

The Best Thing about the Deflationary Theory of Truth

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Abstract

I argue that deflationary theories of truth reveal an important lesson for the broader theory of truth: although the notion of truthmaking has played an essential role in many traditional theories of truth, it can be separated from and survive the rejection of substantive theories of truth. I argue that many of the traditional substantive theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic) are unified in defining truth in terms of the ontological grounds (or truthmakers) that are needed to account for truth. Deflationists reject the idea that a theory of truth needs such metaphysical implications, but in so doing they need not rule out the possibility of developing an independently motivated theory of truthmaking. I argue that deflationists can and should embrace truthmaker theory, once it is shorn from its connection to the traditional project of defining truth.

The best thing about the deflationary theory of truth is that it enables us to draw a clean separation between philosophical issues regarding *truth* and philosophical issues regarding *truthmaking*. These two sorts of inquiry are easily and frequently conflated. As I'll argue, many of the longstanding traditional theories of truth can be viewed as attempts to define the nature of truth in terms of a (sometimes implicit) theory of truthmaking. It might seem natural, then, to interpret deflationary theories of truth as involving a wholesale rejection of truthmaker theory. In fact, many deflationists likely believe that the best thing about the deflationary theory of truth is that it liberates its adherents from metaphysics. With deflationism about truth in hand, they argue, substantive inquiry into metaphysics is a waste of time. However, the correct way of understanding the deflationary theory of truth is that it merely *separates* truth and truthmaking: it in no way nullifies the latter, nor does it provide any justification for doing so. What I aim to demonstrate is that deflationism about truth separates truthmaking from truth, and in so doing provides a better

perspective on both philosophical enterprises. My intent is not to argue in favor of or against deflationism—that I do elsewhere.¹ Instead, my goal is to show how the very presence of deflationism on the menu of theories of truth provides a better account of the relationship between truth and ontology.

1. Truth and Truthmaking

It is no simple matter delineating what is involved in giving a “theory of truth”. Here, then, is how I shall proceed. I take for granted that there are many canonical theories of truth: correspondence theories (e.g., Rasmussen 2014), coherence theories (e.g., Alcott 1996), and pragmatic theories (e.g., James 1907) are the best known. These views are frequently referred to as being *substantive* accounts of truth. There are also well known *deflationary* theories: for example, disquotationalism (e.g., Field 1994), prosententialism (e.g., Grover 1992), and minimalism (e.g., Horwich 1998). Crucial to this paper is the distinction between substantive and deflationary theories, though it is not my intent to offer a definition or analysis of that distinction. Though it’s difficult to say just what it is that makes a theory substantive or deflationary, there is, for the most part, overall consensus regarding which theories belong to which category.² My goal is to defend my titular thesis by offering some observations about the two families of theories that focus on their relationship to metaphysics and, more specifically, truthmaking.

Nevertheless, it will be useful to highlight some of the major differences between substantive and deflationary theories. One important difference is that views of the former kind can provide a uniform account or explanation of truth. If p is true and q is true, then there is a common explanation behind those two separate facts (cf. Dodd 2000: 133-134). For example, p and q are both true in virtue of corresponding with the facts, or by cohering in some ideal or useful system of belief. Deflationists, meanwhile, maintain that no such unified account is forthcoming. The explanation of p ’s truth has to do with whatever p expresses; the explanation of q ’s truth has to do with whatever q says. The truth or falsity of ‘Pandas prefer pantaloons’ is accounted for by

¹ See Asay 2013.

² Complicating matters further is the distinction between the concept of truth, property of truth, and predicates like ‘is true’. One could be a deflationist or substantivist about some of these aspects of truth, but not others. I’m partial to the account offered by Bar-On and Simmons (2007) regarding *conceptual* and *linguistic* deflationism and substantivism, and the account offered by Edwards (2013, 2018) and myself (2014) regarding *metaphysical* deflationism and substantivism. But see Wyatt 2016 for criticism of the latter.

pandas' sartorial predilections. The truth or falsity of 'Wallabies want waffles' is accounted for by the gustatory desires of wallabies. For deflationists, there is no common explanation of truth.

Consider also the different shape that substantive and deflationary theories may take. Rasmussen (2014) defends the fundamental idea of correspondence theories—that something is true just in case it corresponds to reality—by offering detailed accounts of what propositions are, what the relation of correspondence is, and the nature of the facts to which those propositions correspond. As Rasmussen puts it, his task is to “investigate the correspondence theory’s metaphysical building blocks,” which in turn “constitute a metaphysical framework for understanding truth and its relation to reality” (2014: 4-5). Horwich’s minimalist theory looks starkly different, and is seemingly designed to avoid offering any such framework. Instead, the theory consists entirely of the non-paradoxical instances of the schema ‘The proposition that p is true if and only if p ’, together with the claim that only propositions are true (1998: 43). A theory of truth, for Horwich, requires no metaphysical foundations. The notion of truth, and everything we do with it, is captured entirely by attending to the truth schema.³

What, then, is a theory of truthmaking? It is often introduced by way of the idea that what is true depends upon what the world is like, but not vice versa. Truths don’t float free of reality. In committing to a body of truths, then, one is obliged to consider the ontological implications of those truths. Some cases of truthmaking are close to trivial: pandas are truthmakers for ‘There are pandas’. Other cases are more difficult. What is the truthmaker for ‘Pandas eat bamboo’? Presumably pandas and bamboo are ontologically relevant here, but are they enough? After all, it’s possible that pandas and bamboo could both exist, though the former subsisted on a diet that completely excluded the latter. (Truthmaking is typically thought to require necessitation, such that T is a truthmaker for p only if it’s metaphysically necessary that if T exists, p is true.) Therefore, some philosophers (but, importantly, not all) turn to entities such as states of affairs or tropes that provide a necessary kind of “tie” between different entities, or between entities and their properties.⁴ “Negative” truths are even thornier: what makes it true that pandas aren’t purple? The details of how particular truthmaker theories address these questions need not concern us; all that matters at the moment is that truthmaker theorists are interested in what sorts of ontological posits are in order, given what truths there are. What unites truthmaker theorists is the idea that truth is

³ Though Horwich offers only one of many deflationist options, he will serve as my go-to deflationist in the paper, given how developed and well-known his view is. I don’t believe any of my arguments or conclusions turn on this choice, since deflationists are united in rejecting the kind of metaphysical framework for a theory of truth that Rasmussen offers.

⁴ See, respectively, Armstrong 2004 and Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984. Lewis (2003) goes a different direction.

grounded by reality—what divides them is the nature of that reality, the nature of the grounding, and whether *all* truths are grounded by particular elements of that reality.⁵

Note that my brief account here of how I understand truthmaking does not lean on the notion of explanation, such that the goal of truthmaker theory is to explain why truths are true.⁶ Instead, I conceive of truthmaking as fundamentally an ontological project, one whose main goal is to find the correct equilibrium between one's beliefs and one's ontological commitments. This perspective on truthmaking is most evident in Armstrong's objections to philosophical theories that embrace the truth of various counterfactuals without committing to any of the ontological posits that would seem to be required for them to be true (2004: 1-3), and Bigelow's (1988) spin on truthmaking that centers on the idea that the facts about what is true of the world must supervene on the facts about what exists. Maintaining equilibrium here involves not committing to truths without also committing to the relevant ontology; if truth supervenes (or, what is stronger, depends) on what exists, then one's ontology must provide an adequate supervenience base for what one believes to be true. Keeping clear on truthmaking's ontological focus (as opposed to some vague kind of explanation) will be important later when I turn to competing ideas about whether truthmaking and deflationism harmonize.

