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PART I
EXISTENCE

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Truthmakers and Easy Ontology

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Quine’s “On What There Is” initiated a heyday for existence questions. For decades, the central task of ontology was seen as answering questions about what exists, by seeking a ‘best theory’ and determining its ontological commitments. And so there followed decades of inquiry into whether our best theory will tell us that there are possible worlds, persons, artifacts, mereological sums, works of art, and so on.

But those days are fading.

One reason existence questions are fading from interest is the increasing sympathy for the thought that many existence questions are easy to answer—and in the affirmative. Kit Fine, for example, accepts that “given the evident fact that there is a prime number greater than 2, it trivially follows that there is a number . . . and similarly, given the evident fact that I am sitting on a chair, it trivially follows that there is a chair” (2009a, 158). Jonathan Schaffer similarly accepts that questions about the existence of numbers, properties, mereological sums and the like, “are *trivial*, in that the *entities in question obviously do exist*” (2009a, 357).

One reason many existence questions seem ‘easy’ to answer is that we can often make what seem to be trivial inferences from uncontested truths to claims that numbers, properties, or other ‘controversial’ entities exist. Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (2001) famously made the case in the philosophy of mathematics. An uncontroversial claim such as “The cups and saucers are equinumerous”, they argued, may be combined with Hume’s Principle (“The number of ns = the number of ms iff the ns and ms are equinumerous”) to derive the claim “The number of cups=the number of saucers”, in which we seem to have a true identity claim with

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singular terms that refer to numbers. Stephen Schiffer (2003) generalized the approach, arguing that what he called ‘something from nothing’ inferences could in each case take us from an uncontroversial claim that involved no terms for properties, propositions, states, etc. to one that *does* include such new terms, which are seemingly guaranteed to refer. So, for example, we can make the inference from ‘Snow is white’ to ‘Snow has the property of being white’—and while the latter is intuitively redundant with respect to the former, it apparently includes a new referring term for a *property* of being white. In *Ontology Made Easy* (2015), I further generalized such easy arguments for existence—expanding them to include arguments for concreta as well as abstracta—and defended them against a range of objections.

One common response to such easy arguments is to allow that questions about what exists *are* easy to answer, and that, as a result, the proper, interesting project of ontology must lie elsewhere than in determining what exists. A common suggestion—particularly among those metaphysicians who follow the lead of Armstrong more than of Quine—is to say that the project of ontology should instead be thought of as the search for *truthmakers*. As Ross Cameron puts it:

one particularly pleasing metametaphysical feature of the truthmaking account [is that] it allows us to recognize that existential questions can often times be easy—sometimes to the point of triviality—to answer, while still allowing that there is a deep, difficult and interesting ontological project to be undertaken. (forthcoming, 7)

That project is answering the truthmaker question: “What makes what true?”

In many ways the truthmaker theorist and the easy ontologist are allies. Both reject the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment, on grounds that it makes irrelevant grammatical differences implausibly lead to huge differences in our ontological commitments (see Armstrong 2004, 23; Alston 1958, 13–14). Both deny that ontology should be concerned with deep questions about what exists, as existence questions are typically easy to answer, and both are happy to accept a broadly permissive view about what exists.

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The question I aim to address in this paper is this: *Suppose we accept the easy approach to ontology.*¹ Can we then legitimately turn to address instead the question *what makes what true?* Ross Cameron argues that the answer is yes:

all this [easy ontology] just shows us that the project of ontology should not be understood in terms of cataloging what exists. I agree with Thomasson that existential questions are often easy to answer (Of course there are tables—look, my dinner’s on one), and that for many traditional ontological debates the existence of the entities in question follows trivially from obvious truths . . . But there is still a deep, hard to answer, ontological question: what makes what true? Do tables, numbers, properties, etc., figure amongst the [fundamental] *truthmakers* for the way the world is? (forthcoming, 10 in draft)

The plan for this paper is as follows. I will begin by briefly recounting some key theses of easy ontology, so that we can better see what its consequences are for the truthmaker approach. Then, I will consider two different versions of the claim that the proper question for metaphysics is ‘What makes what true?’. First, I will consider the strong claim (developed by Cameron) that a project remains of determining what the *fundamental truthmakers are*, with the goal of giving a uniquely true statement of *what the fundamental entities are*. Second, I will consider a weaker claim (endorsed in different forms by several truthmaker theorists), which holds that it is at least a *constraint* on metaphysics to give *some good account* of what the (fundamental) truthmakers are for claims we accept—and that wielding this constraint gives us a way of ‘catching cheaters’ in metaphysics.

I will argue that, if we truly take on board some of the basic theses of easy ontology, we should have serious reservations about both of these projects. I will conclude by considering what may, nonetheless, remain to be done.

¹ I will not argue for the easy approach to ontology here, though I have done so extensively elsewhere (2015). Instead, the question to be addressed here concerns what *follows* if we accept easy ontology.

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1. Theses of easy ontology

Easy ontology consists of two interrelated theses,² conceived as part of an overarching project:

1. All well-formed existence questions are easy to answer, in the sense that they may be answered by conceptual and/or empirical work (Thomasson 2015, 128).³
2. At least some disputed existence questions may be answered by means of trivial inferences from uncontroversial premises (Thomasson 2015, 128).

The *project* these theses are designed to support is demystifying metaphysics, by arguing that those metaphysical questions that are well-formed and answerable descriptive questions can be answered via nothing more mysterious than empirical and conceptual work.⁴ The theses support the project by showing how one prominent swath of metaphysical questions (existence questions) may be answered without relying on any work that is ‘epistemically metaphysical’ in Theodore Sider’s sense of being answerable neither by direct empirical methods nor by conceptual analysis (2011, 187). (I address another swath of metaphysical questions, the modal questions, in my (2020)—as another step on the way to making good on the general project.)

² At least as I use the term ‘Easy Ontology’. For the original discussion, see my (2015, 128).

³ Actually, thanks to discussion with Katherine Hawley, I have now softened this claim: all well-formed existence questions *that can be answered at all* may be answered by conceptual and/or empirical work. That is, for example, a question about whether there are concrete entities spatiotemporally and causally isolated from us may be unanswerable empirically (given the spatiotemporal and causal isolation), but there seems to be no reason to think that ‘serious metaphysics’ could give us knowledge of the answer either (see my 2019, following Hawley’s 2019). It may simply be unanswerable. This caveat will not play a role in what follows here, nor does it constrain what I have wanted to say about traditional metaphysical debates.

⁴ By ‘descriptive questions’ I mean questions about *what is the case*, rather than normative questions about what *we should do*. I have argued elsewhere (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018) that we can also reconceive of many debates in metaphysics as debates about what terms or concepts we *should* use or how we *should* use them.

