Introduction
A Manifesto for Truthmaking

Truth depends on reality. When something is true, its truth depends upon the world. Its truth is not some brute, inexplicable feature of reality. Truths are true in virtue of reality, and not vice versa.

These ideas are the source of the philosophical enterprise known as *truthmaker theory*. Truthmaker theorists, accordingly, are philosophers who explore the domain of metaphysics by using the tools of truthmaker theory. Explaining what those tools are, and how they are best put to use, are the main goals of this monograph. It is my contention that thinking clearly about truthmaking can lead to progress in metaphysics: it helps us dispense with a variety of erroneous ways of reasoning about truth and ontology, and correctly calls our attention to ontological issues that deserve to be addressed.

Now, it is not just self-identified truthmaker theorists who agree with the theses with which I began. (Nor do all truthmaker theorists agree on how they are to be interpreted.) But it is truthmaker theorists who think that those ideas are particularly useful in advancing metaphysical debate. Many philosophers, nevertheless, have remained unconvinced of the prospects for truthmaker theory, and are dismissive of the enterprise. My hope for these pages is that such skepticism can be assuaged by thinking about truthmakers in the manner I offer. I suspect that many philosophers have rejected truthmaker theory because of its close associations with certain controversial metaphysical views, or because they think its basic ambitions can be achieved by much more modest means. In the chapters that follow, I offer an attractive approach to truthmaker theory that is not front-loaded with the heavy theoretical assumptions and commitments that many take it to involve, and address the charge that truthmaker theory is an over-reaction to a simple ontological impulse. While truthmaker theory is no metaphysical magic bullet, I do believe that its questions are fruitful ones that deserve our attention. Furthermore, as I shall argue, plenty of thinking

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about truthmaking can already be found in ordinary philosophical theorizing, though not always under that description.

In this introduction, then, my goal is to defend the claim that truthmakers are worth caring about, and to identify some of the core motivations that drive the project. In subsequent chapters, I turn to my development of truthmaker theory, and how a proper truthmaking methodology should be constructed. Then I put that methodology to work to prove its utility to metaphysics and philosophy more broadly. But first, let's consider why we should care about truthmaking at all.

0.1   Why Care about Truthmakers?

Let's take a closer look at the cherished theses of truthmaker theory with which I began. As will become clear, how to interpret them is multiply contentious. But regardless of the details, they are quite plausible, and capture some fundamental ways of thinking about truth and metaphysics. Anyone who likewise finds them appealing ought to give truthmakers a chance. One central claim is that *truth depends on reality, but not vice versa*. What these words express is that there is an asymmetric priority to be found between two different things. On the one hand, there are sentences, beliefs, propositions, and the like (i.e., *truth-bearers*) being true. My belief that penguins are flightless birds is true, as is the sentence "England is west of Belgium." On the other hand, there are things that exist in the world: penguins and their vestigial wings, and England and Belgium together with their geographic relationships to one another. To say that truth depends on reality is to say something along the lines of: my belief that penguins are flightless birds is true because of the existence of the penguins themselves and their vestigial wings. But it doesn't work the other way around: the penguins don't exist *because* my belief is true. The penguins and their features come "first"; their existence explains, grounds, or accounts for the truth of my belief. Everyone can agree that if penguins exist as they do, my belief is true, and that if my belief is true, then the penguins exist as they do. But this material equivalence fails to express the asymmetry that exists between these two separate matters.

What I am addressing here is a "Euthyphro contrast," named for Plato's famous dialogue (Plato 1997). To say that two things always (and even perhaps necessarily) accompany one another is not to say that one does or doesn't account for the other, or that the two are equally fundamental. Everything that God tolerates may be everything that is morally permissible, but it doesn't follow that actions are morally permissible because

God tolerates them. It may instead be the case that God tolerates them because they are morally permissible. Correlation, to put it simply, is not causation. Aristotle detects the asymmetry between truth and being in his *Categories*:

> For that a man is reciprocates in implication of being with the true statement about him (for if a man is, the statement by which we say that a man is is true; and it reciprocates, since if the statement by which we say that a man is is true, then the man is). The true statement, however, is in no way the cause of the object's being. Rather the object is apparently in a way the cause of the statement's being true; for it is because the object is or is not that the statement is said to be true or false. (Aristotle 1995: 11–12, 14b14–22)[1]

Put into the language of truthmaking (which typically abandons a causal understanding of the dependence in question),[2] Aristotle's claim is that statements are true in virtue of the existence of their truthmakers, but it's not the case that those truthmakers exist because the statements in question are true.