2. The Proposal

Here is my proposal. I have just identified two distinct philosophical projects. The first concerns the nature of truth. What is the nature of that property or relation in virtue of which something is true? Traditional substantivists give a single, unified account that ties together and offers a common explanation for all truths. Deflationists reject the question, and argue that a full account of how truth functions in language and thought can be offered by way of the equivalence schema.

The second concerns truthmakers. This project involves giving an ontological accounting that is a proper fit for the body of truths. It's true that if Kennedy had looked through binoculars into the book depository, he would have seen Oswald. Such a claim can't be true unless various things exist: Kennedy, Oswald, the book depository, and more (such as various laws of optics,

⁵ Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984, Lewis 2001b, and Armstrong 2004 are canonical contributions to truthmaker theory. Saenz 2014 and Griffith 2015 are more recent additions to the debate. Mellor 2009 is perhaps closest in spirit to my overall approach to truthmaking.

⁶ This is an increasingly common claim, and it's problematic for truthmaker theory. See Asay 2018 and Tallant 2018.

etc.). Truthmaker theorists use the idea of truthmaking to probe ontological questions, and guide investigation into what exists.

My first claim is that the projects of giving an account of truth and giving an account of truthmakers are distinct and separable philosophical endeavors. One can give an account of what it is for something to *be* true without at the same time giving an account of what *makes* something true, and vice versa. My second claim is that the distinction here is much more readily appreciated when the deflationary approach to truth is in full view. That, I maintain, is why deflationary theories of truth are so important. They enable us to separate the *ontological* issue of truthmaking from the *alethic* issue of analyzing truth. My third claim is that deflationists not only can, but *should* embrace truthmaker theory. As a result, I counter what many deflationists likely presume to be the best thing about their deflationism. Many philosophers have interpreted deflationary theories of truth as a liberation from metaphysics, or as a rejection of the kinds of projects that interest truthmaker theorists.⁷ What I hope to do in the following sections is diagnose where that impulse comes from, and offer reasons for abandoning it.⁸

3. In Defense of the Proposal

The defense of my proposal proceeds as follows. First, I offer the following suggestion for understanding the canonical substantive theories of truth: they define truth by way of identifying truthmakers. Viewing matters this way is independently attractive. In addition, it helps show one sense in which these views are *substantive*: they are, at heart, metaphysical views, in addition to being views about truth. It is this metaphysical substance that deflationists wish to deflate. Deflationists,

⁷ E.g., Price (2011, 2013), Blackburn (2012), and Thomasson (2014, 2015).

⁸ Simpson (2021) also advocates the compatibility of truthmaking and deflationism, though we employ very different accounts of truthmaking. Simpson advocates the explanation-based approach that I recommend jettisoning, and relies on a notion of bearerless truth which I needn't adopt. He also appears to imply that deflationists and non-deflationists have different understandings of what truthmaking is: "For the deflationist, then, truthmaking primarily concerns explanations of (bearerless) truths by other (bearerless) truths, where the latter concern truthmakers. In other words, truthmaking is concerned with explaining why things are so" (2021: 3165). On the view I defend here, deflationists don't need a distinct understanding of what truthmaking is; they just adopt a competing view about its relationship to the theory of truth. Simpson is also open to the possibility of truthmakers that are not objects, and recommends it to certain deflationists (2021: 3170-3172). Given truthmaking's ontological focus, this is not real compatibility between deflationism and truthmaking. The latter's entire theoretical point is in connecting truth with what exists, and a truthmaking theory that has no implications for what exists is not a real theory of truthmaking (see Baron 2015 and Asay and Baron 2020).

then, can be seen as those who offer theories of truth without recourse to truthmakers, and the metaphysical worldview that accompanies them. The success of the deflationary program (if it is successful) has led many to the thought that the project of truthmaking is therefore dispensable and unnecessary. But that, I argue, is the wrong moral to draw from deflationary theories. Deflationary theories motivate the *separation* of truth from truthmaking, not the abandonment of the latter.

The connection between substantive theories of truth and theories of truthmaking is most evident in the correspondence theory of truth. In fact, I imagine many philosophers believe that the correspondence theory is the *only* substantive theory of truth essentially connected to truthmaking. But that would be a mistake, as many canonical substantive theories can be seen as taking a stand on truthmaking.⁹ The correspondence theory articulates the nature of truth in terms of a relation to what exists. The relation is labeled ‘correspondence’ and the corresponding objects appealed to are often (but not always) ‘facts’. Whatever the details, for a correspondence theorist, for p to be true is for there to be some object to which p stands in the correspondence relation. To understand and appreciate the correspondence theorist’s view of *truth*, we need to understand their view of what the corresponding objects are. Here, I submit, is where truthmakers can be found. A truthmaker provides an “ontological ground” for a truth, something in the world for the truth to depend on. For the correspondence theorist, the corresponding objects play that role. *What it is* to be true, according to the correspondence theorist, is to stand in a form of correspondence to truthmaking entities.¹⁰

I believe that a similar perspective applies (though less obviously so) to the other canonical substantive theories of truth. According to the classical coherence theory, what it is for something to be true is for it to cohere with other truth-bearers.¹¹ What it is for p to be true is for it to stand in the coherence relation to some suitably specified set of truth-bearers. Various coherence theorists offer competing articulations of this basic formula. But a common thought unites them: the ontological grounds for true truth-bearers are *all the other true truth-bearers*. The idea behind coherentist theories is strikingly different than that behind correspondence theories.

⁹ I hesitate to generalize too quickly to the claim that *all* substantive theories define truth in terms of truthmaking. The issue could be settled only by attending to the specific details of each account that has been given over the years. My hope is to identify an illuminating commonality between many of the canonical theories of truth, one which separates them from deflationary views. Thanks go to Dave Ripley and Sam Baron for helping to shape my view on this point.

¹⁰ I maintain that they play this role, even if correspondence theorists reject the ideology or language of truthmaking, as David (2009) contends they might.

¹¹ See Alcock 1996 for a contemporary defense.

Correspondence theorists see truth as a relation that typically obtains between truth-bearing objects on the one hand and non-truth-bearing objects on the other. This “cross-categorical” understanding of truth does not arise for coherence theorists. For them, truth-bearers are true in virtue of their relationship to other truth-bearers. The “world” need not get involved. (This feature is seen by some to be its chief advantage, and others its primary downfall.) Of course, a coherence theorist might be an idealist of some stripe, in which case the world and our beliefs about the world do not stand in so stark a contrast as they do for correspondence theorists. Regardless of the details, my contention is that the coherence theorist does present a metaphysical picture of truth, which can broadly be glossed as the idea that truth-bearers are made true by other truth-bearers.