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At least in some cases, allowing that existence questions are easy to answer, but insisting that there remains a ‘substantive metaphysical project’ is a way of accepting the theses, while rejecting the overall *project* by identifying remaining questions that are the target of serious metaphysical inquiry. As Cameron goes on to describe it, the question ‘What makes what true?’ “cannot be answered by the combination of conceptual analysis and empirical observation: it is a substantive metaphysical question” (forthcoming, 10).

Some accept that existence questions are easy to answer, in the sense that they are (generally) *obvious*, without commitment to whether there are trivial or analytic inferences that take us to existential conclusions.⁵ But the form of easy ontology I am interested in here, and that I have defended elsewhere (2015), is one that gives a particular *reason* for thinking that many of the disputed ontological existence questions are easy to answer—and that comes from premise (2): that questions, say, about the existence of numbers, properties, propositions, facts, or even tables may be answered by making trivial inferences (such as those reviewed in the introduction) from premises that are *not* in dispute by the parties debating.

Accepting that there are trivial inferences that enable us to answer disputed existence questions (on the basis of an uncontroversial premise combined with a conceptual truth) has the consequence that there may be trivial inferences across what we might call ‘ontologically alternative’ statements. Take a sentence to have as its ‘apparent ontological commitments’ those entities that would most directly correspond to its surface grammar: objects corresponding to its noun terms, properties corresponding to its predicates, etc. Say that a sentence ‘A’ is ‘ontologically alternative’ to a sentence ‘B’ when its apparent ontological commitments are distinct from those of B. Since easy ontologists accept that there are valid trivial inferences that take us, say, from “There are particles arranged tablewise” to “There is a table”, or from “There are three cups on the table” to “The number of cups on the table is three”, they accept that there are valid trivial inferences across ‘ontologically alternative’

⁵ Jonathan Schaffer, for example, takes the existence of numbers as a ‘Moorean certainty’, “more credible than any philosopher’s argument to the contrary” (2009, 357).

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expressions. For the right side in each case involves introducing a new noun term that does not appear in the original; a noun term that (as Stephen Schiffer (2003) puts it) is apparently guaranteed to refer, given the truth of the original claim and the triviality of the inference.⁶

However, as I argue next, taking seriously the idea that there may be trivial inferences across ontologically alternative expressions undermines the idea that we can hope to use an appeal to truthmakers to get a uniquely true statement of what the fundamental truthmakers are.

2. Cameron's project: finding the fundamental truthmakers

As discussed in the introduction, a common response to the easy approach to ontology is to allow that existence questions are easy to answer, and yet to hold that a deep project remains for metaphysics. That project, as Cameron presents it, is finding the fundamental truthmakers for the claims we accept, and thereby determining what we should accept as being *fundamental*.

The idea is roughly this: Quineans hold that we are *ontologically committed to* (only) whatever we must quantify over to render true the statements of a theory we accept, and that to determine what we should say exists, we should figure out our best total theory, and what it is ontologically committed to, and then allow that those (and only those) things exist.

Truthmaker theorists tend to reject the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment (Armstrong 2004, 23–4; Cameron 2008) and the neo-Quinean focus on existence questions. Instead, Cameron aims to determine the *fundamentality commitments* of a sentence by asking what *must* exist to make the claims of our theory true. Then, to determine what we should say is *fundamental*, we should figure out our best total

⁶ As will be apparent, the easy approach also requires that we give up the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment. For there may also be valid trivial inferences across sentences that Quine would take to have different 'ontological commitments', for example, taking us from "Some dogs are white" to "there is a property of whiteness some dogs have". For discussion see my (2015, ch. 1).

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theory, and what it is fundamentality-committed to, and allow that those (and only those) things are *fundamental*.⁷

But what are we fundamentality-committed to? We need some criterion—some way of deciding, given a sentence or theory one accepts, what one is—and is not—committed to saying is *fundamental*. Say that a sentence's *fundamentality commitments* are whatever entities one is committed to saying are fundamental, in virtue of accepting that sentence. It seems that even if truthmaker theorists don't give us a recipe for determining what we *are* fundamentality-committed to, they must at least provide a criterion that will tell us when we *aren't fundamentality-committed to* entities of a kind apparently referred to in a given sentence or theory. Under what conditions can we say that an entity *isn't needed* as a fundamental truthmaker and so deny the apparent commitment? The truthmaker theorist clearly needs such a principle to narrow things down—giving us a way to say that, while a sentence may have many apparent ontological commitments, we needn't (in virtue of accepting that sentence) be committed to saying that all of those are *fundamental* ("Everything is Fundamental" being an even worse slogan than "Everything is Awesome").

Actual truthmaker theorists have not (to my knowledge) directly articulated such a principle, so it will take some reconstructive work to see what suggestions might be offered to provide a way of determining which of those entities we are *apparently* ontologically committed to (in accepting sentences of various forms) are not things we are *fundamentality-committed to*.

We will begin by looking at some of the classical, simple, and most plausible cases in which truthmaker theorists claim that their approach entitles us to avoid certain apparent ontological commitments. But first, a little history is in order. In earlier literature (e.g., Armstrong 2004;

⁷ It is certainly not true, however, that all of those who appeal to truthmakers think that they can be used in aiming to get a uniquely true statement of what is fundamental. John Heil and Heather Dyke, for example, would clearly reject this goal. Jonathan Schaffer holds that the fundamentality commitments 'are best viewed as constraints' (2008, 19), and so is not committed to the idea that appeal to truthmakers can get us to a unique statement of what is fundamental (I return to this later in this section). Ross Cameron has argued most prominently for using the appeal to truthmakers to determine one's fundamentality commitments. This section is largely directed toward his views.

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Cameron 2008), the truthmaker approach was often held to give an alternative to Quine’s approach to ontological commitment. As a result, truthmaker theorists tended to distinguish a sentence’s *apparent* ontological commitments from its *genuine* ontological commitments, as given by a ‘truthmaker criterion’ of ontological commitment. Mulligan, Simons, and Smith write “The glory of logical atomism was that it showed that not every kind of sentence needs its own characteristic kind of truthmaker” (1984, 289). As Cameron put it, “I am a truthmaker theorist: I hold that the ontological commitments of a theory are just those things that must exist to *make true* the sentences of that theory” (2008, 4). More recent versions of truthmaker theory often aim instead to distinguish a sentence’s apparent ontological commitments from its *fundamentality* commitments.⁸ I will translate the original work to the fundamentality phrasing, to streamline the exposition.