So far I have focused on the asymmetry between truth and being: one takes priority over the other in our thinking about them. One goal of truthmaker theory is to better understand the nature of that asymmetric relationship. But perhaps an even more important goal is determining what actually stands in the relationship. Given that truth depends on reality, there must be the right kind of reality to properly ground what we take to be true. As a result, which things are true has implications for *ontology*, the discovery of what exists in reality. These implications impose restrictions on what I'll be referring to as our "cognitive accounting." On the one hand, we have various beliefs about the world; these beliefs constitute our worldview by giving an exhaustive account of what we take to be true. On the other hand, we maintain an ontology: we commit only to certain things existing in reality. To borrow a metaphor, we each have a "belief box" that contains all the things we believe, and an "ontological inventory" that lists all of our ontological commitments. Truthmaker theory offers the admonition to keep these two dimensions of our cognitive lives in harmony. One should not add something to or subtract something from one's belief box without also appropriately updating one's ontological inventory. What truthmaker theory offers is a constant reminder to consider the ontological implications that are imposed on us

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[1] See also Aristotle 1966: 158, 1051b:6–7.   [2] But see Wilson 2018.

by our beliefs. In this way, truthmaker theory aspires to ontological honesty: it keeps us ever cognizant of the kind of ontology our best theories of the world commit us to.

It might be thought that the concept of an ontological inventory can simply be reduced to one corner of our belief box. There's nothing more to Venus, say, being on my ontological inventory than <Venus exists> being in my belief box.[3] However, I think that it is useful to distinguish the two. The main reason is that it's not at all obvious which members of my belief box constitute my ontological inventory. Suppose I am ontologically committed to penguins. Which belief expresses this commitment? Perhaps the obvious choice from my belief box would be <There are penguins>. However, this choice is not mandatory. It is, famously, the choice that Quine makes in "On What There Is" (1948). But Quine later revised his view, arguing that ontological commitments can only be read off the quantified statements of our chosen theories once they're regimented into first-order logic; the sentences of natural language don't, for Quine, express ontological commitments (1960). Jody Azzouni has argued that *no* sentence in natural language expresses ontological commitments (2007), and has independently challenged Quine's quantifier-based view (Azzouni 2004). Thomas Hofweber (2005) argues that quantified sentences in natural language are ambiguous between two readings, only one of which is ontologically committing. The question of which of our beliefs actually represent our ontological commitments is one taken up by the theory of ontological commitment itself, which is not my present project.[4] However our ontological commitments are expressed, we definitely take them on (*pace* Carnap 1950). Truthmaker theorists believe that we can advantageously develop our ontological inventories by thinking clearly about truthmakers, and are suspicious of those who give too little attention to ontological questions.

To take a case in point, consider the many, many theories that employ possible worlds as a theoretical device. The use of possible worlds in developing various theories (of meaning, propositions, etc.) is so widespread that one might take their invocation to be completely innocuous. It's not uncommon, for instance, to see someone make use of possible worlds, but quickly add that such things are a mere *façon de parler*, and not

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[3] The expression "<*p*>" most commonly abbreviates "the proposition that *p*." In the interest of ontological neutrality, I use "<*p*>" to refer to any truth-bearer whose content is given by "*p*" (or *is* the content that *p*), unless context makes it clear otherwise. I discuss truth-bearers more fully in Section 1.2.

[4] I discuss the matter in more detail in Section 2.3.

to be associated with the very ontologically real concrete possible worlds of David Lewis (1986).[5] Such quick maneuvers do not pass the critical scrutiny of truthmaker theorists, however. If possible worlds are an important theoretical component of one's view, then one owes an account of how there can be such important truths that rely upon them. Lewis himself passes this test admirably: because he commits to an ontology of possible worlds, he can freely make use of them in his theory-building. For those other philosophers who make repeated use of them but refrain from acknowledging their existence, truthmaker theorists become a kind of ontological gadfly, inquiring as to how a mere way of speaking can bear such a heavy theoretical burden.[6]

In summary, truthmaker theory tells us that truth depends on reality, and counsels us to consider what needs to belong to reality in order to provide the proper grounds for all of that truth. As a result, truthmaker theory offers the imperative to be honest and thorough in one's ontological accounting. Truth abhors a vacuum. So what does it revere? Truthmaker theorists suggest that we wear our ontological commitments on our sleeves. By doing so, we not only further the goals of ontological inquiry, but also make transparent one crucial dimension for making judgments about metaphysical theory choice. The requisite ontology for a given theory is a crucial factor in determining its plausibility and acceptability. Asking after truthmakers is a means for keeping our ontological books well managed. Anyone interested in developing theories with precisely articulated ontological commitments ought to take truthmaking seriously.