Finally, consider classical pragmatic theories. Some pragmatists, roughly speaking, hold that truth is a matter of useful belief (James 1907: 143).¹² Our beliefs are true because they are useful, not the other way around. What we witness here is that the ontological grounds for truth are those features of the world directly relevant to us and our interests. ‘Snow is white’ is true not because of the color of snow, but because of the various advantages to our well-being that result from our believing that snow is white. Like the other substantive theories, we have a *metaphysical* account of what makes our beliefs true, though the relevant metaphysics is found within the believers.

In each of the traditional views, I see a common strategy. Each answers the question ‘What is it for something to *be* true?’ by way of the question ‘What *makes* something true?’. As I would put the point, the canonical substantive views of truth come built-in with partisan theories of truthmaking: they all connect being true with having a certain kind of ontological ground. As a result, they deserve the title of being *substantive* about truth. Each theory is rich in metaphysical implications. There cannot be truth without the relevant ontology, regardless of whether that ontology is composed by mind-independent facts, other true beliefs, or mind-dependent utility facts. What unites these substantive theories of truth is that they define truth itself in terms of their views about the ontological grounds for truths.

I’ve now argued that the substantive theories of truth do *double* theoretical duty: they provide a theory of truthmakers along the way to giving a theory of truth. One might accuse me, however, of double counting: What’s the difference between giving a theory of what it is to be true, and giving a theory of what makes something true? All I’ve demonstrated is that *what it is* to give a theory of truth is to give a theory of what makes things true. The best response to this charge

¹² Of course, more sophisticated pragmatic theories are available (e.g., Misak 1991).

is to look to deflationary theories of truth, which manage to offer tenable theories of truth that remain silent on questions of truthmaking. Deflationary theories demonstrate the possibility of giving a theory of truth that has no implications for truthmaking.

Deflationary theories of truth do not come pre-equipped with the kinds of ontological commitments that accompany the substantive views. Deflationists do not offer some common metaphysical underpinning for truth. This couldn't be clearer in Horwich's minimalism. His theory is exhausted by the non-paradoxical instances of the truth schema, together with the claim that only propositions are true (1998: 43). That's all. There is no discussion of what makes propositions true, and no claim as to what kind of common metaphysical explanation is available to all and only truths. Deflationary theories of truth, then, are best understood as theories of truth that make no recourse to truthmaking. Truth is not to be defined in terms of what makes truths true. The notion of 'making true' *never comes up*; truth is "defined", if at all, in terms of the truth schema and its instances of material biconditionals. The metaphysical questions as to what provides ontological grounds for truths never arise.¹³

With deflationary theories of truth in mind, it becomes apparent that one *can* give a theory of truth without at the same time giving a theory of truthmakers. Because such views are possible, it is not necessary that a theory of what truth is must be constituted by a theory of what makes something true. Deflationary theories of truth therefore reveal that there is a *separation* between the projects of giving a theory of truth and giving a theory of truthmaking. However, there is a stronger thesis nearby that many have found compelling, namely, that deflationary theories of truth reveal a basis for *rejecting* the project of truthmaking. The reasoning behind this view is easy to appreciate, especially given what I've already established. Traditionally, the notion of truthmaking has been used to fund the project of giving a (substantive) theory of truth. Truthmaker theory and the correspondence theory have even frequently been identified with each other.¹⁴ What deflationary theories reveal is that we don't need a substantive theory of truth, so we need not bother with a notion—that of a *truthmaker*—which earns a place in our philosophizing only insofar as it is useful

¹³ It has been suggested to me that a deflationist might make use of the 'making true' idiom by saying that, for example, 'Snow is white' is made true by snow's being white, etc. (e.g., Horwich 1998: 105). Saying as much is perfectly innocuous, if it's intended as a grammatical variant on the instances of the truth schema (though I think that's implausible). But to go further and say (or deny) that 'snow's being white' refers to a particular entity (such as a state of affairs) that stands in the truthmaking relation to the sentence is to leave the remit of deflationism and engage in substantive truthmaker theory.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984: 288-289 and Bigelow 1988: 122.

in defining truth. If we don't need to define truth in the traditional, substantive way, we don't need the notion of a truthmaker at all.

The stronger view is mistaken. Deflationary theories—tenable or not—reveal that truth and truthmaking can in principle be separated, but do not establish a wholesale rejection of truthmaking once it is freed from the task of defining truth. To think otherwise is to suppose that the idea of truthmaking has no purchase outside the context of giving a theory of truth. That thought is what I wish to challenge. Consider first the fact that truthmaking arguments have long been used to challenge various philosophical theories where the question of the nature of truth has no bearing. Famously, David Armstrong and Charlie Martin objected to phenomenalism and behaviorist theories by arguing that they lack any ontological grounds for some of the central truths of their theories (Armstrong 2004: 1-3). For example, suppose a phenomenalist wants to “explain away” the supposed existence of an unobserved rock on the dark side of the moon. The phenomenalist might deny the existence of any such unperceived rock, but maintain nevertheless that it's true that if one were to travel to the dark side of the moon with a flashlight in hand, one would have a rock-like sensory experience. Armstrong and Martin agree that the counterfactual is true, but challenge the phenomenalist's right to uphold it. What makes it true? Those with an ontology of unperceived rocks could account for its truth, but how can the phenomenalist who believes only in actual sense data? To take it as a brute truth about the universe is hardly plausible.

Such arguments continue to be relevant today. Those who subscribe to presentism believe in the existence of only present things. But there are truths about the past, such as that dinosaurs existed. What accounts for the truth of ‘Dinosaurs existed’, since it concerns entities that used to exist but exist no longer? Presentists need a response, and it has nothing directly to do with what theory of truth they uphold. (Put another way: even a presentist who is a deflationist about truth needs to answer this question. Indeed, in spite of the multitudinous responses to this objection, no one has ever suggested just adopting deflationism as a solution.) Or consider a metaethical case. One might give a counterfactual analysis of moral judgments: doing some action is good if and only if an ideal set of observers would advise doing that action. Such a theory might be thought of as an alternative to traditional moral realism, understood as a view that is ontologically committed to *sui generis* ethical facts and properties. But what makes true such counterfactuals about what an ideal set of observers would advise? There is no set of ideal observers, so it's unclear what provides the ontological grounds for facts about what decisions such a body would make. To demonstrate that the ideal observer theory is an alternative to standard moral realism, it needs to be shown that what grounds its counterfactual judgments is an ontology that doesn't include the ontology of the traditional moral realist. After all, one might think that the simplest account of what grounds the

decisions of hypothetical advisers are those *sui generis* ethical facts and properties that the realist posits.

The notion of a truthmaker, then, comfortably finds a home in various ontological projects where the topic of the nature of truth is irrelevant. We can investigate the truthmakers for counterfactuals, truths about the past, and moral judgments without investigating the nature of truth. Furthermore, there is nothing within the deflationary theory of truth that precludes investigation into truthmaking. Take an ordinary truth, such as ‘There are penguins’. All the typical deflationist says about this truth is that ‘There are penguins’ is true if and only if there are penguins. The truthmaker theorist goes further, and suggests that anyone who accepts the truth of ‘There are penguins’ must also ontologically commit to penguins.¹⁵ To say that Peter the Penguin is a truthmaker for ‘There are penguins’ goes beyond anything entailed by any deflationary theory of truth. Deflationary theories of truth only ever match semantically ascended claims (‘*p* is true’) with descended claims (*p*). It never matches truths and *objects*, which is the concern of truthmaker theory. Hence, deflationary theories remain *silent* on issues of truthmaking; they do not issue a rejection of it.