Here are some classic, central cases in which truthmaker theorists argue that the apparent ontological commitments of a sentence can be avoided (or not treated as fundamentality commitments):

- Disjunctive properties: “X is (A or B)” has an apparent ontological commitment to a disjunctive property (being A or B), as well as to X. But since “X is A” entails the truth of “X is (A or B)” and does not even appear to require a disjunctive property to make it true, we need not accept disjunctive properties [as fundamental] to accept the truth of the disjunctive statement. As Mulligan, Simons, and Smith put it, “Provided we can account for the truth and falsehood of atomic sentences, we can dispense with special truth-makers for, e.g., negative, conjunctive, disjunctive, and identity sentences” (1984, 289).
- Determinables: “The cloth is colored” appears to commit us to a determinable property of *being colored*. But, as Armstrong argues, not all sentences of the form “X is Q” require the property of being

⁸ See Schaffer (2008) for arguments that appeal to truthmakers cannot “provide a viable measure of ontological commitment” but does “provide a needed constraint on what is fundamental” (2008, 7). More on this later in this section.

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Q as a [fundamental] truthmaker. For “The cloth is scarlet” entails “the cloth is red”, and “the cloth is colored”. So we can just accept the property of being scarlet as a (predicate-side) truthmaker for all of these sentences and can avoid [fundamental] ontological commitment to determinable properties.⁹

Using this approach, Armstrong held that he could maintain a sparse account of what properties we are committed to as truthmakers. But he did not extend the approach to object terms. Instead, Armstrong held that “for every truthmaker T, the truth <T exists> has T as its unique minimal truthmaker” (2004, 23). Cameron extends the approach to object terms, arguing that even existence claims may have different (fundamental) truthmakers than at first appears (2008, 4). Thus, Cameron argues that we needn’t accept that an entity X is fundamental if we can show that the truth of “X exists” is grounded without appeal to X:

If X is needed as the truthmaker for “X exists” then X really exists—it is *part of fundamental reality*. But if “X exists” is made true not by X but by Y then, while X exists, X does not really exist: It is Y that really exists; it is Y that is *part of fundamental ontology*, and which is the [fundamental] ontological commitment of “X exists”.

(2008, 17, italics mine)

Later he puts it this way:

if you want to hold that ‘there are Xs’ is strictly and literally true whilst resisting [fundamentality] commitment to the Xs, you should show that one can provide grounds for the truth of such claims without appealing to the Xs; that is, you should show that a [fundamental] ontology lacking in Xs can nonetheless *make true* a sentence proclaiming the existence of, or attributing features to, the Xs. The thought is

⁹ Mulligan, Simons, and Smith similarly acknowledge that one and the same truthmaker may make true sentences with different meanings (1984, 300).

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that the [fundamentality] commitments of a sentence are those entities that are needed as truthmakers for the sentence: those entities that must number amongst the [fundamental] ontology of the world if the world is to provide an adequate *grounding* for the truth [of] the sentence. (Cameron 2010, 249–50)

Thus, in addition to the above classic cases in which truthmaker theorists argue that various apparent commitments to properties can be avoided (or needn't be treated as fundamental), Cameron adds the following for apparent commitments to certain objects:

- Mereological sums: “The mereological sum of a, b, and c exists” is made true by a, b, and c (Cameron 2008, 5)—so we can avoid being fundamentality-committed to mereological sums.
- Sets: “{Socrates} exists” is made true by Socrates (Cameron 2008, 10)—so we needn't be fundamentality-committed to sets.
- Symphonies: “Beethoven's ninth symphony exists” is made true by the event of Beethoven indicating a certain abstract sound structure for performance (Cameron 2010, 261)—so we needn't be fundamentality-committed to symphonies.

What do these cases have in common that inclines us to accept the claim that we needn't think that disjunctive properties, determinables, mereological sums, sets, or symphonies are fundamental, in order to accept that sentences about them are true? They all have in common the following feature: The original sentence 'A' (which has the relevant entities among its *apparent* commitments) is non-vacuously entailed by an ontologically alternative sentence 'B', which lacks those apparent commitments. It is, I submit, this relation that makes the examples plausible—for it seems that in cases where a sentence 'A' is non-vacuously entailed by an ontologically alternative sentence 'B', we are able to look for the truthmakers for 'B' to serve as the ultimate truthmakers for 'A' and thereby reduce our fundamentality commitments.¹⁰ So, for example, “a, b, and c

¹⁰ The restriction to cases of non-vacuous entailment is to rule out cases in which necessary truths, for example about the existence of numbers or properties, might be thought to be

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exist” is apparently committed (only) to a, b, and c; yet it entails “the mereological sum of a, b, and c exists”; “Beethoven indicated a certain abstract structure for performance” has as apparent ontological commitments only a man, a certain abstract structure, and an act of indication, but also seems to entail “Beethoven’s ninth symphony exists”.

While truthmaker theorists do not explicitly propose such a criterion, and often resist thinking of truthmaking itself as entailment, they clearly need *some* criterion if they are to provide a way of narrowing down what must be counted as fundamental. What I am suggesting is that it is arguably the presence of these analytic entailments that implicitly makes their central and most plausible cases seem plausible. That is, arguably, it is these underlying analytic entailments that makes it seem plausible that we need not be fundamentality-committed to the objects that would be the apparent commitments of the original sentences (mereological sums, sets, symphonies), but only to the truthmakers for sentences asserting the existence other entities (individuals a, b, and c; Socrates; an indication event). At least in these most central and plausible cases (as in the cases describing disjunctive and determinable properties) the relevant entailments seem to reflect linguistic rules.¹¹ As Cameron himself puts it: that “{Socrates} exists” is made true by Socrates is “just a consequence of how we use the term ‘Socrates singleton’” (2008, 10).

So one might think that a relevant criterion which would make sense of the examples commonly used to motivate the view would be the following:

Negative methodological principle (NMP): if a true sentence “A” (non-vacuously) analytically entails an *ontologically alternative*

vacuously entailed by anything whatsoever—though it seems odd to count ‘there is a cup of coffee on my desk’ as a truthmaker for ‘there is a number greater than 23,000’. For discussion of the problem, see Restall 1996 (333–4). I will put those issues to the side here, since the problems I identify remain even if we restrict our interest to cases of entailments to contingent truths.

¹¹ Note that this doesn’t commit one to thinking that truthmaking *is* entailment (a position Heil argues against at length (2003, ch. 7)). It is simply a view that the presence of certain entailments from “A” to “B” entitle one to *deny* that we need to accept any new apparent commitments of “B” as genuine commitments (since one can make do with truthmakers for “A” instead).

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sentence “B”, then we are not fundamentality-committed to any apparent commitments of “B” that are not already among the apparent commitments of “A”.¹²

For, presumably, we can limit our fundamentality commitments to those entities needed to make “A” true, and (given the analytic entailment) we are assured that these can also make “B” true—without the need to treat any new entities “B” apparently commits us to as fundamental.