There is one grander objective that some might seek after in the idea of truthmaking, and that is to discover the true and most fundamental nature of reality. Truthmaking may seem to be a competitor with other prominent metaphysical views currently in vogue. Consider the systems developed by Fine (2001), Sider (2011), and Williamson (2013). These views purport to offer a metaphysics that accounts for the genuine structure of reality, and their defenders are keen to argue for their superiority to truthmaker theory.[7] It is not obvious to me, however, that these

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[5] E.g., Nozick 1981: 681, n. 8, and Yalcin 2007. I did this myself in my dissertation.
[6] Cf. Divers: "The use of PW [possible-world discourse] is available to any philosopher. But when the chips are down, we want to know exactly what the talk is supposed to mean and exactly what kind of application the discourse, so interpreted, is supposed to afford. Unless both of these questions are answered, one who invokes PW achieves nothing of any philosophical substance" (2002: 16; cf. Heil 2012: 169). Melia's "weasel nominalism" about mathematics might be another case of refusing to acknowledge the ontological commitments of one's assertions (2000).
[7] See, e.g., Sider 2011: 153–161, Fine 2012: 43–46, and Williamson 2013: 391–403. I rebut Fine's arguments in Asay 2017, and Williamson's in Asay 2016b. See also Sections 5.1 and 5.2.

philosophers are genuine opponents. Whether or not truthmaking cap-
tures the fundamental structure of reality is not a question I address, or
really even understand. I do believe that thinking about truthmaking can
lead to productive inquiry into metaphysics, and help remove a fair
amount of muddled reasoning that regularly appears when the topics of
truth and ontology are on the table. I do maintain, alongside all truth-
maker theorists, that truth depends on reality, but not vice versa. Whether
this claim reflects some prior metaphysical fact about the genuine structure
of reality, or simply a deeply entrenched fact about the way many of us
conceive of the relationship between truth and reality, is not ultimately my
concern. The thought that being is prior to truth has a long history – it's
present already in Aristotle – and its continuing appeal is sufficient to
justify serious inquiry into the idea of truthmaking. Those who deny it
(if there are any) also betray a fundamental dimension of their thinking
about the relationship between truth and ontology that is worth exploring.
True or not, and capturing some fundamental metaphysical fact or not,
the truthmaking theses merit thoughtful investigation.

This project, then, should be understood as having relatively modest
ambitions. P. F. Strawson has famously drawn a useful distinction between
descriptive and *revisionary* metaphysics. The former "is content to describe
the actual structure of our thought about the world," while the latter "is
concerned to produce a better structure" (1959: 9). Sider, Fine, and
Williamson are best understood as pursuing a third option, one that might
have seemed too optimistic for mid-century Anglophone philosophy:
discovering the actual structure of the world, regardless of its implications
for how we actually structure our thought. My ambitions are squarely
descriptive, however. Many of us are naturally inclined to find a kind of
dependence between truth and being; for those who share this disposition,
I offer my account as the best way of understanding it, and show what
implications we should draw from it. Regardless of whether or not truth-
making reveals the fundamental structure of reality, it does reveal a
fundamental aspect of how we think about truth and reality.

0.2   What Truthmakers Can Do for You

Like any good philosophical theory, truthmaker theory must earn its keep
by demonstrating the theoretical virtues it has to offer. Beyond its core
ambitions of understanding the relationship between truth and reality and
providing credible ontological inventories, truthmaker theory also has
much to contribute to topics of metaphysical concern that crop up in

nearly every corner of philosophy. In this section, I highlight a number of ways that nuanced thinking about truthmaking can illuminate other topics of philosophical interest.

One source of utility found in truthmaker theory is its ability to capture and articulate a variety of extant arguments and objections that appear all across the philosophical landscape. My contention, in other words, is that truthmaking is *already* at play in many philosophical discussions. Truthmaker theory can contribute to those discussions by articulating what is at stake in them, and showing how they are unified in purpose in what are perhaps surprising ways.