Now, one might suspect that my talk of truthmaking’s commitment to the “matching” of truths and objects sounds an awful lot like the correspondence theory of truth, and it is part of the deflationary theory to reject correspondence theory. But to object to any talk of matching at all in this context is tantamount to rejecting the maximally anodyne claim that at least some truths are about the things in the world. To reject all claims about truthmakers is to deny, for instance, that Peter the Penguin is a truthmaker for ‘There are penguins’, and that Kripke is a truthmaker for ‘Kripke exists’. I see no way of deriving those rejections on the basis of the truth schema, and deflationist ideas about how ‘true’ serves as a generalizing device, or pro-sentence forming operator.

Perhaps, though, it might be thought that deflationists’ idea that “The entire conceptual and theoretical role of truth may be explained” on the basis of the truth schema precludes any further investigation into truthmakers since, as I say, such investigation goes beyond the truth

¹⁵ This might not sound like “going further” until one remembers claims like ‘There are prime numbers’ and ‘There are fictional characters’ and ‘There are things that don’t exist, like unicorns’, where it’s incredibly contentious as to what ontological commitments follow from their truth (if indeed they are true). Since Quine (e.g., 1960), it’s commonly taken for granted that the relationship between truth and ontology is transparent, and revealed by his “criterion for ontological commitment”. But this itself is a partisan stance on the relationship between truth and ontology that needs to be argued for (see Azzouni 2004); I return to this point in the conclusion. And, in line with my present argument, deflationism about truth is logically independent from the claim that Quine’s criterion is adequate.

schema (Horwich 1998: 5). But remember the proposal I'm defending: in giving a theory of truthmakers, one need not be saying anything about truth. The theory of truth and theory of truthmakers are separate enterprises. So one isn't adding to one's theory of truth when one goes on to make claims about truthmakers. It's question begging to cite commitments regarding truthmaker theory as necessarily supplementing one's theory of truth in a way inconsistent with deflationism.

Here is the overall picture. Every theorist of truth, substantivist and deflationist alike, can accept the idea that truths have ontological grounds. Substantivist theorists admit from the outset that truths *always* have ontological grounds, and of a uniform kind, and use those grounds to offer their theories about the nature of truth. Substantive theories accept, in one way or another, that to be true is to be made true; what they disagree about is the nature of what those truthmakers are (and, perhaps, what the nature of the truthmaking relation is). As a result, all substantive theorists are "maximalist" about their truthmaking: all truths must have truthmakers, since truth itself is defined in terms of having truthmakers.

But deflationists, too, can accept that truths have ontological grounds. (And they ought to, lest they subscribe to the indefensible view that truth and ontology are completely independent of one another.) What distinguishes deflationists, however, is that they do not think that claims about truthmaking can be ratcheted up into a full-blown metaphysical theory of truth. Ontological grounds are one thing—the subject of metaphysical theorizing such as truthmaker theory, and its application to issues such as presentism, phenomenalism, and moral realism. Truth is another thing—something which deflationists believe can be fully analyzed in the familiar deflationary way. Deflationists reject much of the philosophical discussion that goes on in the theory of truth, but they find the notion of truth perfectly acceptable, and indispensable for certain expressive purposes. (Having a truth predicate makes it much simpler to express certain infinite conjunctions and disjunctions, for example.) Similarly, the deflationist can find the notion of a truthmaker perfectly innocuous: it's just another tool for talking about what exists, as revealed by attending to the ontological grounds of what is true. But the deflationist calls for caution in that word 'truthmaker'. For the word 'truth' is fundamentally an abbreviating device, and it remains so when it makes its appearance inside 'truthmaker'. Kripke makes true 'Kripke exists' and Peter the Penguin makes true 'There are penguins', but Kripke and Peter have no more in common than do the truth of 'Kripke exists' and 'There are penguins'. In place of speaking of *truth*makers, we could speak of "there-being-Kripke-makers" and "there-being-penguins-makers". The common term

‘truthmaker’ glosses over the differences between truthmakers, just as ‘truth’ glosses over the differences between truths.¹⁶

The most tenable form of the deflationary theory of truth, then, is one that accepts the legitimacy of truthmaker theory. That is to say, deflationists can and should accept that there is legitimate inquiry to be had regarding what the ontological grounds for truths are; it’s just that this sort of investigation is separate from the theory of truth itself. Strictly speaking, then, deflationists who venture into truthmaking territory do so “off the clock”, but there are many reasons for them to pursue this particular extracurricular activity. Perhaps the most obvious advantage for deflationists pursuing truthmaking is that it enables them to uphold their promise to preserve the “correspondence intuition”, the idea that at least in some sense truths correspond to reality (see Horwich 1998: 104). Truthmaker theory is the perfect tool for that task, given that it connects truth and ontology without augmenting one’s theory of truth.¹⁷

Here is another noteworthy advantage of taking on truthmaking in the context of deflationary theories of truth. (This benefit also reinforces why a deflationist’s preferred theory of truthmaking should not be thought of as a theory of truth.) What we might call “pure” truthmaker theory—the investigation into the ontological grounds for truths that is indifferent toward its implications for the theory of truth itself—does not need to make certain contentious antecedent assumptions that truthmaker theory must when it is called into service within the theory of truth. For example, it is no requirement of pure truthmaker theory that it be maximalist. Perhaps there are truthmaker gaps: truths without a truthmaker. A truthmaker gap would seem to be conceptually impossible from the vantage point of substantive theories of truth. If to *be* true is to be *made* true, then something cannot be true except by way of having a truthmaker. But there are independent grounds for believing in truthmaker gaps. Negative existentials are the most familiar example: it’s true that there are no unicorns, but it’s unclear that anything in the world is responsible for this truth. To demand a truthmaker for negative existentials is to say, puzzlingly, that whenever things of one kind don’t exist, things of another, very different kind must. There are other cases. Analytic truths, or necessary truths more generally, might be thought to be true without benefit of any truthmaker. Then there are cases like ‘This sentence has no truthmaker’, which seems to be provably true, and so provably a truthmaker gap (Khlentzos 2000, Milne 2005). All these examples

¹⁶ Note that this is not a “deflationary” perspective on truthmaking, of the kind attacked by Asay and Baron (2020). That perspective tries, impossibly, to defend ontologically empty claims about truthmaking. The current perspective merely advances a “piecemeal” approach to truthmakers that perfectly aligns with deflationists’ piecemeal approach to truths. Thanks go to John Roberts for first helping me articulate this aspect of my view.

¹⁷ For a contrasting view, see Liggins 2016.

are contentious, of course, but that they can be taken seriously is an advantage of pure truthmaker theory, which does not presuppose maximalism from the outset.

