



# Deflationism and truthmaking

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## Abstract

This paper is about the relationship between truthmaking—one of the pillars of contemporary metaphysics—and deflationism about truth—one of the main contenders in the debate about truth, and a key component of the broad anti-metaphysical philosophical approach known as (contemporary) pragmatism. Many philosophers have argued that deflationism and truthmaking are incompatible or in conflict in some interesting way. Some take this to count against deflationism, others to count against truthmaking. In this paper I argue that deflationism and truthmaking are compatible in most of the ways in which they are commonly thought to be incompatible. Deflationism does not render truthmaking unintelligible, avoidable, unmotivated, or trivial NB this must be changed in the abstract itself too (e.g. in page 2 of the file this proof is part of.). While deflationism is incompatible with certain ideas within mainstream truthmaking, I argue that these ideas result from merely optional assumptions and principles commonly accepted by mainstream truthmaker theorists.

**Keywords** Deflationism · Truthmaking · Truth · Truthmakers · Metaphysics

## 1 Introduction

This paper is about the relationship between truthmaking—one of the pillars of contemporary metaphysics—and deflationism about truth—one of the main contenders in the debate about truth, and a key component of the broad anti-metaphysical philosophical approach known as (contemporary) pragmatism. Many philosophers have argued that deflationism and truthmaking are incompatible or in conflict in some interesting way. Some take this to count against deflationism, others to count against truthmaking.

In this paper I argue that deflationism and truthmaking are compatible in most of the ways in which they are commonly thought to be incompatible. Deflationism does not render truthmaking unintelligible. Nor does it entail that truthmaking questions are

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avoidable, unmotivated, or that they have only trivial answers. Deflationism is incompatible with certain conceptions of truthmaking, one common motivation for believing that all truths have truthmakers, and it blocks one route to believing that truthmakers must be objects. However, I shall argue that these ideas result from assumptions and principles which are commonly accepted by mainstream truthmaker theorists but which are purely optional.

As such, the apparent conflict between deflationism and truthmaking rests on the fact that both sides have built more into the notion of truthmaking than is necessary. Truthmaker theorists themselves have built in significant philosophical ideas into their defences of truthmaking, and it is to these that philosophers who support deflationism have reacted. Without these optional extras, deflationism and truthmaking are entirely compatible.

The idea that deflationism is compatible with truthmaking is not new; we find arguments to this effect from various writers, including Bigelow (2009), Lewis (2001), and perhaps the best known deflationist, Horwich (2008). The idea has been challenged by defenders of truthmaking like MacBride (2013) and Armstrong (1997, p. 128) but also deflationists like Huw Price (2013, ch.1) and Blackburn (2012).<sup>1</sup> My argument differs from these earlier defences of the compatibility of deflationism and truthmaking in two ways. First, there are no replies to the arguments made by deflationists like Price and Blackburn; defenders of truthmaker theory have tended to agree that deflationism and truthmaking are in tension, and taken this to count against deflationism. In Sects. 6, 7 I address these arguments.

Second, the majority of work in this area has focused on the idea that truthmaking primarily concerns truthbearers like propositions, and that while there are similar ideas which do not concern truthbearers, these are therefore not really about truth.<sup>2</sup> In Sect. 3 I motivate and apply a distinction between different ways of talking about truth which shows that this dilemma is a false one: we can talk about truthmaking and the notion of truth without focusing on truthbearers. When we do this, I argue, we get new results about the compatibility of deflationism and truthmaking, which apply both to older arguments from truthmaker theorists and the newer ones from deflationists.

The structure of this paper is as follows. After outlining deflationism in Sect. 2, I will show how deflationists can make sense of truthmaking, why they have good reason to believe in it, but why this doesn't force them to take facts and properties as truthmakers (Sects. 3–5). I will then refute Huw Price's argument that deflationism lets us avoid answering questions about truthmaking, before showing how deflationism does not make such questions trivial (Sects. 6–7). I finish by briefly discussing the significance of the idea that deflationism makes truthmaking a 'first-order' matter.

## 2 Deflationism about truth

There are many different kinds of deflationism (sometimes known as 'minimalism'). In this paper I will only discuss Paul Horwich's view, mainly because it is typically

<sup>1</sup> See also the writers referenced in MacBride (2019, §3.4).

<sup>2</sup> See for instance McGrath (2003) for a nice example of the focus on propositions, and Horwich (2008, pp. 217ff), Lewis (2001, pp. 278–9), MacBride (2013) for the idea that without the focus on propositions, we are not really talking about truth.

the favourite view of those who use deflationism to undermine truthmaker theory—philosophers like Huw Price and Simon Blackburn—and the primary deflationary view under discussion in the literature on this topic.<sup>3</sup> I won't ask whether other forms of deflationism conflict with truthmaking. Horwich's deflationism focuses on propositions as the primary bearers of truth, the primary things to which our concept of truth applies. Other views take sentences or other truthbearers as the primary bearers of truth. Horwich's view explains truth as it applies to propositions, and then later explains truth as it applies to other truthbearers. In what follows I'll be talking about propositional truth only.

For our purposes, then, deflationism involves two key claims. The first is that there is no true substantial theory of truth (Horwich 1998, pp. 120–122). A substantial theory of truth is one that specifies a property which is necessarily coextensive with truth—a property that necessarily all and only the true propositions have—such that this necessary coextensivity explains the facts about truth. For instance, the following theories are substantial ones:

- x is true iff x corresponds to a fact
- x is true iff x would be part of the maximally coherent set of propositions
- x is true iff x is useful to believe
- x is true iff x would be believed by an omniscient being

These biconditionals aim to specify a property of truth which is necessarily coextensive with it, such that this necessary coextensivity explains the facts about truth. Deflationism rejects all such theories. Either the property they specify is not necessarily coextensive with truth—consider the third theory above—or it is but this is not explanatory, as in the case of the fourth theory in this list which gives us no illumination of truth whatsoever. So according to Horwich: there is no property necessarily coextensive with truth and which explains truth.

The second key deflationist claim is more positive. It is that that our grasp of the concept of truth is exhausted by our disposition to infer according to the 'T-schema' (where ' $\langle p \rangle$ ' denotes the proposition that  $p$ ):

(T)  $\langle p \rangle$  is true if and only if  $p$

and that the collected instances of this schema form the most basic or fundamental facts about truth.<sup>4</sup> The instances themselves are basic—they are not derived from or explained by anything else. Deflationists think that all the facts involving truth can be explained on the basis of this schema plus other facts not about truth (Horwich 1998, Ch.1). This positive claim fits in nicely with the deflationist's rejection of substantive theories of truth: it is a replacement for such theories.

Deflationists supplement this positive claim with explanations of why we have the concept of truth and the truth predicate ' $\dots$  is true'. For our purposes, however, the most important features of deflationism are its rejection of substantial theories of truth, its claim that the instances of (T) are the basic facts about truth – they are not derived from any other principle about truth—and its claim that the disposition to infer according to it is constitutive of grasp of the concept of truth.

<sup>3</sup> See Horwich (1998) for Horwich's view, and Price (2011, 2013); Blackburn (1998, 2012); Horwich (2008); MacBride (2013); Lewis (2001); Simpson (2016) for some examples.

<sup>4</sup> I ignore complications concerning the Liar paradox as they don't affect my argument here.

### 3 Truthmaking

In this section I'll explain the idea of truthmaking and argue that deflationists can make sense of it. The basic idea of a truthmaker is simple: it's an existing object which makes a truth true. Here 'makes' is not causal: a truthmaker is not something which causes a truth to be true. Rather, most read it in terms of the phrase 'in virtue of': a truthmaker is an existing object in virtue of whose existence a truth is true. Most truthmaker theorists think this implies that a truthmaker must both necessitate and explain a truth it makes true: necessarily, if the truthmaker exists, the truth is true, and the truth is explained by the existence of the truthmaker.