Take, for instance, the topic of personal identity. Suppose you undergo a split-brain operation, with each half of your brain transplanted to a unique, new body (or any other kind of "fission" operation). Are you identical to the person in new body A, or to the person in new body B? While it is logically coherent to select one of these options, there seems to be no reason to choose one over the other. More to the point, there doesn't appear to be anything to make it true that you're identical with A, rather than B (or vice versa). As Derek Parfit wonders about such a view: "What can make me one of them rather than the other?" (1971: 5). This is a metaphysical objection to the idea that you could be identical to just one of the candidates: such a view supposes that it's true that you're identical to A (or B), but has no plausible ontological answer to the question of what makes that supposed fact[8] true. The complaint is thus not simply epistemological, that there's no evidence that favors the A hypothesis over the B hypothesis. Rather, the charge is that nothing in reality can account for you being identical to one but not the other. Yet there must be some such ground, if it's to be true that the identity holds. So neither identity obtains. This line of thought is truthmaker theory in action, though it is not generally represented that way.

Sometimes the idea of truthmaking appears in epistemological contexts. In fact, it plays a starring role in the most famous epistemological context: Gettier's counterexamples to the justified true belief analysis of knowledge (1963). Smith has a justified belief that Jones has ten coins in his pocket and will get the job for which they are both applicants. Smith thus infers

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[8] "Fact" is a troublesome word in truthmaking contexts. In short, "fact" is often used in a *truthmaking* sense (as in Russell and Wittgenstein), to refer to objects that make things true, and in a *truth-bearing* sense, to refer to things that are true. Both uses are legitimate, and not in conflict or competition with one another. The existence of the former (but not the latter) is metaphysically contentious, and I make no assumptions about their reality. As with the above sentence, which sense of "fact" is at play will easily be discernible from the context.

that the proposition <The man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket> is true. This turns out to be a justified true belief, but it's true because Smith himself will get the job (and unknowingly happens to have ten coins in his own pocket, too). Gettier argues that Smith does not know the proposition in question because it "is true in virtue of the number of coins in Smith's pocket, while Smith does not know how many coins are in Smith's pocket, and bases his belief in [this proposition] on a count of the coins in Jones's pocket" (1963: 122). Gettier's argument here assumes a principle to the effect that to know a proposition, one must be appropriately related to the states of the world that make that proposition true. (This principle later becomes the centerpiece of Goldman's (1967) causal theory of knowledge.)[9]

Another example involves epistemicism about vagueness (e.g., Williamson 1994). According to the epistemicist, vagueness is fundamentally an epistemological phenomenon. There is a fact of the matter regarding where the line is drawn between, say, the rich and the poor, although this fact is generally unknowable. According to the epistemicist, then, some claim of the form "Exactly x amount of dollars is minimally sufficient for being rich" is true. What many find intolerable about epistemicism is how such a claim could be true when similar claims where x is a penny more or a penny less are false (cf. Eklund 2011: 357). As in the case of personal identity, a sense of metaphysical arbitrariness is easily detected. Truthmaker theorists express this sort of reservation by charging that no plausible truthmaker can be found to fund epistemicism's unique commitment to such truths.[10]

A related form of argument has motivated truthmaker theory from the beginning. David Armstrong, who has done more than anyone else to popularize the idea of truthmaking, has long credited Charlie Martin with the following kind of argument (Armstrong 1989a: 8–9, 1991: 191, 1993: 430, 2004: 1–3). Certain philosophical views commit to the truth of various claims; many commit, in particular, to the truth of certain counterfactuals. A phenomenalist in the tradition of Berkeley, for example, may assert that there is nothing more than actual sense data, and that the

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[9] My interests going forward will focus on metaphysics, not epistemology. But there is an ongoing literature that connects truthmaking to epistemological issues. See, e.g., Jacquette 1996, Hetherington 2005, Heathcote 2006, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, and 2015, Bernecker 2011, Biro 2013 and 2014, Giordani 2013 and 2015, and Vance 2014.