4. Other Views

In this section I counter a number of opposing views that detect an antagonistic relationship between deflationism and truthmaking. I've argued so far that the investigation into the ontological grounds for *truths* is a legitimate form of metaphysical inquiry, but it need not take the form of giving a substantive theory of *truth*. Hence, not only *can* truthmaking and deflationism go together, they *should* go together. My opposition, then, falls into two basic camps. Some agree with me that truthmaking and deflationism are theoretically compatible, but go on to argue that deflationism has nothing to gain by taking on truthmaking. Other views detect an irreconcilable incompatibility between deflationism and truthmaking. I discuss each in turn.¹⁸

4.1. Deflationists shouldn't be truthmaker theorists

Like me, Horwich notices how truthmaker theory need not be understood only in relation to the theory of truth. He suggests the “liberating thought” that truthmaker theories can be interpreted

as taking for granted our understanding of truth, rather than attempting to supply it, and as proceeding, with the help of that notion, to articulate a body of metaphysical claims. We must first grasp what truth is, and only then can we go on to say which entities are needed to make true all the various kinds of proposition there are. (2008: 261)

Despite his compatibilist view, Horwich goes on to criticize truthmaker theory. Horwich raises a number of objections to truthmaker theory; I focus here on what I take to be the most serious concerns.¹⁹

Horwich's criticisms of truthmaker theory—which he takes to undermine the entire enterprise—depend on some highly contentious assumptions about how truthmaker theory must

¹⁸ One well-known defense of the friendship between deflationism and truthmaking is found in the work of David Lewis (2001a, 2001b), though I find his account severely flawed. See Vision 2003, David 2004, Thomas 2011, and MacBride 2013.

¹⁹ See also Simpson 2021.

be formulated. First, he claims that “any truthmaker theorist worth his salt” will be a maximalist (2008: 260). He gives no justification for this claim, and it’s not true. As already indicated, the “liberated” truthmaker theorist who adopts deflationism has good reason not to be a maximalist.

Second, Horwich leans heavily on the idea that facts are needed to serve as truthmakers. Horwich correctly observes that standard truthmaker theory rejects the claim that for every true proposition $\langle p \rangle$, there is a unique entity named ‘the fact that p ’ that makes it true.²⁰ Instead, truthmaker theorists opt for the more economical approach of putting facts to multiple truthmaking uses. For example, atomic facts can serve as truthmakers for atomic propositions and disjunctive propositions: there is no need for disjunctive facts. Horwich goes further, and thinks truthmaking is futile because, he contends, no proposition is ever made true by a fact. Now, it must first be said that many truthmaker theorists agree with exactly this claim. Some truthmaker theorists eschew facts completely. Peter Simons, for instance, has argued for a theory of truthmakers that employs “sundry particular items from various ontological categories” (1992: 159). So even if Horwich’s criticisms are correct, they only target fact-based truthmaking, and not the myriad other options that have been defended.

In addition to these two assumptions, Horwich relies on various inferences involving ‘fact’ that many truthmaker theorists, including those who appeal to facts, would dispute. For example, Armstrong would maintain that $\langle \text{Socrates is a philosopher} \rangle$ is made true by a fact (or as he would call it—in order to avoid the confusions that Horwich’s presentation invites—a state of affairs), but it would be misleading to call this fact ‘the fact that Socrates is a philosopher’. For Armstrong, states of affairs are composed in part by universals, and there is no universal corresponding to ‘is a philosopher’. Just what state of affairs it is that makes true this contingent predication about Socrates is a contentious affair, and ultimately an empirical one that depends on scientific accounts of what the world’s fundamental properties are. Horwich must have in mind a conception of facts that match their truths very closely, but that understanding of facts is precisely what is rejected by the very same truthmaker theorists who employ them as truthmakers. ‘The fact that p ’ is a misleading way to speak of $\langle p \rangle$ ’s truthmaking fact, assuming it even has one.

Horwich contends that his presentation in terms of facts is dispensable, and that his criticisms apply regardless of what one’s stock of truthmakers includes (2008: 267, footnote 14). This is not true, however. For instance, one of his objections is that there is a reading of ‘fact’ that is not ontologically committing, and synonymous with ‘true proposition’; hence, it’s gratuitous to believe in facts that are something over and above true propositions. That may be true, but

²⁰ I know of one exception: Fiocco 2013. ‘ $\langle p \rangle$ ’ abbreviates ‘the proposition that p ’.

irrelevant to all those truthmaking claims that don't involve facts. Consider Socrates and <There are humans>. Horwich might have good arguments that we shouldn't posit an entity called 'the fact that there are humans' to make it true, but he has done nothing to dispute the claim that actual truthmaker theorists make, which is that Socrates himself is a truthmaker for it. Furthermore, it has never been part of truthmaker theory to give an account of "what we mean" by 'fact'; it's used various ways in ordinary contexts, and various ways in philosophical contexts. In metaphysics, facts and states of affairs are theoretical entities that earn their keep in truthmaker theory because of their ontological role, not by way of how they might be referred to in ordinary speech.

Andrew Thomas (2011) likewise notices the logical possibility of pure truthmaker theory, but disputes its utility for deflationism. He writes: "Even if truthmaker theory is not taken as part of an analysis of truth, it is still unavailable to a proponent of [deflationism]" (2011: 119). His reasoning is as follows: if deflationists avail themselves of truthmaker theory, then their two-pronged theory will end up employing the same resources as traditional correspondence theory. As a result, Thomas writes, "The gains in theoretical economy that the deflationary account of truth promises to deliver are lost elsewhere" (2011: 120). Furthermore, adopting this "inflated" deflationary theory "makes the dispute between the deflationist and the correspondence theorist seem somewhat thin" (*ibid.*). To illustrate, Thomas asks us to consider two views, A and B. Both views accept some form of truthmaker theory, but B adopts a deflationary theory of truth while A embraces a substantive, correspondence account. Thomas claims that these two views employ the same theoretical resources, and so deflationists who go in for truthmaker theory give up all the ontological advantages they earned by going deflationist in the first place.

Thomas's evaluation of the relative merits of A and B is flawed. Consider the earlier observation that the "pure" truthmaker theory that is employable by deflationists is not necessarily maximalist. When it comes to negative existentials, for instance, correspondence theorists must find something for them to correspond to. Deflationists need not admit this, and can explore theoretical options that don't require truthmakers for every truth. What this shows is that the way deflationists can employ truthmaking is more flexible and thus potentially theoretically advantageous, as compared to how it must be employed by substantivists. In general, deflationists will have a broader menu of metaphysical considerations to help motivate their ultimate ontological views. When they look for truthmakers, they are free to consider a wealth of metaphysical arguments, such as those related to nominalism and realism, for instance. Their ontology will not in any way be dictated or constrained by their theory of truth, which has no ontological implications. Canonical substantivists' ontological inquiry, by contrast, will be strongly constrained by their views about truth and its accompanying ontological grounds.

It's possible that at the end of the day *some* of the overall philosophical differences between substantivists about truth and deflationists who adopt truthmaker theory might be diminished. That would simply show that the ontological worldview available to, say, correspondence theorists is quite similar to the worldview available to deflationists. Nevertheless, the key differences between substantivists and deflationists would remain, and those are the differences relevant to the debate. Substantivists believe that an account of truthmaking must be built into one's theory of truth; deflationists disagree. Hence, their very particular disagreement about *truth* is preserved, even if it's possible (though by no means necessary) for them to share a similar ontological outlook.