The principle makes good sense of the truthmaker theorist’s standard and most plausible examples. It is important to note, however, that the principle is also quite weak—far less strong than most truthmaker theorists would want. For truthmaker theorists are keen to emphasize that there may be truthmaking relations even where there are *not* relations of analytic entailment (see Heil 2003, 55–6, 66; Cameron 2010). Heil, for example, explicitly denies that an account of truthmaking “requires an analytical path from truth-bearer to truth-maker” (2003, 66). To make good on the overall project, truthmaker theorists would (also) need some other principle to cover cases in which there are no such analytic entailments, and yet they think we can still avoid fundamentality commitment to the apparent commitments of “B” by appealing to other truthmakers.

Nonetheless, the NMP might be thought to at least provide a *start*—one principle that would, for certain paradigm and most plausible cases, give the truthmaker theorist license to claim that a theory has fewer fundamentality commitments than its apparent ontological commitments would suggest.

I will argue, however, that even such a weak principle is not one that anyone can accept, while also accepting (as Cameron does) the easy approach to ontology. For accepting easy ontological arguments, as noted in Section 1 above, commits one to accepting that there are often analytic entailments from a sentence with one set of apparent ontological commitments to a sentence with a different set of apparent ontological

¹² Note that entailments from, say, “P & Q” to “Q” would not, on this principle, relieve us of any fundamentality commitments, since the apparent commitments of Q are already among the apparent commitments of “P&Q”.

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commitments. And such entailments seem all too readily available. Ironically, part of what eliminativist neo-Quinean metaphysicians have taught us is how to make grammatical shifts that enable us to still say what we need to, without using noun terms to refer to the entities we don't want. So, for example, we might (using the NMP) avoid fundamentality commitment to tables by saying that 'there is a table here' is entailed by 'there are particles arranged tablewise here', so that we are not committed to tables: particles arranged tablewise may serve as truthmakers for the claim about tables. But by the same token, the NMP suggests that we are not fundamentality-committed to particles. For as Hawthorne and Cortens (1995) have suggested, we can instead adopt an ontologically alternative feature-placing language and say 'it's particling around here', which non-vacuously entails 'there are particles'.

Should we then say (using the NMP) that what we are really fundamentality-committed to is *features*, or *ways the world is*, not to any objects at all? (I suspect that this may be the impulse behind certain nihilist views.) But one must be careful with objectualizing here: to move from *it is particling around here* to: *there is a world-feature of particling* (or: this feature exists) also involves an analytic entailment from one sentence (which has no apparent commitments to things) to an ontologically alternative one, which seems to commit us to certain kinds of 'things': features or ways. But if we take the above interpretation of the truthmaking strategy seriously, that should also lead us to deny that we are fundamentality-committed to such world-features.

Putting this grammatical difficulty aside, should we at least (following this principle) accept that we are fundamentality-committed only to whatever it takes to make sentences in a feature-placing language true? This would also seem to be the wrong move. For feature-placing sentences may also be (non-vacuously) entailed by ontologically alternative sentences. If we start from an objectual-language claim, like 'there is a particle', it seems we are entitled to introduce the feature-placing language and conclude 'it's particling around here'. And so, if we follow the spirit of the negative methodological principle, it seems we have no good reason to think that our fundamentality commitments are to the truthmakers of sentences of the feature-placing language rather than to sentences of the particle language.

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Much the same story could be even more readily told for the predicate-side truthmakers. For (as the easy approach to ontology again makes clear) there seem to be entailments from ‘the ball is red’ to ‘the ball has a redness trope’, ‘the ball instantiates the universal of redness’, ‘the state of affairs of the ball’s being red obtains’, and so on; and it seems we can also get trivial entailments from any of these back to ‘the ball is red’. That is, any of these claims may be non-vacuously entailed by an ontological alternative—and so accepting the negative methodological principle would entitle us to deny that we have fundamentality commitments to any of these.

In short, as noted in Section 1, one consequence of the easy approach to ontology is that language is *ontologically flexible*: it seems that there are quite typically entailments to a target sentence from an ontologically alternative one (whether one we already have in the language or one we can invent). Cameron held that the [fundamentality] commitments of a sentence are those entities that “*must* number amongst the ontology of the world if the world is to provide an adequate grounding of the truth of the sentence” (2010, 249–50). What I have been arguing in essence is that—if we accept easy ontological inferences at all—we should also accept that, whatever our sentence, there is typically *no* unique statement of what entities *must* be in the ontology of the world to account for its truth: we can generally get an entailment up to the truth of the target sentence from an ontologically alternative one, which would apparently require a different fundamental ontology to make it true. As a result, if we adopt the negative methodological principle as a way determining what we are (not) committed to treating as fundamental, then it seems we must conclude that there is nothing we are fundamentality-committed to.¹³

¹³ The Quinean approach faces a similar problem if addressed at the level of determining what our theories commit us to, rather than of what a *particular regimentation* of a theory commits us to. For Quine insists that we can avoid an ontological commitment as long as we can paraphrase a sentence that quantifies over the suspect entities in a way that shows that the ‘seeming reference’ was an “avoidable manner of speaking” (1953, 13). Given the ontological flexibility of language, it seems that we can quite typically avoid apparent ontological commitments by paraphrasing a given sentence with an ontologically alternative one that shows the original to have been an ‘avoidable manner of speaking’.

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Now truthmaker theorists are a varied lot, and some might have been inclined from the start to reject the negative methodological principle. For those who reject the negative methodological principle, but think that the appeal to truthmakers can give us a method for determining what's fundamental, the challenge is to articulate some substitute principle that can tell us when we are licensed in denying that the apparent ontological commitments of a sentence are fundamentality commitments. Some other prominent suggestions about how to understand truthmaking, however, are likewise unpromising as ways of telling us what a theory is committed to saying is fundamental:

- 1) Truthmaking as supervenience: there could be no difference in what things are true without a difference in what things exist (Bigelow 1988, 132). But, of course, the supervenience claim will remain true, in whichever of the ontologically alternative languages we describe what exists, so this does not tell us how to determine what is fundamental.
- 2) Truthmaking as necessitation, so that x is a truthmaker for T iff T is true and, necessarily, if x exists, then T is true (Armstrong 1997, 15). But again if we accept the trivial entailments endorsed by easy ontology, then we must accept the *ontological flexibility of language*. And that means acknowledging that there will often be many options for ways of describing our (fundamental) ontological commitments (to universals versus tropes, to enduring versus perduring objects), each of which is such that, necessarily, if x exists, then T is true. (Necessarily, if Fido's whiteness trope exists, then 'Fido is white' is true. Necessarily, if the state of affairs of Fido exemplifying the universal of whiteness exists, then 'Fido is white' is true . . .). The idea of truthmaking as necessitation does not enable us to narrow down which is the *real truthmaker*, or real 'fundamental ontological commitment', of T .
- 3) Truthmaking as grounding, such that x is a truthmaker for T iff T is true and, necessarily, T 's truth is grounded in x (or T is true in virtue of the existence of x). Here again, given the ontological flexibility of language, we will often have many candidates for the grounds of a single sentence T 's truth. (For "Fido is white"

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we might have as candidates: Fido's having a whiteness trope, the state of affairs of Fido's being white existing, Fido's instantiating the universal of whiteness . . . and no obvious way to narrow them down, enabling us to say what the *real* fundamentality commitments are.)