[10] I raise a parallel objection to epistemicist solutions to the liar paradox in Asay 2015. A similar line of thought seems to drive Kripke's meaning skeptic, who looks for some fact that could make it true that we express PLUS rather than QUUS by "plus" (Kripke 1982).

objects of our experience are to be understood as combinations or con-
structions of those data. When questioned as to whether things could exist
unobserved, such as a crater on the far side of the moon, a phenomenalist
may contend that our suspicion that such things exist (which cannot be
true, by the phenomenalist's lights) is best accounted for by our commit-
ment to truths such as <If you were to be on the moon at a certain time
and location, you would have a crater-like sense impression>, which is not
committed to the existence of unobserved entities. And indeed, this
counterfactual may be true. But what accounts for its truth? Why is this
counterfactual true rather than false? The realist who has no ontological
qualms about unobserved craters has the beginnings of an answer: the
counterfactual is true, at least in part, in virtue of the existence of the
crater. Phenomenalists have no such option available, given that their
ontology is limited to the set of actual sense impressions. Armstrong
detects similar strategies at work in behaviorism about mental states, and
operationalism about quantities (1989a: 10). David Lewis contends that
the same sort of argument can be wielded against presentists (which I take
up in Chapter 10), and those who take the distinction between law-
governed and accidental regularities to be primitive (Lewis 1992: 219).
Here we see the truthmaker theorist's call for honest accounting come into
play. It's not just what we believe that makes our theories tolerable; also
relevant is the sort of ontology that is needed to ground the truths of
those theories.

Other views that rely on counterfactuals face similar challenges. Take,
for instance, Crispin Wright's metaethical view (1992, 1995; see also
Lynch 2009, chapter 8). For Wright, what it is for a moral judgment to
be true is for it to be *superassertible*, which it achieves when it is "warranted
and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily close scrutiny of its
pedigree and arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improve-
ment of our information" (1992: 48). Wright's hope is that the super-
assertibility account of moral truth allows one to dodge commitments to
the moral facts and properties peddled by moral realists; he's interested in
developing an antirealist approach to ethics that nevertheless preserves the
existence of moral truth. Suppose it's true that it's morally wrong to eat
animals. Then, on Wright's view, the belief that it's morally wrong to
eat animals is warranted, and its warrant would survive in the face of any
improvement to our cognitive state. Wright is then hopeful that a fruitful
account of warrant is in the offing (one which, it's important to note,
cannot in any way presuppose the notion of truth, which is what's
currently being analyzed). Because this account makes no reference to

any metaphysics of morals, and analyzes moral judgment by way of an epistemically constrained notion of truth, Wright takes himself to be offering an antirealist alternative in metaethics. But like the phenomenalists, behaviorists, and operationalists before him, Wright has taken flight to counterfactuals. For my moral judgments to be true, they would have to remain warranted after all further positive inquiry. But what makes them remain so warranted? If eating animals is wrong, then that judgment's warrant would survive in the face of any improvement to our information. What makes that counterfactual true? The moral realist has an answer to this question: the mind-independent truthmakers for moral judgments (however understood by the different views) continue to exist, irrespective of what's going on with respect to our state of knowledge about the world. Wright, by contrast, has no obvious answer available to him. But until the superassertibility view answers this question, we're left in the dark as to what metaphysical stance it really takes on. It purports to be a form of antirealism, but it can't make good on that assertion until it offers a response to the truthmaker theorist's query. Put another way, the superassertibility view offers us an account of the *truth conditions* for moral judgments; but until it offers us an account of their *truthmakers*, it's left unsettled whether or not the view ultimately avoids the metaethical realism it seeks to dodge.

Finding retreat in counterfactuals, as we have seen, is a philosophical maneuver that boasts a long tradition; it's none the better for that. Truthmaker theorists are wary of those who take refuge in counterfactuals. In the face of a metaphysical question (what makes some perfectly ordinary claim true?), this strategy directs our attention not to the view's ontological commitments, but to a further truth: the counterfactual in question. Truthmaker theory reminds us not to settle for such buck-passing responses. After all, we can ask about the newly cited truth's truthmaker just as easily. An ontological question deserves an ontological answer.

The preceding also highlights how truthmaker theory has a role to play in navigating the murky waters of realism and antirealism. (I defend this claim in full in Chapter 8.) What exactly is at stake between ethical realists and ethical antirealists? As just seen, it's not always clear why certain views deserve to be thought of as being realist or antirealist. They may claim not to be committed to a realism-relevant ontology, for example, but to make good on any such assertion they have to provide their own adequate truthmaking story that demonstrates as much. Furthermore, it has often been thought that realism issues turn on the theory of truth at issue, or various other semantic notions (e.g., Fine 1984b). This thought