The idea of explaining a truth is ambiguous. Consider the question of what explains the truth of (grass is green). This can be read in two ways. First it could be read as asking what explains the fact that grass is green, what explains why grass is green. Second, it could be read as asking what it is for (grass is green) to be true, asking what it takes for that proposition to have the property of being true. This question is focused on the proposition itself: it asks what that proposition needs to be like to be true. For instance, a coherentist may say that for (grass is green) to be true is for it to be a member of some special set of propositions, so what explains its truth is its membership in this set.

A nice way to understand this is to distinguish between two ways of talking about truth, truths, and the truth.<sup>5</sup> The first is perhaps the usual way in philosophical contexts. On this usage, 'truth' serves two roles. It names a property, truth, which we can call *being true* to avoid confusion. It also acts as a sortal term like 'table', applying to truthbearers which have this property, the property *being true*. In both of these functions, 'truth' corresponds to the predicate '... is true' which combines with a name to form a sentence, as in '(grass is green) is true' and 'Gödel's theorem is true'.

In this first sense, then, truth is a property of truths, and truths are objects—truthbearers like sentences, propositions, beliefs, and perhaps other things too. If you think a sentence inscription on a piece of paper can be a truthbearer, then in this sense you can fold a truth, tear it, burn it, and so on.

However, there is another way of talking about truth. On this usage, 'truth' does not name a property, nor is it a genuine sortal, applying to objects with that property. On this usage, talking of truth means talking about what the world is like. When we talk of truth in this way, as what the world is like, as how things are, we need not have truthbearers in mind. This is so even though we may use 'truth' to talk about 'truths' plural as well as *the* truth or just truth. While we can talk about truths in this sense, we are not talking about objects which have the property being true – we're just talking about the ways things are.

In the second sense, truths are not really *things* at all – not objects, not individuals that can bear properties. You cannot tear or burn truths in this sense, as you can tear and burn sentences on paper. The second sense of truth goes with the truth operator 'it is true that ...', which takes a sentence to form a new one whose truth-conditions are the same as the first. When we say 'it is true that grass is green' this is about grass and

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Daniel Brigham for bringing the idea behind this distinction to my attention, and for a great deal of helpful discussion of it.

its colour, not a truthbearer like a sentence or a proposition. This sense of truth goes along with sentential quantification: to say that something is true in this second sense is to say: ‘for some  $p$ ,  $p$ ’, or to use A.N. Prior’s idiom, ‘things are somehow’ (Prior 1971, p. 38).

We can talk about truths in the second sense as ‘bearerless truths’, though this is still misleading as it suggests that truths in this sense are objects, which they are not. We could talk about them as ‘ways the world is’; this will still give the impression that truths in this sense are objects, if we reify *ways*, but may be less misleading on this score than ‘bearerless truths’ is. Indeed it is misleading to even say ‘talk about *them*’ as this gives the impression that there are such *things* as bearerless truths. However, I will stick with this terminology in what follows, since my claim is that we naturally talk about ‘truths’ in this bearerless sense, and I will use ‘bearerless’ to mark this usage.

Suppose there was a world without any truthbearers of any kind: no sentences, no beliefs, no propositions, and so on. In that world, there would be no truths in the first sense—no things which have the property *being true*. This is because there would be no things apt to bear that property. But there would be plenty of truths in the latter sense, because that world could be plenty of different ways. It’s just that these truths, in the latter sense, are not objects with the property *being true*. They are not objects at all; they are ways the world is, and ways the world is are not objects either.

A natural way to express the second way of talking about truth is to talk about facts. We could distinguish between truths—true truthbearers, objects which have the property *being true*—and facts, ways the world is. However, this is potentially misleading. Some philosophers understand facts as things. Some of them take facts to be true propositions. In this sense, facts are things which have the property *being true*—because they are propositions which have this property—and so they are just truths in the first way of speaking. Others, like Armstrong, take facts to be metaphysical entities, substances in their own right which are the fundamental constituents of reality. On this view, reality is made up of objects like *the ball’s being red*, which are real objects, involving a particular, a property, and a tie between them. Armstrong calls these *states of affairs* (see e.g. Armstrong 1997).

The second way of talking about truth matches neither of these things. On both of these views, facts are things—objects which bear properties. On the first view a fact is a proposition which has the property *being true*. It is the first kind of truth, then, and when we say ‘a fact’ we are using ‘fact’ as a sortal, to pick out an object. On the second view a fact is a special kind of object, distinct from particulars and properties, and more fundamental than them. This is not what I mean when I use the second sense of truth. A nominalist, who rejects states of affairs, can believe in facts in my sense. In a world containing a red rose, such a nominalist can say that there would be a fact—namely that the rose is red—but no Armstrongian state of affairs. In the second sense, there would also be a truth in such a world.<sup>6</sup>

So we have two ways of using words like ‘truth’ and ‘true’. One concerns truthbearers: when we talk about truth in this sense, we are using ‘truth’ to pick out truthbearers

<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that there are no facts, or that there’s no sense to be made of true propositions serving certain roles that we might want to identify with facts. It is just to say that there is a distinction between these ways of using words like ‘truth’.

which have the property *being true*, or to pick out that property itself. The second does not concern truthbearers—it just concerns how the world is. When we use ‘truth’ in this sense, we are not really using it as a count noun, to name a thing which is true. We are just using it to talk about reality, more precisely to talk about things in reality – the subject matter of truthbearers rather than truthbearers themselves. I can wonder what *the truth* is, just by wondering what is the case in general.

These two senses of truth are, of course, closely related. Wherever we have a true truthbearer, the world is some way—we have a bearerless truth. If ⟨grass is green⟩ is true, then one truth about the world is that grass is green. And vice versa, so long as the relevant truthbearer exists: if grass is green, then ⟨grass is green⟩ is true so long as it exists. However, there is still a distinction here. One can understand truth in the bearerless sense without understanding what truthbearers are: the idea that the world is a certain way is independent of the idea that some linguistic or representational thing has some property. And truths in the former sense have features that those in the latter sense do not: we can pass around a book in which truths are literally written, but we cannot pass around ways the world is. We can write down many true truthbearers that all have the same content: so the truths in the first sense are replicable in a way that bearerless truths are not.

Some may argue that all talk of truths in the second ‘bearerless’ sense can be rendered as talk of truths in the first sense, as talk of true propositions. For instance, we could read ‘it is true that p’ as featuring a name ‘that p’ which refers to the proposition (p), and the sentence would stand to ‘(p) is true’ as ‘he’s stupid, your brother’ stands to ‘your brother is stupid’. However, it is not obvious that this general strategy could succeed. Consider when we talk about sad truths, as when we say it’s a sad truth that people suffer. If we take ‘that people suffer’ here as naming a proposition ⟨people suffer⟩, then this claim says: ‘it is a sad truth ⟨people suffer⟩’ which according to the method above would be rendered as ‘⟨people suffer⟩ is true and sad’. But this is wrong: it is not the proposition that is sad. Rather, it’s sad that people suffer. So instead we could say ‘it is a sad truth that people suffer’ means: ‘⟨people suffer⟩ is true and it’s sad that it is true’. But then we’ve introduced a new ‘that’ clause which we must read as naming a proposition, and the whole thing becomes: ‘⟨people suffer⟩ is true and it’s sad ⟨⟨people suffer⟩ is true⟩’. Once again, we must treat this as elliptical for ‘⟨people suffer⟩ is true and ⟨⟨people suffer⟩ is true⟩ is sad’. But once again, this won’t do: the proposition isn’t sad, it’s its truth that is sad, and ultimately all this means is that it’s sad that people suffer.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, going down such a route is ad hoc: there’s no reason to resist this distinction between ways of talking about truth. Making the distinction does not mean trying to eliminate talk of truths in the first sense, the true truthbearer sense. Nor does it mean saying that ‘that p’ never names a proposition, for instance in belief ascriptions. It just means admitting another way of using words like ‘true’ and ‘truth’ which does not pertain to truthbearers. While it is also true that it is not always clear which sense is in use in a particular context, and that it is not clear how to understand some claims

<sup>7</sup> It’s not clear how a way the world is, a bearerless truth, could be a sad *thing* either. But a way the world is is not really a thing anyway, a bearer of properties like sadness. And as before, there’s no reason to force a reading of ‘it’s sad that people suffer’ as ascribing a property of sadness to some thing, whether it is a proposition or something else. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

about bearerless truths—such as when we wonder what the truth is—the distinction still stands.<sup>8</sup>

So we have our distinction between two ways of talking about truth. The two ways to explain a truth correspond to this distinction. We can explain a truth by explaining why something is so. For instance, we can explain the truth that grass is green by explaining why grass is green. This treats truth in the bearerless sense. In the second sense, we explain a truth by explaining why a truthbearer has the property *being true*. Our focus is on the truthbearer itself and why it has this property.