In short, whichever approach to truthmaking one takes, it is hard to see how to parlay an appeal to truthmakers into a criterion to tell us what we are committed to saying is (or is not) fundamental, given some theory or set of statements we accept. For—given the ontological flexibility of language that follows from accepting easy ontology—any statement we could give of what the fundamental truthmakers are would have a range of rival ontologically alternative statements. And so, if we say that we can deny an entity (or kind of entity) is fundamental when it isn't *needed* as part of the supervenience base or to account for the necessitation of the truth, then we would again have to deny that there is anything we are committed to accepting as fundamental.

Yet if we fail to provide a principle for identifying the fundamental truthmakers of our sentences or theories, it seems we have no way of using the truthmaker approach to provide a principle for getting a uniquely true statement of what we are (and aren't) committed to treating as fundamental. Unless another principle is suggested,¹⁴ the appeal to truthmakers fails to provide a method for determining what our fundamentality commitments are.

I actually think that, if one accepts easy ontological arguments, it's right to deny that there is a *uniquely true statement of the* fundamental ontology that must be *presupposed* for certain statements to be made true. This conclusion in some ways echoes Jonathan Schaffer's arguments that the appeal to a necessitation criterion of truthmaking "does not in general provide *unique* truth-necessitators" (2008, 14). But there are two important differences. First, Schaffer's argument against uniqueness was based in the problem that (while one clearly has to appeal

¹⁴ Armstrong avails himself of an entirely different approach, suggesting the Eleatic proposal as a way of trying to find the fundamental entities—they must be those that make a contribution to the causal order of the world. I have argued against this elsewhere (see Thomasson 2008; 2015, ch. 2).

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to minimal truthmakers to make the approach work) one can't find a *minimal truthmaker* for *certain* truths (such as 'there are denumerably many electrons'). The problem raised here is more general: that for *any* truth we will be able to give a statement of the truthmakers in ontologically alternative terms, so that we can get no good claim via the truthmaker route to have a uniquely true statement of the fundamental ontology required. Second, while Schaffer argued that the truthmaker approach cannot provide a viable approach to ontological commitment, he allowed that appeal to truthmaker commitments can be "re-targeted to the task of fundamentality commitments" (2008, 19). What I am arguing is that the problem of failing to delimit a unique statement of *what the commitments are* applies whether we aim to state the *ontological commitments* or the *fundamentality commitments* of a theory. More precisely, it applies if the goal is seen as giving a uniquely true statement of what a theory is committed to as being fundamental.¹⁵

3. What fundamentality projects might remain?

There has been widespread and growing sympathy for the idea that fundamentality questions are the (or at least a) proper domain for metaphysics, and it is important to note that, despite the arguments of Section 2, certain versions of fundamentality questions may be pursued in complete consistency with the easy approach to ontology. Fundamentality questions that can be answered *empirically*, for example, are as much on the table as ever.¹⁶ As long as it is empirical, easy ontology raises no doubts about the work of physics, say, in telling us that atoms are more fundamental than molecules, that particles such as protons, and neutrons and electrons are more fundamental than atoms, and that quarks are more fundamental than protons and neutrons.

¹⁵ This is *not* a goal of Schaffer's (see Section 3), who aptly treats the fundamentality commitments as merely providing *constraints*, and so this line of criticism does not apply to his work. (More on this in Section 3.)

¹⁶ Schaffer again provides an interesting contrast case to Cameron. For he makes use of both arguments from mereology and empirical reason, from quantum mechanics, to hold that the "physical story is best told in terms of fields pervading the whole cosmos, rather than in terms of local particles" (2010b, 51).

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The easy ontologist may also be open to addressing certain questions of *relative* fundamentality in conceptual terms.¹⁷ Perhaps one could use a restricted version of our negative methodological principle to offer at least some assessments of relative fundamentality: If “B” can be trivially inferred from an ontological alternative “A”, *and the reverse is not the case*, then “A” is a *more* fundamental sentence, and any apparent commitments of “B” that are not among the apparent commitments of “A” would *not* be fundamental truthmakers. That would entitle us to deny that disjunctive properties and determinables are fundamental. It might thereby enable us to get local orderings of some more and less fundamental sentences and corresponding entities (or perhaps, if you prefer, of dependence or grounding relations among entities). This might indeed be a worthwhile and manageable project, which can be carried on within a language, by assessing certain one-way conceptual relations. In this way, the appeal to truthmakers also might give us *license* to embrace a more parsimonious view of what’s fundamental—allowing that some things are things we should say exist, but deny are fundamental.

These projects, of course, are not the same as Cameron’s project. For he insists that the *metaphysician’s* fundamentality question “cannot be answered by the combination of conceptual analysis and empirical observation: it is a substantive metaphysical question” (forthcoming, 10 in draft). And he seeks not merely local claims of relative fundamentality, but a uniquely true statement of what the fundamental entities are: “We are [fundamentality] committed to what must exist to make true the claims we make about the world, and there *is* a unique answer to the question of what those truthmakers are” (forthcoming, 16 in draft).

In his most recent work,¹⁸ Cameron seems to accept that there is no criterion we can use to determine what is needed to make a claim true, and in response rejects the need for the truthmaker theorist to give “some general principle about what is or is not needed to make some claim true”. Instead, he suggests that we can discover what the unique fundamental truthmakers are only by “engaging in the highly speculative

¹⁷ Although we need not be committed to the idea that *all* such questions of the relative fundamentality (of Ps versus Qs) are answerable.

¹⁸ Which was responding to an earlier version of this paper.

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and highly fallible project of metaphysics . . . We have to get our hands dirty and engage with all the arguments metaphysicians give concerning the benefits of an ontology of tropes versus an ontology of states of affairs, or of the costs and benefits ontological nihilism” (forthcoming, 16 in draft).

Whether such a project can be done, and, if so, how one could do it, would have to be topics for another occasion. It is worth noting, however, that adopting the easy approach to ontology should give us reason to hesitate before embracing this project. For if there are often mutual (rather than one-way) trivial entailments across sentences—all true—that have different apparent ontological commitments, what grounds can there be for thinking that one but not the other (of statements made in various ontologically alternative languages) gives us the uniquely true statement of what the fundamental ontology is? Taking on this project leaves us with a massive (and familiar) epistemological puzzle: how are we supposed to tell *which* of these is the *real* grounds of the truth? Avoiding such epistemological mysteries for metaphysics was, of course, a central goal of the project of easy ontology.