Jonathan Tallant also argues that deflationists have no need of truthmaker theory. His argument is that the main theoretical drive behind truthmaker theory can be satisfied without recourse to truthmaking's contentious ontological and theoretical commitments, so it is ultimately superfluous. As Tallant writes, "The most significant motivation for being a truthmaker theorist comes from the idea that the truth of a proposition—any proposition—requires an explanation" (2018: 141). But truths can be explained quite readily without talk of truthmakers at all, according to Tallant's "explanationist" alternative. What is to be explained for some true proposition $\langle p \rangle$ is that $\langle p \rangle$ is true. This fact can be deduced from the premises ' p ' (which of course is true since the explanandum ' $\langle p \rangle$ is true' is true) and the T-sentence ' $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if p '. In this way, deflationists can explain all truths; no truthmakers are required.

I have two responses to Tallant's argument. First, it presupposes the wrong approach to truthmaking, as I indicated above. Truthmaking is not about *explanation*, it's about *ontology*. As Tallant demonstrates, the task of "explaining truth" can be quite minimal. Explanations come in all shapes and sizes, and truthmaker theorists present themselves as being first and foremost in the business of explanation at their peril. Truthmaker theory's true utility consists in its ability to guide ontological investigation, and supply a properly balanced ontological inventory that provides a supervenience/dependence base for one's set of beliefs. One can offer a deductive argument from 'Kripke exists' and '<Kripke exists> is true if and only if Kripke exists' to '<Kripke exists> is true', but the truthmaker theorist's claim here is that one shouldn't accept <Kripke exists> into one's stock of beliefs without accepting its truthmaker, Kripke, into one's ontology.

Secondly, Tallant presents the truthmaker theorist as concerned only with "semantically ascended" claims of the form '$\langle p \rangle$ is true'. Because Tallant thinks we can help ourselves to the "ground level" facts (i.e., $\langle \text{Kripke exists} \rangle$), accounting for the semantically ascended ones is no challenge. But the real questions of interest to truthmaker theory concern those ground level facts. Truthmaker theorists want to know what sort of ontology is required to ground the ground-level propositions. Tallant's explanations are fine so far as they go, but they remain silent on the issue

of how one's beliefs and ontology need to be coordinated. They reveal the need for truthmaker theory, not its dismissal.

4.2. Deflationists can't be truthmaker theorists

Several other theorists have argued that deflationism and truthmaking are incompatible. Incompatibilism is most easily motivated when "pure" truthmaker theory goes unnoticed. If truthmakers just are part of the project of giving a substantive theory of truth, then they have no place cohabitating alongside a deflationary theory of truth that rejects such things. Vision expresses this attitude when he writes: "at first glance it would appear that deflationists simply deny that anything accounts for a proposition's being true" (2005: 365). Similarly, McGrath claims that deflationists who avail themselves of truthmaking would have to commit to entities "of a kind that only a correspondence theorist can appeal to in explaining truthmaking, i.e., a worldly fact (event, state)" (2003: 670). But to concede that truths have truthmakers is not to concede that those truthmakers figure into a substantive analysis of truth, or that they have to be of one specific ontological variety.

But perhaps there is a more fundamental conflict between deflationism about truth and pure truthmaker theory. MacBride, for instance, argues that pure truthmaker theory is implausible in the context of deflationism. MacBride follows Lewis (2001a) in claiming that, for deflationists (but only for deflationists), truthmaking principles like maximalism (i.e., that all truths have truthmakers) are equivalent to an infinitely large conjunction of biconditionals. But these biconditionals, MacBride asserts, "aren't themselves credible conceived *eo ipso*; so if the truthmaker principle is just a short version of the long story about them, then it can't be plausible either. What makes the instances credible for us is that we derive them from the truthmaker principle rather than the other way around" (2013: 688). Deflationists, unlike substantivists, have no reason to believe in truthmaking because it's plausible only in the context of a substantive theory of truth.

MacBride makes claims about what makes instances of truthmaking credible for us, but he speaks only for himself. Consider some of the instances that MacBride must deem *eo ipso* incredible:

Kripke exists if and only if there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that Kripke exists.

There are penguins if and only if there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that there are penguins.

I find these so highly credible that I believe I would be guilty of something close to contradiction were I to deny them. So MacBride has hardly shown that deflationism renders truthmaking “a motley of claims that aren’t compelling” (2013: 691).

Now, MacBride might charge me with cherry-picking examples. His example

Cats purr if and only if there exists something such that the existence of that thing implies that cats purr

might not be so immediately plausible. And perhaps he would argue that deflationists must accept *all* the instances of maximalism, so the fact that some are acceptable is no refuge for the deflationist. But this response falsely presupposes that truthmaker theory requires maximalism, and I’ve already argued that deflationists who take on pure truthmaker theory have good reason to reject it. The question of which instances of maximalism are acceptable just is the question of which truths have truthmakers, and that is a live, ongoing debate; contingent predications, which MacBride’s example employs, are a focal point in that debate (see Lewis 2001b and 2003). The fact that MacBride identifies potentially implausible implications of maximalism actually speaks in favor of pursuing truthmaker theory in its pure version that is compatible with both deflationism and non-maximalism.²¹

Finally, I’d like to consider the view of those who argue that deflationism about truth entails further deflationary attitudes about metaphysics that ultimately preclude truthmaker theory. This perspective has been put forward forcefully by Price in the service of global expressivism (2011, 2013), Thomasson in the service of neo-Carnapian “easy” ontology (2014, 2015), and Edwards as a step in a *reductio* against deflationism in service of his own substantivism about truth (2018). Price and Thomasson in particular represent the kind of philosopher most opposed to my perspective in this paper: given their deflationary metaphysical ambitions, they are allied to the view that the best thing about the deflationary theory of truth is its takedown of metaphysics, truthmaker theory included. Their argument for cascading deflationism, however, is unsuccessful.

I shall focus on Thomasson’s presentation, as it provides an explicit argument for the incompatibility between deflationism about truth and substantive metaphysical inquiry (such as truthmaking). Edwards’s argument (2018: 54-57) relies on Thomasson’s presentation, which itself borrows ideas from Price. Here is a relevant passage from Thomasson:

²¹ See also Simpson 2016, which identifies other problems for MacBride’s argument.

perhaps we should not be so surprised that accepting deflationism about truth ultimately undermines the prospects for ambitious metaphysics aimed at determining what ‘really’ exists. For, as Huw Price puts it “quietism about metaphysics needs to go hand in hand with quietism about semantics” (2011: 14). For accepting semantic minimalism undermines the representationalist picture of the relation between language and the world: the idea that all language has the function of representing the world, and that true statements ‘match’ features of the world (Price 2011: 3-4). The prevalence of the representationalist picture makes it seem that for any true statement ‘P’ we are entitled to ask what the truthmakers are for P—the facts in the world that explain what makes it true. [...] Semantic minimalism encourages us to give up the representationalist picture. For if the notion of truth is simply captured in the equivalence schema, then there is no pressure to look for what states of affairs correspond to our true claims, what facts make them true, or what objects they are about in order to explain what makes them true. [...] Once we reject representationalism, we cannot even formulate robust metaphysical positions about what ‘really’ exists, what could serve as the truthmakers for our diverse claims, and so on, and are left with a sort of metaphysical quietism. (2014: 203)

Thomasson is ambivalent about the actual conclusion she draws—are truthmaker theory’s prospects undermined, do we lose our entitlement to engage in it, or are its claims not even formulable? Whatever the reason, it’s clear that it is to be rejected. So the argument seems to proceed as follows:

- (1) Truthmaker theory is acceptable only if the representationalist picture of language is true.
- (2) If deflationism about truth is true, then the representationalist picture of language is false.
- (3) Therefore, if deflationism is true, then truthmaker theory is not acceptable.