Schulte (2011) draws on Benjamin Schnieder's (2006) notion of close explanations to make sense of the ambiguity in explaining truths. Schnieder defines closeness in terms of conjunctions of explanations. A proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  gives a closer explanation of a proposition  $\langle r \rangle$  than a third proposition  $\langle q \rangle$  does iff  $r$  because  $p$  and  $p$  because  $q$  (Schnieder 2006, p. 38). In this case,  $\langle p \rangle$  is in some sense between  $\langle r \rangle$  and  $\langle q \rangle$  in the explanatory chain. For instance, a functionalist may say that someone has a mental state  $M$  because they have a functional state  $F$ , which they have because they have a brain state  $B$ . For the functionalist,  $F$  is a closer explanation of  $M$  than  $B$  is. Moreover, for the functionalist  $F$  is the *closest* explanation of  $M$ : there is nothing between  $M$  and  $F$  which mediates the explanation, and no fact which explains this explanatory relation.<sup>9</sup>

Schulte points out that we can understand the less common reading of explaining a truth, the one which focuses on truthbearers and their possession of the property *being true*, in terms of closeness (2011, pp. 418ff). The closest explanation of  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$ 's truth will tell us *what it is* for that proposition to be true. It gives us the most basic thing we can say about the proposition's truth, the explanation which itself is not explicable. Less close explanations will explain why the conditions specified in the close explanations hold. For instance, if we say that the closest explanation of  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$ 's truth is that grass is green, less close explanations will explain why grass is green, perhaps in terms of truths about pieces of grass, chlorophyll, and so on.

On this basis, Schulte distinguishes two kinds of truthmaker explanations. He points out that the following two explanations are different in an important way:

- (1)  $\langle \text{Aristotle exists} \rangle$  is true because Aristotle exists.
- (2)  $\langle \text{Bertie believes Jeeves is clever} \rangle$  is true because Bertie has a state  $F$  with a given functional role.

While both of these explanations may be true, Schulte points out that the first explanation is essentially about the proposition concerned, while the second isn't.

We can see this by replacing each proposition with the relevant (bearerless) truth:

- (3) Aristotle exists because Aristotle exists.
- (4) Bertie believes Jeeves is clever because Bertie has a state  $F$  with a given functional role.

<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for this last example. We could treat it as wondering in general what is the case, or to use sentential quantification again, wondering in general which  $p$  are such that  $p$ .

<sup>9</sup> If as is common, we assume that explanation is a strict partial order, then closeness will be too, in the sense that the relation  $x$  is a closer explanation of  $\langle r \rangle$  than  $y$  will be a strict partial order, so that  $x$  is never closer than itself, if  $x$  is closer than  $y$  then  $y$  is not closer than  $x$ , and if  $x$  is closer than  $y$  and  $y$  is closer than  $z$ , then  $x$  is closer than  $z$ . I leave the proof of this as an exercise.

Only the latter is true. Schulte argues that this shows us that (1) is essentially about the proposition ⟨Aristotle exists⟩ and so concerns *what it is* for that proposition to be true. (2) on the other hand is not essentially about the proposition, since it remains true once the proposition is removed. Schulte calls explanations like (1) *simple* truthmaker explanations and those like (2) *substantial* ones.

In our terms, Schulte's distinction between simple and substantial truthmaker explanations corresponds with the distinction between a truth as a true truthbearer and a truth as a way the world is. Simple truthmaker explanations essentially concern true truthbearers; substantial ones primarily concern bearerless truths. We can understand this distinction in terms of closeness: simple explanations are the closest explanations of truthbearer truth, while substantial ones are more distant, since their main focus is on explaining bearerless truths which in turn explain the truth of truthbearers.

Schnieder and Schulte therefore argue that truthmaker explanations like

⟨grass is green⟩ is true in virtue of its truthmaker *g*

Are best read as *series* of explanations, involving two components:

- (i) ⟨grass is green⟩ is true in virtue of grass's being green and
- (ii) grass is green in virtue of *g*'s existence

As Schulte points out, these combine two elements: the explanation of a truthbearer's being true in terms of a bearerless truth, and the explanation of that truth in terms of another, namely that *g* exists.<sup>10</sup>

What will a deflationist have to say about all this? Well, for her, the closest possible explanation of the truth of ⟨grass is green⟩ is that grass is green, and the same goes for all propositions, since the instances of the T-schema are the most fundamental facts about truth. There can be no closer explanation of ⟨grass is green⟩'s truth than that grass is green: this explanation flows directly from the concept of truth, understood via the T-schema. There is some controversy about whether deflationists can agree that ⟨grass is green⟩ is true *because* grass is green. I follow Schnieder (2006) and Künne (2003, pp. 148ff) in taking the 'because' here to indicate a conceptual explanation, similar to when we say that Bertie is Angela's cousin *because* one of Bertie's parents is a sibling of one of Angela's parents. While this answer is controversial (see Liggins 2016), I will ignore this controversy since I'm only interested in the impact deflationism has if it succeeds, and it succeeds only if it can secure these explanations.<sup>11</sup>

As such, for the deflationist a truthmaker, say *g*, can explain a proposition's truth. However, if it does, this will not be the closest explanation possible. A truthmaker can only explain a proposition's truth by explaining a bearerless one. So *g* can explain ⟨grass is green⟩'s truth, but only by explaining why grass is green. In general, any true claim of the form

<sup>10</sup> Schulte talks in terms of facts instead of bearerless truths. I've changed this because as we've seen 'fact' usually means either a complex entity, which Armstrong calls a 'state of affairs', or a true proposition. Neither of these lines up with truths in the bearerless sense, ways the world is, which is what I'm talking about here.

<sup>11</sup> Deflationists typically want to agree that ⟨grass is green⟩ is true *because* grass is green, partly because this is intuitively true, and partly to explain away the intuitiveness of correspondence theories of truth (Horwich 1998, ch.7). If they cannot accept this, and in general that ⟨p⟩ is true because *p*, then their theory is severely weakened by their own lights. See also Stoljar and Damnjanovic (2014, §7.2).

(grass is green) is true in virtue of *g*'s existence

is true only because

Grass is green in virtue of *g*'s existence

is also true. Truthmaking explanations can *never* be closer than those given to us by the T-schema: there is nothing 'in between' grass's being green and (grass is green)'s truth in the explanatory chain.

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. As Horwich puts it:

...we should appreciate that the basic content of a truthmaker theory is formulated by propositions of the form "p because of x" or "p because x exists" (Horwich 2008, p. 273)

For instance, a truthmaker theory for philosophy of mind specifies objects in virtue of which (bearerless) truths about the mind hold. Or in other words, it non-causally explains various mental phenomena.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, for the deflationist, there's little difference between truthmaking and grounding—the general notion of non-causal (perhaps metaphysical) explanation (see, Fine 2001). As we've seen, truthmaking involves two ideas: that truthbearers' truth is explained by reality, and that bearerless truths typically also admit of, and require, explanations. For the deflationist, the first idea is dealt with as a basic upshot of the concept of truth, rather than in terms of a substantial theory of truth which brings in truthmakers. The second idea is where all the interest lies, for the deflationist. But this is just a matter of non-causal explanation of ways the world is.

So, to conclude, a deflationist can believe in truthmakers. They are objects in virtue of which bearerless truths hold. By explaining these bearerless truths, truthmakers explain the truth of various truthbearers. This explanation is always mediated by the basic truth found in the T-schema:  $\langle p \rangle$  is true because *p*. The more central claims of truthmaker theory are non-causal explanations of various bearerless truths, and deflationists will accept that there are such explanations.