One response to the epistemological mystery is to suggest that, while there are different ways of saying what the fundamental truthmakers are, we should simply weigh up the competing options by comparing theoretic virtues, and thereby arrive at the true fundamental ontology.¹⁹ There are, however, familiar grounds (which I will not rehash here) for doubting that we can appeal to theoretic virtues to answer serious metaphysical questions.²⁰ At this stage in the dialectic, we might expect some response to the criticisms of the epistemological mysteries surrounding such serious approaches to metaphysics.

Another reason for doubting the viability of Cameron’s ambitious project comes from truthmaker theory itself. For many truthmaker theorists were originally motivated by criticisms of the so-called ‘picture theory’ of the relation between language and the world, according to

¹⁹ Cameron (forthcoming, 16 in draft) comes close to suggesting this, recommending that we simply engage in arguments assessing costs and benefits. Laurie Paul (2012) explicitly defends appealing to theoretic virtues as a method for metaphysics.

²⁰ For an overview of some of these epistemological difficulties, see my (2017b, 369–70).

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which “the character of reality can be ‘read off’ our linguistic representations of reality—or our suitably regimented linguistic representations of reality” (Heil 2003, 6). A truthmaker theorist who aims to provide a uniquely true description of what’s fundamental denies that we can read features of reality off *just any* ways we have of representing reality. Nonetheless, in thinking that there is (among all the ontologically alternative ways in which fundamental reality might be described) one that is uniquely true in ‘corresponding to the ontological structure of the world’, Cameron still presupposes that there is some *privileged* representation of reality where the terms of the language ‘line up with’ the *true* fundamental ontology—and so seems committed to a version of the picture theory that many truthmaker theorists reject.

Given the availability of ontologically alternative languages, however, it seems likely that any statement one could give of what *the* fundamental entities are could be rivalled by a statement in an ontologically alternative language. The idea that one but not the others of these ontologically alternative languages gives us the ‘true’ story about what the fundamental entities are seems to itself rely on a picture theory that would take the world to have to have a fundamental ontological structure that mirrors some but not other modes of expression.

The real lesson of the need to abandon the picture theory, I would say, is that we should give up looking for a ‘best language’ in which one could then claim to have a correlation between the terms of the language and the ‘true ontology’—or even the ‘true *fundamental* ontology’ of the world. And that means giving up looking for a uniquely true *statement* of what the true ontology of the world is. For in whatever terms we describe *the* fundamental ontology, these could (assuming we accept easy ontological inferences) be expressed instead in some ontologically alternative language, with different apparent ontological commitments. And we are left with the usual crisis in the epistemology of metaphysics in asking by what methods we could possibly hope to determine which of these is ‘the correct’ one. (I hope I will be forgiven if I find ‘we just have to get our hands dirty and do some really hard metaphysics’ to be a less than satisfying response to the epistemological crisis.)

All of this adds up to trouble for the view that one can both accept the easy ontologist’s trivial arguments for the existence of many sorts of

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entity, and yet still think that truthmaker theory will enable us to engage in a new ontological project: determining what (given our best theory) we are committed to saying is fundamental. As I have argued, if we accept the idea that language is ontologically flexible, then the appeal to truthmakers cannot give us any method for determining what the fundamental truthmakers are. Moreover, even if one allows that truthmakers give us no method, embracing the project of finding a uniquely true statement of what the fundamental truthmakers are leaves us in epistemological mystery, and leads us back to a version of the picture theory that the appeal to truthmakers was designed to free us from.

Not all truthmaker theorists embrace the goal of getting a uniquely true statement of what's fundamental.²¹ Early on, Armstrong acknowledged that “in metaphysics we have a certain latitude in what we assign as truthmakers for particular truths... There can very reasonably be disagreement among metaphysicians... about what the truthmakers for certain truths are” (2004, p. 33). Jonathan Schaffer explicitly notes that often a theory will only have *disjunctive* fundamentality commitments—say, to arrangements of particles, or objects, or a wave function, or... which simply act as *constraints* without telling us the true fundamental ontology (2008, 18). The theory that simply states ‘You exist’, for example:

is fundamentality-committed to the existence of fundamental entities sufficient to ground the truth of the proposition that you exist. This does not tell us whether these fundamental entities are an arrangement of particles, or perhaps an effective wave-function abstracted from the wave-function of the whole universe, or anything else. But it does impose constraints. Supposing that particles are fundamental, it tells us that the fundamental entities include particles arranged you-wise.
(2008, 18)

Schaffer is admirably upfront in rejecting the goal of finding a uniquely true statement of the fundamental ontology, and doesn't propose any

²¹ It seems that Heil and Dyke would both reject such projects.

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principle to aid in determining what *the* fundamental ontology is.²² All he gives is a way of conceiving of truthmaking as grounding, according to which:

For all p , for all w , (if p is true at w , then p 's truth at w is grounded in the fundamental features of w). (2008, 10)

But (given the openness of the truthmaking constraint) this does not even purport to give us guidance on determining *which* of various ontologically alternative statements gives us a statement of what those fundamental truthmakers are.²³

Schaffer's own proposed answer to what the fundamental truthmakers are also remains admirably neutral among statements that could be made in ontologically alternative languages. His proposed answer is that the one and only truthmaker (in any given world) is *the world* (2010a, 307). But what is the world? At one point he speaks of it as a 'big concrete object', but quickly adds that this:

will play no role in the discussion. It is merely grammatically impossible to speak of the truthmakers in a category-neutral way. The fan of facts may substitute a fact, namely, *the way the world is* . . . The fan of tropes may substitute the global tropes, namely, *the ways that are the world*. (2010a, 309)

If we do aim to determine what is fundamental by appealing to what the basic truthmaker(s) are, then it may indeed be that the most that

²² Heil also does not suggest that we can appeal to truthmakers to determine what the fundamental ontology is, saying for example "It is an open question what the ultimate truthmakers are for true descriptions of the world" (2003, 189). Instead, he appeals to truthmakers largely in opposing the 'picture theory', and insisting that statements about ordinary objects, mental states, and the like may be made true by the world, without requiring that we 'posit' 'higher level' entities as truthmakers (2003, 55).

²³ Rettler (2015, §5) similarly accepts that "we are not able to distinguish between whether tables or simples-arranged-tablewise are the truthmakers for sentences about tables". His 'general truthmaker view' just maintains that we are committed to there being *something* that makes the statements we accept true, and so also seems to retain the needed ontological neutrality (2015, 16). As Rettler puts it, on his General Truthmaker View, ontological commitments "can't be read off of sentences at all" (2015, 19).

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can be said is that *the world*—in this ontologically neutral sense—is what is fundamental.²⁴ For rival *ontological descriptions* of the world, in ontologically alternative languages, will always remain available, undermining the claim of any such description to provide the uniquely true (ontological) account of what the fundamental entities are.