My critique focuses on undermining the first premise.

The argument turns entirely on what Price, at least when speaking out loud, calls “(big-R) Representationalism”. Representationalism “has to accord a key role to the idea that the function of statements is to “represent” worldly states of affairs, and that true statements succeed in doing so” (2011: 4; cf. 2013: 24). Price introduces the Representationalist by way of analogy with a child’s matching game, which has the child match stickers (truths) to outlines of the stickers’ shapes

(truthmakers). The Representationalist, Price says, finds this game a “useful informal model of the relation of language to the world” (2011: 4).

Why should such a view be a necessary condition on pursuing truthmaker theory? This question is especially difficult to address, given Representationalism’s vague articulation. The key term that gives the view its name is encased in scare quotes, suggesting that not representation, but something else is at play. Does the view require that *all* statements represent worldly states of affairs? Furthermore, ‘state of affairs’ is itself a technical term—does it refer to Armstrong’s (1997) notion, Plantinga’s (1974), or something else? In any event, these ideas bear little resemblance to anything that goes on in actual truthmaker theory. First and foremost, it is no presupposition of truthmaker theory that truths represent their truthmakers in any sense. Consider a humdrum example: Cleo the cow is a truthmaker for ‘There are cows’. I can cite no one who argues that ‘There are cows’ represents Cleo.²² Cleo, of course, is not a worldly state of affairs, on anyone’s view. But that does not interfere with her truthmaking prowess. Furthermore, it’s an open question whether all truths have truthmakers, and thus even if truthmaking is necessarily wrapped up in representing worldly states of affairs (which it pretty clearly isn’t), it’s not committed to all statements having to do so in order to succeed. Potential truthmaker gaps such as analytic truths, necessary truths, negative truths, and contingent predications have all come under scrutiny, and by truthmaker theorists *themselves*.

Price’s appeal to the children’s game is revealing of his intentions, but it also undermines his critique. The game he describes sounds more like (a possible crude caricature of) an older correspondence theory of truth that posits a one-one correspondence between truths and facts, and where the correspondence involves a high degree of isomorphism (e.g., Moore 1953: 256). At best, Price might be able to target a view like Rasmussen’s, where truth is given a substantive analysis that may rely on substantial representationalist relations. But contemporary truthmaker theory has, from the start, distinguished itself from those approaches. For instance, Mulligan, Simons, and Smith’s pioneering paper (1984) offers a non-maximalist account of truthmaking that appeals to tropes, and so cannot be a theory of truth at all, let alone a correspondence theory involving facts or states of affairs. Truthmaker theorists have every reason to agree with Price that his child’s game is a facile model for understanding how truth relates to reality.

Price *almost* recognizes something like what I’m calling ‘pure’ truthmaker theory. He says there is a “weak way” of asking about truthmakers, as when one takes the questions ‘What makes it true that snow is white?’ and ‘What makes snow white?’ to be equivalent. The latter question is

²² Neither can Price. Though his work has plenty to say (mostly critical) about truthmakers in his 2011 and 2013, there is not a single work on truthmaking in their bibliographies.

“reasonable”, but “a question to be answered in terms of the physics of ice and light, not in terms of the metaphysics of facts and states of affairs. There is no additional *semantic* explanandum, and no distinctively metaphysical question” (2011: 14). This observation harmonizes with my emphasis above that truthmaking is a “piecemeal” affair, and that ‘truth’ shows up in ‘truthmaking’ in its usual generalizing mode. As I would put it, investigating truthmakers is not an *additional* task of the metaphysician; rather, it’s an approach for or regimentation of the task of building an ontology. So Price’s observation in no way undercuts the motivation for thinking about the relationship between what is true and what exists. Maybe the physics of ice and light requires no appeal to the metaphysics of facts and states of affairs—though Price hasn’t argued this, just asserted it—but it doesn’t follow that the physics of ice and light have no implications for *metaphysics*: far from it. Metaphysics is the study of reality, and surely physics has had much to contribute to it. Like most self-styled anti-metaphysicians, Price presumably means by ‘metaphysics’ (or ‘distinctive metaphysics’) metaphysical inquiry that takes place outside certain academic boundaries.²³ It’s pointless to fight over a word, but what can’t reasonably be denied is that ontological investigation pervades the sciences. The discovery of Neptune was an ontological one, as was the recent discovery that there are multiple species of giraffes. These discoveries have better informed us as to what exists in our world. Truthmaker theorists are first and foremost interested in articulating the ontological commitments that best square with our worldviews (i.e., our stock of beliefs), and this aim is by no means alien to the sciences.

It’s less clear what the “strong” way of asking about truthmakers is,²⁴ but perhaps telling is the opening of the passage from Thomasson above: “accepting deflationism about truth ultimately undermines the prospects for ambitious metaphysics aimed at determining what ‘really’ exists” (2014: 203). Suppose so. But does accepting deflationism about truth undermine the prospects for metaphysics aimed at determining what exists? Maybe not. Price, for his part, claims to stand with the folk in rejecting eliminativism about mental states, moral values, and causes, so long as he doesn’t adopt a “distinctively metaphysical theoretical perspective”, namely, that these things “*really* exist” (2011: 235-236). So what emerges is a dichotomy between the strong and ambitious truthmaker theorists exploring what ‘really’ exists and the weak truthmaker theorists unambitiously

²³ For instance, Price contrasts “metaphysical” with “ordinary, first-order scientific viewpoint” (2013: 55).

²⁴ One clue might be that strong truthmaker theorists are required to treat the truthmaking relation as being “substantial” (Price 2011: 14). Price doesn’t say what “substantial” comes to, but Armstrong has an account of substantial relations: they correspond to universals. Unfortunately for Price, Armstrong’s account of truthmaking treats the truthmaking relation as insubstantial—it’s an “internal” relation—and so the paradigm truthmaker theorist counts as perfectly kosher by Price’s lights (2004: 9).

exploring what exists. I find it ironic that philosophers like Price and Thomasson who celebrate their rampant, infectious deflationism nevertheless fail to be deflationists about ‘really’, italicization, and capitalization, as if there is a distinction between a modest interest in what exists and an immodest interest in what *really* Exists.²⁵ Needless to say, no truthmaker theorist need accept this distinction. “Weak” truthmaking is truthmaking enough.