## 4 Why believe in truthmaking?

Even if deflationists can believe in truthmakers, should they? Some say no, because truthmaker theory is often motivated by thoughts about truthbearers, and in particular by ideas close to the correspondence theory of truth. For instance, D.M. Armstrong (1997, p. 14), Alex Oliver (1996, p. 69), and Fraser MacBride (2013, p. 687) all claim that truthmaking, and the truthmaker principle that all truths have truthmakers, is just another form of the correspondence theory. Since deflationists reject that theory, they will surely reject truthmaking.

An important idea here is that the truthmaker principle—that every truth has a truthmaker—specifies a truthmaking *relation* between true truthbearers and things in

<sup>12</sup> See also McFetridge (1990); Smith and Simon (2007) for similar ideas.

the world, and that this is unacceptable to deflationists. Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra argues that truthmaking is an asymmetric relation holding between ‘a true proposition and a thing in the world’, and on this basis that ‘truth is a relational property of propositions’ (2005, p. 26). He claims that this links truthmaker theory closely to correspondence theories of truth (2005, n. 12 p. 26), something Oliver echoes when he says that the truthmaker principle is a ‘sanitised version of a correspondence theory’ (1996, p. 96). MacBride concurs, arguing that ‘The truthmaker principle is an expression of the general idea that truth is a relation to something worldly’ (2013, p. 687), and claiming that truthmaker theorists in general agree that ‘x makes it true that p’ denotes ‘a relation borne to a truth-bearer by something else, a truth-maker’ (2019).

This relational idea seems incompatible with deflationism. Armstrong claims that deflationism commits us to ‘the conclusion that there really is no truth relation that holds between the true proposition and the world’, because it says that ‘attaching the truth predicate to a proposition does not add anything to the mere assertion of that proposition’. (Armstrong 1997, p. 128). The key idea here is that to believe in truthmakers is to believe in a relation between true truthbearers and the world, but the deflationist cannot accept that truth is such a relation, since this goes above and beyond the instances of the T-schema which tell us only that any proposition  $\langle p \rangle$  is true iff  $p$ .

However this should not put deflationists off truthmaking. For the deflationist can believe in a truthmaking relation without believing that it gives us a theory of truth.<sup>13</sup> In other words, she can believe in truthmakers, without thinking that *what it is* for a proposition to be true is to have a truthmaker. She can do this by distinguishing two ways of denying a truth relation between true propositions and the world. First, it is clear that the deflationist does deny that the property *being true* is *constituted* by a relation between a true truthbearer and the world. That is to say, there is no relation R such that the biconditional

x is true iff x bears R to (something in) the world

is an *explanation* of what it is to be true. No such relation will explain truth; *a fortiori* no relation between a proposition and its truthmaker will explain the proposition’s truth. Partly this is because no such relation will explain the truth of the instances of the T-schema, which deflationists take to be inexplicable.

However, this doesn’t mean that there are no relations between truthbearers and truthmakers. The deflationist can admit these relations but take them as superficial. Consider the proposition that Ramsey is tall, call it R, and let  $r$  be a truthmaker for it. Can the deflationist believe in a truthmaking relation between  $r$  and R? She can argue as follows. For  $r$  to make R true is for R to be true in virtue of  $r$ ’s existence. But *being true in virtue of* is not a genuine relation between R and  $r$ . This is because all it takes for R to be true is for Ramsey to be tall. Moreover, this is the most basic thing we can say about what it is for R to be true. As such, for R to be true in virtue of  $r$ ’s existence is just for Ramsey to be tall in virtue of  $r$ ’s existence.

So the deflationist can believe in the truthmaking relation between an object and a proposition, she just believes that this holds because of the relation between the object

<sup>13</sup> See also Smith and Simon (2007); Lewis (2001); Horwich (2008).

and the subject matter of the proposition, and not in virtue of a relation involving the proposition itself. She can accept the truthmaking relation without thinking it explains truth, and hence without taking truth to be a relational property in any sense that conflicts with deflationism.

Moreover, note that the above argument does not apply to so-called *non-maximalists* like Simons (2005) and Mellor (2009), who believe that some but not all true propositions have truthmakers. Non-maximalists cannot think the truthmaker relation *constitutes* truth, since they think that some propositions are true yet do not bear this relation to anything. If deflationists accept non-maximalism they needn't worry about the correspondence idea.<sup>14</sup>

The conception of truth as a relation is very important when we consider deflationary arguments against truthmaking. So-called *contemporary pragmatists* like Huw Price, Simon Blackburn, Michael Williams, and others, are suspicious of relations between language and the world, such as representation, description, and reference. As such they are often suspicious of the idea of truthmaking, on the grounds that it involves a relational view of truth, a view they reject in favour of deflationism. Pragmatists have been the main source of arguments that truthmaking suffers from its incompatibility with deflationism.

Huw Price nicely sums up the picture pragmatists reject with his metaphor of the 'matching model'. We line up all the statements we have on the left side of the page: on the right we draw out the world. Our aim is to find for each statement on the left a truthmaker on the right, much like a children's sticker book (Price 2013, ch.2). This game, Price claims, is a simplified version of contemporary linguistically grounded metaphysics, and it may at first seem unacceptable to pragmatists, who are suspicious of the use of relations between words and the world. Moreover, we've seen that influential truthmaker theorists including Armstrong support this relational picture.

However, the relational picture of truthmaking is optional. Contrary to what some truthmaker theorists say, we can do truthmaking without believing that the truth of a proposition *consists in* a truthmaking relation between propositions and the world. So no philosopher should be suspicious of truthmaking on the grounds of suspicion about the idea of truth as a relation. Thinking otherwise involves accepting overly strong views about what truthmaking involves, views which encourage the relational picture Price rejects. The tension between deflationism and truthmaking is based on a conception of truthmaking nobody needs to accept.

The previous argument blocks a bad reason to think deflationists cannot believe in truthmakers. But are there any positive reasons to think that deflationists *should* believe in truthmakers? Earlier we saw that a deflationist will only believe a truthmaker claim about a truthbearer on the basis of a truthmaker claim about a bearerless truth. As such, she will only believe the unrestricted truthmaker principle:

<sup>14</sup> A non-maximalist could give a recursive theory of truth which isolates a set of 'primary' propositions, in its base clause says that for a primary proposition to be true is to have a truthmaker, and then defines truth for more complex propositions in terms of these. However even then, the view wouldn't be that being true is *constituted* by having a truthmaker, since there would still be many propositions that didn't have a truthmaker, a single object necessitating and explaining their truth. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

(TM) For every proposition  $\langle p \rangle$ , if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true then there is some  $x$  such that  $\langle p \rangle$  is true in virtue of  $x$ 's existence

on the basis of believing the corresponding bearerless principle, which we can express using sentential quantification:

(TM\*) For every  $p$ , if  $p$  then there is some  $x$  such that  $p$  in virtue of  $x$ 's existence

Therefore, the question of whether deflationists should believe that any truths have truthmakers comes down to whether they should believe that any (bearerless) truths hold in virtue of existing objects. The question of whether all truths have truthmakers becomes the question of whether all (bearerless) truths hold in virtue of existing objects—in other words, whether if something is so, it's so because something exists.

To start with, deflationists must reject a common motivation for believing in truthmakers in general, which relates to the issues raised above about the correspondence theory. The common motivation is that truth is not primitive or brute, but is grounded in or dependent on reality. Rodriguez-Pereyra puts this nicely:

If a certain proposition is true, then it owes its truth to something else: its truth is not a primitive, brute, ultimate fact. The truth of a proposition thus depends on what reality, and in particular its subject matter, is like. (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2005, p. 21)

Notice that this motivation is all about truthbearers: the truth of *a proposition* is not brute but depends on the world. Earlier we saw similar ideas in Armstrong, MacBride and Oliver, in relation to correspondence theories of truth.