This does capture something of what truthmaker theorists wanted: the idea that, as Heather Dyke puts it, “what reality is like dictates which of our utterances are true. Truths are true in virtue of the way reality is” (2007, 80). And it does seem to me clearly a better alternative—and one that does not invite epistemic mysteries—to simply accept that *the world* (in an ontologically neutral sense) (Schaffer 2008) or being ‘something’ (in an ontologically neutral sense) (Rettler 2015) may make *all* of the relevant ontologically alternative statements true—there being no pressure to choose among them, or pretend that the world somehow makes this choice for us.

Nonetheless, as I will turn to argue next, even accepting the generic idea that the world or ‘something’ makes all of our statements true may be accepting too much.

4. Truthmakers as a constraint

As the discussion in Section 3 suggests, the truthmaker approach may be taken as having a more modest goal: simply imposing a *constraint* or *requirement* on any acceptable ontological view, that one must at least give *some* account of what the fundamental truthmakers *are* for the claims one accepts. One might, of course, accept this job for truthmakers without embracing the idea that there is a uniquely true statement of what the fundamental truthmakers are. Indeed this is, I think, the more standard view among truthmaker theorists.

²⁴ And this should be taken not as an endorsement of a ‘blobby’ ontology, of a world without ontological distinctions, but rather as a refusal to privilege any particular *statement of the ontology* in more ontologically specific terms.

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Truthmakers have often been invoked as a constraint in metaphysics. Both Armstrong (2004) and Heil (2003) trace the idea of truthmakers to C. B. Martin, who introduced the truthmaker principle that “when a statement concerning the world is true, there must be something about the world that makes it true” (Heil 2003, 61). As the idea of truthmakers was popularized by Armstrong, the primary role of the appeal to truthmakers was to serve as a constraint on metaphysics. Armstrong introduces his book on truthmakers by criticizing Ryle for failing to say what the truthmakers are for dispositional truths, and writing “the truthmaker insight . . . prevents the metaphysician from letting dispositions ‘hang on air’ as they do in Ryle’s philosophy of mind. That is the ultimate sin in metaphysics, or at any rate, in a realist metaphysics” (2004, 3). Thus, the appeal to truthmakers is often thought to play a central role in ‘catching cheaters’ and ruling out ‘dubious ontologies’. Theodore Sider writes that the point of the truthmaker principle (that “for every truth T, there exists an entity—a ‘truth-maker’—whose existence suffices for the truth of T”) is to “rule out dubious ontologies that posit ‘ungrounded’ truths” (2001, 36), and to catch ‘cheaters’ who are “unwilling to accept an ontology robust enough to bear the weight of the truths [they feel] free to invoke” (2001, 41).

And so, since its inception, a popular use of truthmaker theory has been the idea that the appeal to truthmakers can enable us to *rule out* certain ontological views: that if truthmakers are *not* provided, the view is *illegitimate*. This idea is enshrined in the doctrine known as ‘the truthmaker principle’: the view that every true proposition must be made true by something (Beebe and Dodd 2005, 1). Armstrong proposes the same idea under the name ‘Truthmaker Maximalism’—the idea that “every truth has a truthmaker” (2004, 5). Yet he admits that he does not “have any direct argument” for Truthmaker Maximalism, adding simply, “My hope is that philosophers of realist inclinations will be immediately attracted to the idea that a truth, any truth, should depend for its truth on something ‘outside’ it, in virtue of which it is true” (2004, 7). This hope has been borne out—many *have* been immediately attracted by it. But the question is whether that attraction comes from considering a too narrow diet of examples, and from insufficient

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appreciation of the strengths of alternative views, particularly non-Representational views of certain areas of discourse.²⁵

The Rylean example immediately shows the problem with the idea that appeals to truthmakers provides a suitable way of ‘catching cheaters’ and ruling out certain views. For Ryle (1949) is not properly criticized as failing to answer the question of what the truthmakers are for dispositional truths (about the mind or anything). The very point of Ryle’s discussion in *The Concept of Mind* (which Armstrong seemed to miss) was to argue against the assumption that all forms of discourse served the same functional role—of aiming to *describe* portions of reality (such that we can then aptly ask “what way is the world in virtue of which these truths are true?”). Instead, as Ryle (1949) argues at length, dispositional talk does not even *aim to describe* covert dispositional properties, categorical properties, laws of nature, or powers. Instead, it serves a very different function: *licensing inferences* about what might happen in a variety of circumstances.

While there is not space to fully make this case here, the use of truthmakers even in the limited role of ‘catching cheaters’, by requiring metaphysicians to state the truthmakers for their claims, completely ignores the possibility of a *functional pluralism* in language: the idea that areas of discourse may have different functions, and that not all forms of discourse (not even all indicative utterances) serve the purpose of describing or tracking some portion of reality that must be a certain way to make the statement true. Truthmaker theorists assume that all true simple indicative sentences have truthmakers (Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984, 313–14)—but this is to assume a kind of functional monism. It is to assume something like what Huw Price calls a ‘Representationalist’ theory of language that assumes that all our “statements ‘stand for’, or ‘represent’ aspects of the world” (Price 2011, 5). This is an assumption Ryle fought against, Wittgenstein warned of, and that, more recently, such authors as Huw Price (2011, 14–33), Robert Brandom (1994), and Michael Williams (2011) have inveighed against in general terms.

²⁵ Blackburn (1993, 4) uses the term ‘non-descriptive’ rather than ‘non-Representational’ for such views.

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If we take on board the assumption that all true indicative statements require truthmakers, taken as “some portion of reality in virtue of which that truth is true” (Armstrong 2004, 5), then we presuppose that all such indicative statements *have the function of tracking certain features of the world*²⁶—such that the relevant statements are *defective* if there fails to be some feature of the world that can *make them true*. But there are well-developed, viable philosophical approaches to many areas of discourse that *deny* this (Price 2011). As an early example, one can find Ramsey’s (1931) view that universal generalizations (what he called ‘variable hypotheticals’) “are not judgments but rules for judging. ‘If I meet a phi, I shall regard it as a psi’”, where his reason for this is in part because asking ‘what would make [For all x, Px] true’ would “force us to make it a conjunction, and to have a theory of conjunctions which we cannot express for lack of symbolic power” (1929, 134). In more recent work, consider the expressivist views of moral discourse developed by Simon Blackburn (1993) and Allan Gibbard (2003); the treatments of modal discourse by Wilfred Sellars (1958), Robert Brandom (1994), and myself (2020); and many other cases. Such non-Representational approaches treat an area of discourse as fundamentally serving some other function—say, to express and coordinate attitudes, to endorse prescriptions, to make explicit the rules of use for our terms, or to license inferences.

