the crucial premiss: once we appreciate the Fitch-like reasoning, we see that whatever reason we had for doubting, for example, that every truth is necessitated by something, is equally a reason to doubt that every truth is *possibly* necessitated by something. If, for instance, you think that 'there are no unicorns' might be a truth that is not necessitated by anything, then you have equal reason to suspect that 'there are no unicorns is an unnecessitated truth' might be a truth that could not *possibly* be necessitated by anything.

If you are not already convinced of the conclusion, therefore, the Fitch-like reasoning provides you with a salient group of potential counterexamples to the crucial premiss. And once you realize this, you should not accept an inductive justification whose inductive base consists exclusively of instances that bear no relation at all to this salient group of problematic cases – regardless of how varied it is in other respects. To be clear, the point is not that you are entitled to insist that these definitely *are* counterexamples (that would arguably be question-begging), but that you should not accept the inductive argument in the absence of some reason to think that they are not.[4]

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Abstract

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