Deflationists will deny that this gives us any further reason to believe in truthmakers. They will accept that the truth of a truthbearer depends on what the world is like:  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$  is not *just true*. Its truth depends on what the world is like, namely on whether grass is green. As I argued earlier, deflationists should follow Schnieder and Künne in taking this to be a conceptual fact, holding in virtue of the concept of truth. This is all there is to say about the dependence of truthbearer truth on reality:  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$ 's truth depends on whether grass is green.

Deflationists will argue that we only need truthmakers to account for this dependence if we need them to account for bearerless truths. We will only need to appeal to a truthmaker like  $g$  to account for the fact that the truth of  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$  depends on what reality is like, if we need  $g$  to explain why grass is green. For the dependence is already accounted for by saying that  $\langle \text{grass is green} \rangle$ 's truth depends on whether grass is green. So truthmakers can only be involved here if they are needed to explain why grass is green.

In other words, whether we should believe in truthmakers depends entirely on whether we think that all bearerless truths need hold in virtue of existing objects. However, regarding that question, Rodriguez-Pereyra's argument has less force. While in general, we can agree that *any proposition's* truth is to be explained by a bearerless truth, i.e. for any  $\langle p \rangle$ ,  $\langle p \rangle$  is true because  $p$ , we needn't also agree that any bearerless truth is to be explained by something.

To see why this is so, consider the idea that there are brute (bearerless) truths, truths which have no explanation. Use the letter ' $b$ ' to state (not refer to) such a truth, so  $b$  but there is no entity  $x$  such that  $b$  because  $x$  exists. Saying this is completely consistent

with agreeing that the corresponding proposition  $\langle b \rangle$  is true because  $b$ . So agreeing that truthbearer truth is always explained by the world does not require agreeing that bearerless truth is always so explained. And so the deflationist can agree with the truthbearer-focused argument of Rodriguez-Pereyra and others, without thinking this commits her to believing in truthmakers for *all* true truthbearers, since she will only believe this on the grounds of believing in truthmakers for all bearerless truths, and she may reject this.<sup>15</sup>

So, considerations about truthbearers don't by themselves give deflationists reason to believe in truthmakers. However, deflationists will of course agree that many truths do have explanations, and in particular that many truths philosophers are interested in have, or are likely to have, non-causal explanations, for instance truths about modality, morality, minds, social groups, parts and wholes, time, mathematics, logic, and many other things. So deflationists have good reason to accept truthmaking as applied to bearerless truths in general.

It's worth noting that truthmaker theorists often point to cases where truthmakers are said to be needed, but for reasons which have nothing to do with truthbearers. Consider, for instance, Armstrong's (1968) 'truthmaker argument' against Ryle's behaviourism. In order to account for beliefs which don't manifest in actual behaviour, Ryle must appeal to behavioural dispositions, which involve counterfactuals about what behaviour *would have* occurred in certain circumstances. Armstrong argues that Ryle fails to recognise that these counterfactuals need truthmakers – the 'ultimate sin' in a realist metaphysics (2004, p. 3).

We can make sense of Armstrong's objection without thinking about truthbearers at all. The problem with behaviourism is not that it does not explain what it is for  $\langle$ In these circumstances this behaviour would have occurred $\rangle$  to be true. Behaviourists will agree with the rest of us: this is true just in case in those circumstances that behaviour would have occurred. (They may add to this if they accept non-deflationary theories of truth.) The problem is that they cannot explain this counterfactual: they cannot say why that behaviour would have occurred in those circumstances. They must treat this as brute, since no amount of actual behaviour can make it true. But what needs to be made true here is a bearerless truth. Behaviourists refuse to explain a truth which needs an explanation.

Horwich claims that Armstrong's truthmaker arguments don't give us any reason to buy into truthmaker theory. He argues that the problem with behaviourism is simply that we should not, as it must, treat truths about dispositions as brute. But he claims that 'it is perfectly possible to formulate these criticisms without any truthmaking rhetoric', that truthmaking 'merely offers a dressed up way of putting the point', and ultimately that the notion of truth needn't play any role in truthmaking theses at all (Horwich 2008, pp. 272–3).

I think Horwich is right to think that the notion of *truthbearer* truth doesn't play any role here, since Armstrong's concerns can be stated without mentioning truthbearers. However I don't think it follows that Armstrong's points can be formulated without 'truthmaking rhetoric'. For Armstrong is still ultimately concerned with what it is in

<sup>15</sup> See Smith and Simon (2007, p. 88) for a similar stance towards the explicability of truths in general. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this.

virtue of which certain truths hold. This counts as truthmaking even though it's not about truthbearers.

So in general deflationists have good reason to believe that truths have truthmakers. In particular, they also have good reason to believe that we *need* to specify these, in order to explain those truths. Where truths require explanation, we should explain them. However, deflationists should not believe we need to do this in order to account for truthbearer truth as such, i.e. in order to say what it is for a truthbearer to be true. Rather, we need to do this simply because many (bearerless) truths need explanation. Moreover, there's no reason for deflationists to believe the unrestricted truthmaker principle (TM) since this rules out any brute truths, which deflationists may want to accept. This means deflationists differ from those mainstream truthmaker theorists who think *what it is* to be true is to have a truthmaker, and who have grounds for believing (TM) that deflationists do not.

## 5 Facts and properties

So far I have not discussed what truthmakers themselves are. However, this question is important both for debates within truthmaker theory and for the relationship between truthmaking and deflationism. I have talked as if truthmakers are *objects* since many truthmaker theorists accept this. However, not everyone accepts this, and deflationists neither need to nor should accept it.

Accepting that truthmakers have to be objects immediately leads to debates about universals and facts. Armstrong argues for facts or 'states of affairs' as he calls them on this basis (Armstrong 1997, pp. 115–6). Consider a contingent truth like  $\langle$ Ramsey is tall $\rangle$ . If we think truthmakers are objects, and we accept the common view that a truthmaker must necessitate a truth it makes true, then the truthmaker for this proposition must be such that necessarily, if it exists, then  $\langle$ Ramsey is tall $\rangle$  is true. So we need to find an object whose existence entails that Ramsey is tall. Ramsey himself won't do: he could have existed while being short. Adding a universal, *being tall*, is a step in the right direction. But it still won't do, since both Ramsey and *being tall* can exist, yet he can fail to instantiate it. So, Armstrong concludes, we need a state of affairs, *Ramsey's being tall*, as the truthmaker.

Parsons (1999) and Melia (2005) have objected to this argument. Parsons denies the assumption that a truthmaker must necessitate any truth it makes true, and hence claims that Ramsey by himself can make true  $\langle$ Ramsey is tall $\rangle$ . Melia argues that truthmakers needn't be objects, or more precisely, that we don't need *truthmakers* to make sense of truthmaking. Melia argues that truthmaking needn't be a relation between an object and a truthbearer. Instead he treats 'makes true' as a connective like 'and' or 'because'; this allows us to specify truthmakers using sentences, for instance by saying

Bertie has F makes it true that Bertie has M

Melia claims that this blocks Armstrong's argument at the first step.

These issues are relevant for this discussion, since many who accept deflationism about truth also accept deflationism about facts and properties, which excludes them

from any explanatory role, and *a fortiori* a truthmaking role. For instance, Horwich (2008, p. 273) takes facts and properties to be exhausted by the following schemas:

- (2) The fact that p exists because p
- (3) x has the property F-ness because x is F

Horwich therefore thinks that properties and facts cannot explain the truths that truthmaker theorists want them to. For instance, he will deny that Ramsey is tall *because* the fact *Ramsey's being tall* exists. Rather, that fact exists because Ramsey is tall. Similarly, Ramsey has the property *being tall* because Ramsey is tall, not vice versa.