Fully developed,²⁷ alternative functional stories may also explain why we come to make the relevant statements in the indicative mood, and how they may be *true*, without that requiring that they be *made* true by some ‘portion of reality’ (Price 2011, 8–9). Here again, there is an important connection to easy ontology. For example, once we accept that there are easy inferences from any proposition <that P> to “It is a fact <that P>”, we can be assured that we are entitled to infer, say, from ‘torturing kittens is morally wrong’ that ‘it is a fact that torturing kittens is morally wrong’—and so to acquire a commitment to what I have elsewhere called a form of ‘simple realism’ about moral facts (2015,

²⁶ That is, roughly, that they serve as e-representations in something like Price’s sense (2011, 20) of representations that have as their job to “*co-vary* with something else—typically some *external* factor, or environmental condition” (2011, 20).

²⁷ For example, in Simon Blackburn’s (1993) ‘quasi-realist’ program.

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145–58). This adds to the plausibility of alternative functional stories, by showing that they are perfectly consistent with beliefs that there are the relevant facts, properties, etc. There are many forms of speech from which we can get trivial inferences *to* the existence of the relevant facts and objects rather than requiring that we ‘posit truthmakers’ to *explain* what *makes* the relevant claims true.

Once we (with the easy ontologist) see our talk about the relevant facts as derived by hypostatizations from other forms of speech, however, we can see that these facts are *not* suited to play the role of *truthmakers*. For truthmakers were supposed to play an *explanatory* role, to be *that in virtue of which the truth is true*. But if talk of such facts just arises via hypostatizations out of the relevant truths, then the facts posited can’t *explain* the truths except via a blatant dormitive virtue explanation.²⁸ Otherwise put, if saying ‘it is a fact that torturing kittens is morally wrong’ is just a hypostatization out of ‘torturing kittens is morally wrong’, licensed by the rules for introducing fact talk, then the former can’t *explain* what makes the latter true, any more than ‘poppies have the dormitive virtue’ (as a simple hypostatization out of ‘poppies make us sleepy’) can *explain why* poppies make us sleepy. So while we may start with an alternative functional story, and come to be entitled to say that such indicative statements in some deflated sense ‘describe facts’ about what is moral or what is possible, this is not a matter of treating them as *having the relevant facts as truthmakers* in the original sense given to the idea of ‘truthmakers’ as “that in the world *in virtue of which* sentences or propositions are true” (Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984, 289).²⁹ Accepting the easy approach to ontology thus both makes it clear how a non-Representational approach may lead to a form of (simple) realism and why it would nonetheless be a mistake to treat the relevant

²⁸ For further discussion of this point, see my (2015, 156–7).

²⁹ I have no objection if someone wants to introduce some deflated sense of ‘truthmaking’ according to which it only requires, for every truth P, that there be a fact that P (without requiring that it is *in virtue of* the existence of P that the statement is true). Nor do I object to asking questions of the form “What makes it true that P?” in the sense of what Price calls a “first-order request for an explanation” of why P—for example, asking for a scientific explanation of why snow is white (rather than for a ‘metaphysical explanation’ of what makes “Snow is white” true) (Price 2011, 14).

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facts as *truthmakers*, or to demand that some proper truthmakers be presented in order to avoid ‘cheating’.

I do not aim here to argue for any (local or global) non-Representational view. All I aim to note is that truthmaker theorists *are not entitled to presuppose that all such views are false, untenable, or involve ‘cheating’*. Accepting a ‘truthmaker principle’ as a way of ruling out certain views does just that, and blinds us to the possibilities that different areas of discourse may serve different functions, in ways that make it inappropriate to demand some account of what the ‘portion of reality’ is, *in virtue of which* they are made true. As Price, following a range of expressivists, urges, “issues that seem at first sight to call for a metaphysical treatment may be best addressed in another key altogether” (2011, 26). That is, before demanding truthmakers for all truths, we had better step back and settle whether we have an adequate understanding of how the discourse in question functions, whether it aims to track worldly features, and, if not, what functions it does serve in our lives and in our language, and how the discourse works.

All of this requires far more extensive discussion, of course. The lesson here is simply that one is certainly not entitled to unilaterally invoke a ‘truthmaker principle’ as a way to rule out certain sorts of view without engaging with the contrary view that such a principle is based on a failure to acknowledge the possibility of functional pluralism in language, and without engaging with contrary proposals about how different areas of discourse work, what functions they serve, and how they may entitle us to refer to the relevant facts and objects without those having any prospect of serving as truthmakers. This gives us reason for pause in accepting an appeal to truthmakers as a constraint on ontologies, even if it is stated ontologically neutrally in terms that say only that all true propositions must be made true by ‘the world’ or (with Rettler 2015) say merely that all true propositions must have ‘something’ that makes them true.

5. Conclusions

The easy approach to ontology was formulated in opposition to the neo-Quinean approach. While it renders existence questions easy to answer,

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there is a common thought that it leaves open other difficult questions for ontology—including the question “What makes what true?” As I have argued, this question may itself be interpreted either in a strong sense (asking for a uniquely true statement of what the fundamental truthmakers are) or in a weak sense (simply requiring that metaphysicians give *some account* of the truthmakers for any truths they accept). I have argued, however, that those who accept the easy approach to ontology have reason to hesitate to pursue either of these questions. While truthmaker theorists in some ways appear as allies of easy ontology, the easy approach to ontology, more fully understood, also casts doubt on their ‘further projects’ for metaphysics.

What else should we do? As Section 4 suggests, one thing we should do is to begin our inquiries a step back from metaphysics—not just jumping into the question of what the truthmakers are for a given area of discourse, but first asking questions about the functions the discourse fulfills, and the rules it follows.³⁰ As the easy approach to ontology shows, following those rules sometimes can entitle us to refer to the relevant objects and facts without ‘positing’ them as ‘truthmakers’.

Another thing we can do is to reconceive of the work of metaphysics, thinking of it neither as in the business of discovering what exists or nor as aiming to discover what makes what true.³¹ Instead, I have argued elsewhere (2018, 2017a, 2017b) that we should reconceive the work of metaphysics as fundamentally conceptual work. Some metaphysical work may be better seen as involving descriptive conceptual work in investigating the workings and interrelations among our concepts. That may include work that could reveal relative fundamentality relations as well as modal truths, and work in determining whether and, if so, how parts of our everyday conceptual scheme may be reconciled with the conceptual schemes and empirical results from the natural sciences. In other cases, I think metaphysical work is better reconceived as involving *normative* conceptual work: not analyzing the concepts we do have, but

³⁰ At least some truthmaker theorists might be open to this move. John Heil, for example, at a couple of places speaks favorably of the idea that “the concepts we use have evolved to satisfy a variety of purposes” (2003, 43; cf. 49).

³¹ Though the empirical sciences may certainly address non-mysterious versions of existence and fundamentality questions.

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pressing for what concepts we *should* have, to serve a variety of purposes in the social and natural contexts in which we find ourselves. But all of that is the story for another day.³²

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³² See my (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018) for development of this idea.

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