Absent some further account of what separates the actual philosophers who accept, say, electrons into their ontology from the hypothetical philosophers who introduce some layer of distinctive metaphysical theory onto their admission of electrons into their ontology, Price’s Representationalist appears to be nothing more than a Rortyesque bogeyman: a metaphysical opponent who surely must be out there, though no evidence for its existence is offered. A more useful distinction to employ is the one I have offered: there are those who see truthmaker theory as inseparable from the project of defining truth, and those who see it as a useful tool for exploring ontology that isn’t tangled up with defining truth. Deflationism about truth rejects the former project—on that point Price, Thomasson, and I agree. But these philosophers have given us no reason to think that deflationism challenges the latter.

At this point Price might respond that there’s nothing left for self-styled modest truthmaker theorists to do; don’t the sciences handle all the ontological questions of weak (or “pure”) truthmaker theory? It’s hard to see why. Do the sciences answer the ontological dispute between presentists and eternalists? Have they revealed what the ontological grounds are for counterfactuals? Do they tell us what makes it true that a committee of individuals behind a veil of ignorance would decide such-and-such? Ontological investigation is in no way foreign to the sciences; but neither is it the exclusive province of the sciences

5. Conclusion

I’ll conclude by fleshing out the positive proposal I’m offering to deflationists. They can continue thinking of the truth predicate as a useful device for generalization, abbreviation, forming pro-sentences, and the like. The property of truth needs no analysis beyond saying it’s the property that ‘*p*’ has if and only if *p*. These attitudes about truth are brought to and applied to the theory of truthmaking, just as they are applied to any philosophical area that presupposes truth (like, say, epistemology). If a truthmaker for ‘*p*’ is (at least) something whose existence guarantees that ‘*p*’ is true, a deflationist can hold that a truthmaker for ‘*p*’ is (at least) something whose existence

²⁵ The *locus classicus* for (unintentionally ironic) inflationism about ‘really’ is, of course, Fine 1984.

guarantees that p . As Lewis aptly points out, even when it comes to truthmaker theory, “the mention of truth is just an abbreviatory device” (2001b: 604).²⁶ Deflationists can speak of truthmakers (i.e., “ontological grounds”) just as freely as they may speak of knowledge (i.e., “tethered truth-possession”). Truthmaker theory is not a Representationalist phoenix, or a resurrected substantive account of truth.

Deflationists *should* adopt truthmakers because doing so enables them to say what is correct about correspondence theories, and because it discharges the (highly reasonable) duty to keep one’s ontological ducks in a row. If you accept, say, certain counterfactuals as true when spelling out your metaethical views, then be mindful of what ontology that commits you to. Truthmaker theory offers a highly flexible means for coordinating one’s beliefs and one’s ontology. As I argued, truthmaker theorists are not mandated to appeal only to facts or states of affairs. Furthermore, deflationists can reject maximalism (though they are not obliged to). Accepting the existence of truthmaker gaps is independently desirable, and deflationists (unlike substantivists) can take advantage of them.

Is truthmaker theory the absolute best way to go about formulating one’s ontology? That’s a large question, and a thoroughgoing defense of the enterprise is beyond the scope of this single paper.²⁷ At the very least, my goal has been to show that deflationists need not fear ontological investigation, and I believe that such investigation is best pursued with the notion of a truthmaker in hand. One might, though, think that a Quinean approach is a more economical means to this ontological end.²⁸ Instead of going after truthmakers, one just looks to the objects that one’s stock of beliefs quantifies over—once they have been regimented into first-order logic. There is much to say here, including, notably, the issue as to whether these are genuinely rival views (see especially Schaffer 2008). For now, let me make the point that the Quinean approach is a partisan account of how truth and ontology relate that, like truthmaker theory, requires metaphysical argument, and so it enjoys no automatic or default acceptability when compared against truthmaker theory.

The Quinean method (see especially Quine 1960) introduces at least two elements of metaphysical choice, as it were, into its method for reading the ontological commitments off of what is true. First, one’s beliefs need to be *regimented* into first-order logic. Regimentation is not translation: what ends up in the theory may not be exactly what one started with. Regimentation

²⁶ See also Fox 1987: 189 and Bigelow 1988: 127.

²⁷ For defenses of a wide variety of approaches to truthmaking, see Bigelow 1988, Lewis 2001b and 2003, Armstrong 2004, and Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005, among many others.

²⁸ Thanks to a referee for pushing me on this point.

is not, therefore, a metaphysically neutral process.²⁹ A choice to regiment in a particular way can therefore be a choice to embrace or abandon some particular ontological commitment. How might one go about making such a choice? By engaging in the kinds of arguments pursued by truthmaker theory.

Second, Quine identifies ontological commitments with the domain of the first-order existential quantifier, but this, as Azzouni (2004) has shown, is itself a choice, and an optional one at that. (Azzouni himself, for instance, advocates locating commitments with the extension of a predicate instead.) Quine's choice here, too, is metaphysically partisan. As Armstrong observes, Quine "has stacked the ontological deck against predicates as opposed to subject terms" (2004: 23). Quine's decision to locate ontology with the existential quantifier is not a neutral choice *vis-à-vis* the relationship between truth and ontology.

Further choices need to be made. Consider again truths about the past, such as 'Dinosaurs existed'. Truthmaker theorists disagree with one another regarding whether this truth has a truthmaker, and whether presentists or eternalists have an advantage when it comes to saying what it is. What does the Quinean say? At first pass, they have nothing to say. The first-order logic I was taught, and that I teach my students, has no means for expressing tense. As a result, the sentence is untranslatable until that logic is supplemented with, say, tense operators. Once supplemented, though, is the resulting translation ontologically committing? There is no automatic answer here, obtained solely by introducing some logical notation: one has to defend a view regarding whether, in effect, a past tense operator cancels ontological commitment. And formulating such a defense drags one right into the very debates that presentists and eternalists engage in over the truthmakers for truths about the past.

To say that the Quinean is engaged in partisan battles over ontology is not to defend truthmaker theory as a superior approach, but rather to suggest that the Quinean and truthmaker theorists are, at the end of the day, fellow travelers. I thus invite the Quinean to accept the overall picture I have offered in this paper, and to reject Price's and Thomasson's offering of ontological quietism. To be a deflationist about truth is not to reject questions about ontology and truthmaking. Deflationism about *truth* is no slippery slope to deflationism about *metaphysics*. To deflate the property *truth* is not itself to deflate the ontological seriousness which we must bring to individual *truths*. David Lewis, for instance, believes that the sentence 'There is a pluriverse of infinitely many concrete possible worlds' is true (1986). That he rejects the correspondence theory of truth does nothing to undermine the seriousness of the ontological commitment he takes on in

²⁹ Quine writes: "The moot or controversial part of the question of the ontic import of a sentence may of course survive in a new guise, as the question how to paraphrase the sentence into canonical notation" (1960: 242).

believing this sentence to be true. Ontology lives on, even after truth is deflated. Truthmaker theory offers a way of exploring the ontological grounds for truths that is liberated from the traditional, substantive theories of truth. Herein lies the most important lesson to be learned from deflationism.

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