If truthmakers must be objects, then, it may seem that deflationists must reject many common truthmaker explanations, and perhaps accept Parsons's defence of a nominalist approach. However, this is not so. Deflationists can accept Melia's idea that truthmaking is best understood in terms of a connective. For as we saw, deflationists will deny that the truthmaking relation is really a relation, in any more than a superficial sense. As such, they are under no pressure whatsoever to think that truthmakers must be objects since only objects can stand in the truthmaking relation. Instead, deflationists can argue, with Melia, that truthmaker theses are simply explanations of one (bearerless) truth in terms of another. In general, they take the form:

p because q

where the 'because' is non-causal. This doesn't stop deflationists accepting that particular objects can do truthmaking work, since there will be some cases where 'q' says that something exists. But deflationists need not think this will always be so.

Horwich supports roughly this idea, arguing in favour of

a sanitized version of truthmaker theory—a version that is not focused on [truth-bearer] truth *per se*, and that does not attempt to explain everything in terms of what exists, but which is concerned simply with the ways in which various kinds of phenomena are to be explained ... and with which of them must (or may, or may not) be regarded as explanatorily basic. Indeed, many of truthmaker theory's characteristic concerns and claims seem quite reasonable if they are understood as part of such an inquiry. (Horwich 2008, p. 271)

Horwich argues for this on the basis of a rejection of facts and properties as explanatorily prior to (bearerless) truths, and a rejection of truthmaker theory as a theory of truth—two themes I've been discussing in the last few sections.

This doesn't mean deflationists can never talk about facts and properties, since they can use these as shorthand for debates about different kinds of truths. For instance, we may say that mental truths are made true by physical facts or properties, yet really mean that they are made true by physical *truths*. Whether we need to accept facts and properties is irrelevant to this casual use of these terms. And deflationism doesn't block the wider debate about facts and properties, since there are plenty of other things to say in that debate which don't rely on truthmaking and its paraphernalia.

So what should a deflationist say about the claim:  $\langle p \rangle$  is true because p? Is it a truthmaking claim, a non-causal explanation, or something else? I think they should say that (if it is true) it's a trivially true claim that counts as a truthmaking claim in the sense that it non-causally explains some way the world is – namely that  $\langle p \rangle$  is true. If

true, it is trivially true because it follows from the concept of truth, since (according to the deflationist) it's part of the concept of truth that the closest possible explanation of  $\langle p \rangle$ 's truth is that  $p$ .<sup>16</sup> But nevertheless it's a non-causal explanation of a truth, a truth concerning a proposition, and hence counts as a truthmaker claim. It just happens to be one of the less interesting ones!<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, deflationists can accept truthmaking claims as explanations of (bearer-less) truths, whether or not those explanations ultimately specify objects. Moreover they should therefore think that we *need* to specify truthmakers for truths which need explanations. This is not because of issues about the nature of truth, but a more mundane fact: truths need explanations. We've seen that deflationism does have some limited impact on truthmaker theory, for instance not requiring that truthmakers be objects, and blocking certain reasons for believing in truthmaking. However, in general deflationism is compatible with the intelligibility of truthmaking questions, their answerability, and the need to answer them.

## 6 Avoiding truthmaker questions

So far we've seen how deflationists can make sense of truthmaking and why they should believe in it. Huw Price (2013, ch.1) argues, however, that deflationism undermines metaphysicians' motivations for asking truthmaking questions in the first place. His argument is simple. Truthmaking questions about sentences are appropriate only if they are genuinely *about* those sentences. If deflationism is true, truthmaking questions are not genuinely about the sentences in question. So if deflationism is true, truthmaking questions are inappropriate—philosophers should not be asking them.<sup>18</sup>

Price starts with the assumption that truthmaking questions are initially motivated by facts about human language (2013, p. 8). For instance, we note that humans say: 'torture is wrong', and this motivates us to ask about the truthmaker for this sentence. (This is the 'matching game' I mentioned in Sect. 4.) Price's assumption is that this is the basic motivation for our truthmaking questions. While this is extremely controversial, I won't challenge it, since it takes us too far from the main topic, and Price's argument fails in any case.

Price argues that questions about truthmakers for sentences are only appropriate if they are genuinely about those sentences (2013, p. 9). That is, if we think of the sentences humans use as the starting point, the data, in our metaphysical investigation, then asking questions about their truthmakers is only an appropriate reaction to that data if those questions really are about the data, the sentences themselves.

By analogy consider the strange property *being such that grass is green*. All actual objects have this property. In particular, the English name 'Ramsey' has this property.

<sup>16</sup> Not all kinds of deflationism have this consequence. For instance, a sentential deflationist who focuses on sentence truth cannot think that "p" is true because p' is trivial, because it is not even necessarily true, being false at worlds where 'p' doesn't mean  $p$ .

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this question.

<sup>18</sup> Price includes not only questions about truthmakers but questions about referents for terms, for instance what object '3' refers to, and what property 'is good' picks out. I'll ignore this extra element here, as I'm only concerned with truth.

But saying so isn't really saying anything about the name 'Ramsey', like saying that it has six letters. Instead, it's just another way of saying that grass is green. Now suppose our linguistic data comes in: humans use the term 'Ramsey'. If we then ask whether this has the property of being such that grass is green, this isn't an appropriate reaction to that data. It's not about the term at all.

Price claims that if deflationism is right, then questions about truthmakers are like questions about *being such that grass is green*. He claims this is because deflationism entails that ascriptions of truth to sentences aren't really about the sentences concerned, but are covert *uses* of those sentences (2013, p. 9). For instance, deflationism entails that saying that 'Ramsey is tall' is true is saying nothing more than that Ramsey is tall. Saying that Ramsey is tall isn't saying anything about language at all: it's saying something about Ramsey. According to Price, this means that questions about truthmakers for sentences aren't actually about those sentences, since asking what makes true 'Ramsey is tall' is no more than asking what makes Ramsey tall. Asking about the truthmaker for a sentence is like asking whether it has the property *being such that grass is green*.

Therefore, if deflationism is right, truthmaking questions aren't really about language at all. And as such, they are not appropriate reactions in our metaphysical enquiry, since we're assuming that this enquiry starts with data about language use. So while as we've seen deflationism allows truthmaking, Price concludes that it entails that they're not well motivated. Instead, he thinks deflationism leads us to ask other questions about our language, which don't lead us into truthmaker theory.

Even given the assumption that metaphysical enquiry begins with facts about language, Price's argument fails. This is because deflationism does not entail that truthmaker claims are not really about the sentences concerned. And nor should it, as I shall now argue.<sup>19</sup> First consider ascriptions like

In English, the sentence 'Ramsey is tall' is true

where we know the content of the sentence concerned. What is it for this claim to be genuinely about the sentence 'Ramsey is tall'? A good answer is that it is for its truth to depend on what that sentence, that linguistic object, is like. For consider again the property *being such that grass is green*. An ascription of this property to an object is not about that object, because its truth is entirely independent of what that object is like. It is either true of all objects or false of all objects. The fact that the ascription's truth doesn't depend on what the object is like is good reason to think it is not really about that object.

However, the truth ascription above is not like this: its truth does depend on what the sentence 'Ramsey is tall' is like. For a start, its truth depends on what 'Ramsey is tall' means. If 'Ramsey is tall' meant *Ramsey is short*, it would be false and so would the truth ascription. Moreover, we could replace it with another sentence and get a falsehood, since in English, the sentence 'Socrates is tall' is not true. So the truth of the ascription clearly does depend on what 'Ramsey is tall' is like. So there's good reason to think that this ascription is genuinely about that sentence, and more generally that truth ascriptions really are about the sentences concerned.

<sup>19</sup> I owe much of the following discussion to points made by Tim Button in a 2013 talk *Demotivating Deflationism*, in Cambridge.

What about the idea that to ascribe truth to a sentence is to use it? This idea is entirely compatible with the view that truth ascriptions are *also* genuinely about the sentence. Truth ascriptions both use and mention the relevant sentence. Saying that in English, ‘Ramsey is tall’ is true, is both using the sentence ‘Ramsey is tall’ and saying something about it: it is about Ramsey *and* an English sentence. Price thinks that deflationism says that such ascriptions only *look* like mentions, but are really just uses. The right answer, which we’ll now see deflationists accept, is that they are both.

On Horwich’s view, the view under discussion in this paper, propositions are the primary bearers of truth. As such, truth ascriptions like the one above involve ascriptions of *meaning* to the relevant sentence, and are best read like so:

For some  $p$ : in English, ‘Ramsey is tall’ expresses the proposition that  $p$ , and  $p$  or in other words: in English, ‘Ramsey is tall’ expresses a true proposition. So truth ascriptions to sentences are genuinely about those sentences: they say something about those sentences, namely that they express true propositions.

In his paper, Price mentions Quine, whose deflationism is different from Horwich’s in focusing on sentences rather than propositions, which of course Quine rejected. However, Quine too thinks that truth ascriptions are genuinely about the sentences concerned. Quine differs from Horwich in taking sentences to be the primary truth-bearers, and thinking that the claim that ‘Ramsey is tall’ is true is itself an assertion of the quoted sentence and is therefore equivalent to it—no meaning ascription is required. However, as we already saw, that a truth ascription counts as a use of the sentence doesn’t entail that it isn’t about that sentence. And as Stephen Gross (2015) has argued in a closely related exchange with Horisk Claire Horisk (2007), on Quine’s own terms, truth ascriptions are genuinely about the sentences concerned.

This is because Quine thinks that if replacing a singular term by a coreferring term preserves truth-value, then that singular term is performing its usual referring function. For instance, replacing ‘Ramsey’ with ‘the prover of Ramsey’s theorem’ preserves truth-value in the above ascription, since ‘the prover of Ramsey’s theorem is tall’ is true. Gross points out that this holds for the phrase ‘Ramsey is tall’, the name of the sentence (2015, pp. 50ff). Suppose we take ‘my favourite sentence’ to be coreferential with this. Then

In English, my favourite sentence is true

remains true. And so in the original ascription, ‘Ramsey is tall’ is performing its usual function, referring to the sentence ‘Ramsey is tall’. So it really is about that sentence, and is not *just* a use of it.

The same holds of other truth ascriptions where we don’t know the content of the sentence. For instance, I may want to say that Ella’s funniest remark was true, though I can’t remember what she said. This will get the same verdict from Horwich and Quine: it really is about what Ella said, because its truth depends on what sentence that was. Even if this also counts as a use of the sentence – perhaps my remark commits me to agreeing with whatever Ella said – it certainly is about that sentence.

So Horwich’s deflationism doesn’t entail that truth ascriptions aren’t really about the sentences involved, and hence that truthmaker questions and claims aren’t really about the sentences involved either. Quine’s deflationism doesn’t either, though his

view is not the central subject of this paper. Price's argument therefore does not show that deflationism makes truthmaking questions inappropriate.

## 7 Triviality and first-order claims

So far, we've seen that deflationism doesn't make truthmaking questions unintelligible, ill motivated, or avoidable. However, some have argued that deflationism makes truthmaking claims trivial. If this is right, then we could argue that deflationists have no particular need to answer truthmaking questions, because their answers are trivial and not of philosophical interest.

The idea is that deflationism restricts us to saying that what makes a proposition like  $\langle$ Ramsey is tall $\rangle$  true is that Ramsey is tall, and there's nothing more to be said here. The same goes for what components of propositions refer to:  $\langle$ Ramsey $\rangle$  picks out Ramsey and  $\langle$ is tall $\rangle$  picks out tallness. Simon Blackburn argues for this idea:

There is a story to be written, in this view, about the ethical proposition, and how it holds its place as a focus for discussion and thought. But there is no last chapter to be written about 'what makes such a proposition true'. ... If a David Armstrong or a David Lewis comes along demanding a 'truth-maker' we can profit from deflationism, and simply say that what makes it true that honesty is good is that honesty is good. Nothing else needs to be said, wearing allegedly metaphysical hats, or allegedly scientific hats. (Blackburn 2012, p. 195)

Blackburn's idea is that deflationism makes these questions trivial and so irrelevant: what makes it true that honesty is good is that honesty is good, and this we already knew. Price also suggests something similar (2009, p. 266).

However, while deflationism only *supplies* trivial answers to these questions, it doesn't *block* non-trivial ones. For instance, it tells us that  $\langle$ honesty is good $\rangle$  is true iff honesty is good, and that this is the closest explanation of the proposition's truth, in Schnieder's sense. But it doesn't tell us *why* honesty might be good. It doesn't rule out there being anything more informative to say about this: it doesn't falsify in advance all claims of the form 'honesty is good in virtue of ...'. To use a more familiar example, deflationism tell us that  $\langle$ my glass is full of water $\rangle$  is true iff my glass is full of water; but it doesn't rule out that my glass is full of water in virtue of being full of H<sub>2</sub>O, and it doesn't therefore rule out that what makes it true that my glass is full of water is that my glass is full of H<sub>2</sub>O.

This is no problem, because deflationism is a theory of *what it is* for propositions to be true, not a theory of which propositions are actually true. It's not its job to tell us anything more informative, just as it's not functionalism's job to tell us which states realise the functional roles which settle what it is to be a mental state. So while merely thinking about the notion of truth itself won't reveal anything new, this unsurprising fact doesn't stop us investigating further. Nor does it stop us *having* to investigate further: the fact that deflationism doesn't provide us with explanations doesn't tell us that there aren't any to look for.

So deflationism about truth doesn't make truthmaking claims trivial. However, there is a final idea we should consider. Like many of the arguments about deflationism

and truthmaking, this comes from the pragmatists. The argument is that deflationism makes truthmaking a *first-order* matter: deflationism makes truthmaking questions and their answers part of the discipline they are apparently about, rather than distinct and separate from it.<sup>20</sup> Truthmaker theories for, say, ethics, modality, and mathematics, are therefore ethical, modal, and mathematical theories. They are *within* these disciplines, not outside them.

The most common application of this idea is in ethics: statements about truthmakers for ethical statements are ethical statements—when you make them you’re making substantive ethical claims, like when you say that torture is bad or charity is good. The claim that there are moral truths is just the claim that some ethical propositions are true, and this just says that some propositions of the form  $\langle x \text{ is good} \rangle$ ,  $\langle x \text{ is wrong} \rangle$ , and so on, are true. Yet this proposition, if deflationism is right, is nothing more than: for some  $x$ ,  $x$  is good or  $x$  is wrong or . . . , for all ethical predicates. Yet this is an ethical claim, albeit a very general one—it is about the moral status of objects in general. It is just as much an ethical claim as the view that all torture is wrong, though it is more general and much weaker.

It’s important to note that this isn’t because truth ascriptions to moral sentences and propositions aren’t genuinely *about* those sentences and propositions. We already saw how deflationism doesn’t entail this. Instead the idea is just that saying that  $\langle P \rangle$  is true commits you to believing  $\langle P \rangle$ , if you know its content, or to coming to believe its content once you learn it. Moreover, whether  $\langle P \rangle$  is true is settled entirely by whether  $P$ . There is nothing more to whether  $\langle \text{torture is wrong} \rangle$  is true than whether torture is wrong.

There are two ways in which truthmaking questions’ status as ‘first-order’ might make a difference. First, this might leave us no way of understanding crucial questions about the status of truthmakers for a given class of statements. For instance, it might leave us no way of making sense of the distinction between natural or non-natural properties or facts. This would be an interesting consequence for traditional metaphysical debates, especially those which are driven by naturalistic concerns, such as the debate about truthmakers for ethical truths. Second, some have argued that the fact that truthmaking claims are first-order means they are not metaphysical, so that deflationism strips away the metaphysical element from truthmaking. I will take these ideas in turn.

The first idea is that deflationism makes unintelligible traditional questions about the nature of certain truthmakers. For instance, consider the distinction between natural and non-natural properties or facts. If we take properties and facts to be exhausted by Horwich’s deflationary schemas, it’s not clear how to make sense of the view that, for instance, ethical properties and facts are ‘non-natural’. We might think that there are no first-order ethical methods for deciding these questions: there’s nothing within the practice of ethics that lets us make sense of the idea that ethics is natural or not. Therefore, questions of this kind are illegitimate if deflationism is true. This would be a devastating result for traditional metaphysical debates in many different areas, not just ethics.

<sup>20</sup> See the above quotation from Simon Blackburn, and also Blackburn (1998, pp. 294–6), Price (2011, p. 14). Similar ideas are found in the work of the ‘anti-archimedean’ metaethicists who are opposed to pragmatism—see Kramer (2009, 2017); Dworkin (1996).

However, even those who don't believe in properties and facts as explanatory entities can still make sense of distinctions between properties. For instance, a nominalist may distinguish between a causally active property F-ness, and an inactive one G-ness. But she doesn't think F-ness and G-ness are things which can bear causal relations. Instead she understands the difference by saying that there are true claims of the form 'P because x is F' (where 'because' is causal), but no true claims of the form 'P because x is G'. The causal efficacy of properties can be understood in terms of true and false causal claims involving predications but no reference to properties.

This strategy can be applied to ethical properties; we simply need a conception of what it is to be a natural or a non-natural *truth*, and this will tell us what it is to be a natural or non-natural property. We can argue about what it is for a truth to be natural. For instance, we might adopt Dworkin's approach and understand non-natural truths as those invariant over various counterfactuals about different natural truths (Dworkin 2011, n. 3 p. 348, pp. 70ff).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps there are other ways to do this; whatever the strategy here, we can do it without mentioning truths, facts and properties. This is independent of deflationism.

This lets us interpret questions about naturalism and non-naturalism. Whether ethical truths have natural or non-natural truthmakers is settled by whether the 'p' in

x is good in virtue of p

expresses a natural or a non-natural truth. The same goes for modal, epistemic, and causal statements, and any others we are interested in. So long as we can make sense of questions about the status of truthmakers as questions about the status of *truths*, deflationism will not make traditional metaphysical debates unintelligible in this way.

The second argument is that by making truthmaking first-order, deflationism makes it non-metaphysical. For instance, here's Price:

Asking "What makes it true that snow is white?", or "What makes 'Snow is white' true?", is just another way of asking what makes snow white—a reasonable question, in this case, 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. (Price 2011, p. 14)

Price thinks that deflationism makes truthmaker questions first-order *and therefore* non-metaphysical. Blackburn agrees, as we saw above when he said 'Nothing else needs to be said, wearing allegedly metaphysical hats' (Blackburn 2012, p. 195). The idea is that deflationism collapses metaphysical questions into non-metaphysical ones.

The question is then whether being 'first-order' rules out being 'metaphysical'. This is a tricky question, partly because it threatens to collapse into a verbal debate about the word 'metaphysical'. A full discussion of this point would take too much time here, and would involve a far more in depth discussion of contemporary pragmatism, how pragmatists understand the notion of metaphysics, and what significance the 'first-order' argument has in their wider project. However, I will sketch a few ideas here, in order to stimulate further discussion.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this strategy.

The first thing to say is that Price's snow example is not effective. Price says that asking what makes snow white is to be answered by the physics of ice and light, but not in terms of facts and states of affairs: because our question is about snow, it is no longer really metaphysical. I see no reason to think this is true. Metaphysicians will argue that while physics is clearly relevant to the question of what makes snow white, it is not the whole story. For instance, they may argue that physics gives us a causal explanation of snow's colour but not a constitutive one—it does not tell us *what it is* for snow to be white. Answering that question may well involve appealing to 'the metaphysics of facts and states of affairs', or to universals, or tropes, and so on. While we saw that deflationism blocks one particular argument for such things, it does not block the debate about them in general.

Note also that many 'first-order' issues seem perfectly metaphysical anyway. For instance, consider a claim like:  $\langle \text{not-P} \rangle$  in virtue of Q. Saying that this becomes a merely 'first-order' issue about why not-P doesn't make it not metaphysical; for many it invites issues about negative truths and facts. The fact that asking what it is in virtue of which Pegasus does not exist is a first-order question about Pegasus and existence, makes that question no less metaphysical. In particular, it does not affect whether that question is an empirical one, or whether it can be settled analytically.

The same applies to many other kinds of truths whose subject matter is not that usually studied by the natural sciences, for instance truths about logic, parthood, time, causation, free will, induction, and so on. If the *subject matter* is metaphysical, the fact that truthmaking questions are first-order makes no difference to whether they are metaphysical. This doesn't mean they really are metaphysical questions—we might argue that they aren't for other reasons. The point is that deflationism doesn't affect this issue: whether or not truthmaking questions are metaphysical is independent of deflationism.

The above points suggest that deflationism does not give us a *general* recipe for stripping the metaphysical content from truthmaking questions. There are plenty of areas where deflationism does not make truthmaking questions non-metaphysical. While deflationism *does* show us that certain elements of truthmaker theory that its advocates have defended—truth as a relation, inflationary theories of truth, realism about facts and properties—are optional, this does not mean that truthmaker theory in general is non-metaphysical in any interesting sense.

Perhaps the situation is different in the case of certain other disciplines which are not overtly metaphysical. For instance, we don't think of people working on first-order ethical questions as metaphysicians, in the same way as someone asking questions about parthood or location. So we might think that deflationism turns an apparently metaphysical question into a first-order ethical question, and ethical questions are not themselves metaphysical. Deflationism stops us thinking that we can ask distinctively *metaphysical* questions about ethics: such questions are just more ethics, perhaps with rhetorical flourishes of words like 'truthmaking', 'properties', 'facts', 'reality'.<sup>22</sup> So deflationism does seem to make a difference here, by stopping the non-metaphysical become metaphysical.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Blackburn (1998, pp. 79–80).

Since there is no space to discuss this idea fully, I think we can say that deflationism has *at best* a limited impact: it affects truthmaking only by making truthmaking questions first-order. Whether that means those questions are non-metaphysical remains to be seen, and depends strongly on what significance the notion of metaphysics has for the philosopher who is making this argument. It remains to be seen how much mainstream truthmaker theorists are committed to truthmaking being ‘second-order’ in any interesting way.

## 8 Conclusion

To sum up, then: deflationism has only a limited impact on truthmaking. Deflationists can make sense of the idea of truthmaking: it is the idea of non-causal explanation of truths, of ways the world is. For the deflationist, truthmaking does concern truth, but not in the sense of the truth of truthbearers. Deflationism says all there is to say about what it takes for a truthbearer to be true. Rather, truthmaking concerns the notion of truth as ways the world is—as ways things are, or things’ being so. To specify a truthmaker for a truth in this sense is to say why something is so.

To the extent that truths have and need non-causal explanations, deflationists should accept that questions about truthmakers are intelligible, answerable, and need answers. While deflationism cannot give us anything more than trivial answers to these questions, it does not entail that there are no non-trivial answers to be had. Deflationism entails that truthmaking claims are first-order claims about the subject matter of the truths in question; it is not yet clear whether this makes them non-metaphysical in any significant sense, but I’ve tentatively suggested that it has little impact here.

Deflationism does block certain elements of traditional truthmaker theory as defended by writers like Armstrong and Rodriguez-Pereyra. It is incompatible with relational theories of truth, and substantive theories of truth more broadly. As such it is incompatible with a view of truthmaking as a theory of truth, or the view that truthmaker principles follow from the nature of truth itself. In particular, while it is compatible with the idea that truthmaking is a relation, it treats such a relation as only superficial. As such, it is not committed to taking truthmakers to be real objects, and hence blocks some truthmaker theorists’ arguments for facts and properties on the basis of truthmaker principles.

However, from these facts we should not conclude that deflationism and truthmaking are incompatible. Rather we should conclude that the most prominent truthmaker theorists have defended conceptions of truthmaking which involve optional assumptions. Some of these assumptions conflict with deflationism, but the core idea of truthmaking does not. There is, therefore, far less tension between deflationism and truthmaking than many have argued. This should make those interested in truthmaking far less wary of deflationism, and those who accept deflationism far less wary of truthmaking. These consequences are especially significant for contemporary pragmatists, who frequently argue against truthmaking (and metaphysics more broadly) on

the grounds of deflationism about truth: it turns out that one of their bulwarks against metaphysics is weaker than they thought.<sup>23</sup>

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