

A Truthmaker View of Ontological Commitment*

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I Introduction

This paper begins with a story. The purpose of the story is to motivate answering some meta-ontological questions in certain ways. The bulk of the paper will be spent articulating a view that answers the questions the way that the story seems to call for them to be answered. Along the way I'll also contrast the view with four other views, give some independent motivations for the view, and respond to some objections against it.

The story is authored by Ted Sider and it describes a world created by a god named Nihilo.¹ When Nihilo created the world, he created only simples *ex nihilo*. Then he moved them around in certain ways. Eventually he got lonely and moved some simples around around in ways to get them to be arranged in such a way as to look and behave much like us. He then taught them metaphysics, so they could talk precisely about the world around them.² But they were not intelligent, and they had a hard time talking this way. So Nihilo taught them shortcuts; when they see simples-arranged-tablewise, they say “there’s a table”. And so on for other simples-arranged-certain-ways.³ Here are two questions we might be interested in answering: Do they speak truly? Are they ontologically committed to composite objects that are tables?

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¹The following is from Sider (MS, p. 8).

²Take ‘them’ and ‘they’ to be referring to a plurality of pluralities.

³They are now no longer speaking Nihilo’s language (which we suppose is the fundamental language), but some other language.

Let's add to Sider's story the following: Nihilo continues to converse with his minions, and he does so using the new shortcut words, in order that his minions might understand him. He says things like "There are three tables in the next room, minion". Here are two questions we might be interested in answering: Does he speak truly? Is he ontologically committed to composite objects that are tables?

Perhaps after a while Nihilo gets bored with his minions and stops talking to them, and then leaves them alone for a few thousand years. They get a bit smarter, but not too much, so they continue to talk in the shortcut way he has taught them, saying things like "there are three tables in the next room", vaguely aware because of their oral mythology that a god once tried to teach them to speak more precisely. Again, two questions: Are their sentences true? Are they ontologically committed to composite objects that are tables?

Perhaps after a few billion years the minions get way, way smarter, and they stop believing that simples ever compose anything. But they're used to talking a certain way and it's a whole lot shorter and their children catch on easier, so they keep saying "there are three tables in the next room" and the like. Again the two questions: Are their sentences true? Are they ontologically committed to composite objects that are tables?⁴

I want to say "yes" and "no" respectively to all four sets of questions, and I hope many readers do as well.⁵ Or at least, I hope many readers think it would be nice if we could answer the questions that way. In any case, I am not going to argue for those answers; rather, I'm going to offer a view that lets us answer the questions as I'd like.

⁴Sider says it's an open question whether the minions speak truly in the first case (though he thinks they don't), and since in his story Nihilo doesn't speak, he doesn't discuss whether Nihilo would speak truly were he to talk about tables. He also says the minions certainly speak *correctly*, where 'correctly' is a technical term for something that is either (i) true or (ii) close to true and also useful or advantageous or something. I shall avoid this, because I don't know what it means. If we can give a theory whereby the sentences are true, I think that theory is better — it has fewer primitives and respects the intuition that the minions are doing something right.

⁵Why not answer the sets of questions differently? Well, the sentences in question have the same words ("There are three tables in the next room"), and they are spoken in the same language. So presumably they have the same semantic content. But it would be odd if a sentence with the same semantic content had different truth values and bestowed different ontological commitments depending on who said it.

Some terminology, first. I shall speak of people incurring ontological commitment, and they do so by asserting or affirming sentences. I do not mean this to be taken too literally. One needn't assert a sentence to incur ontological commitment — one could write it, believe it, send it via Morse code, or the like. The crucial thing is that one believes the proposition the sentence expresses. Also, one might assert/write/believe/send a sentence without incurring ontological commitment, as when one reports what someone else has said or performs a play or copies a manuscript. Strictly speaking, sentences or sets of sentences are the primary incurrers of ontological commitment, and a person incurs an ontological commitment by asserting/writing/sending the sentence or set of sentences, or by believing the proposition or propositions expressed by the sentence or set of sentences.

The orthodox view of meta-ontology, Quineanism, answers the questions exactly opposite. Quineanism says that if one of the minions asserts “there are three tables in the next room”, the minion speaks falsely (given the description of the world as containing no composites). Quineanism also says that if anyone affirms ‘there are three tables in the next room’, she is ontologically committed to tables. But what if the sentence is true, and there are no tables, because something (or some things) other than tables makes (or make) the sentences true? The Quinean thinks this is impossible. Perhaps it's because she thinks tables are *required* to make true our sentence “there are three tables in the next room”; and if one isn't ontologically committed to tables, then one can't provide a truthmaker for “there are three tables in the next room”.⁶ But if we were in a world like Nihilo's, we would think the same thing, and, I submit, we would be wrong. The moral of the story, then, is that some quantificational sentences are *true*, but they're not made true by the things quantified over. Thus, one who asserts one of them isn't and needn't be ontologically committed to the things over which she quantifies. This suggests that we need a new criterion for ontological commitment, and I suggest the correct criterion is a truthmaker view.

⁶Perhaps she would claim not to understand “makes true” or “truthmaker”, and might resist phrasing her view in this way. But the thought would be something like what I've characterized her as thinking.

Truthmaker views, as I shall call them, are views that posit a close relationship between truthmakers and ontological commitment. I hold to a truthmaker view; on the truthmaker view I like, when one affirms a sentence, one is ontologically committed to there being something (or some things) that makes (or make) true the proposition expressed by the sentence; I'll call this the 'general truthmaker view'.⁷ The truthmaker view I don't like is the view that when one affirms a sentence, one is ontologically committed to whatever happens to make true the sentence; I'll call this the 'specific truthmaker view'.

I'll first sketch the general truthmaker view, and then the opposing truthmaker views — the specific truthmaker view, and also the particular views held by John Heil, David Armstrong, and Ross Cameron. I'll show what those views get wrong and give some more motivations for the general truthmaker view. I'll conclude by responding to some objections against both truthmaker views in general and the general truthmaker view in particular.

2 The General Truthmaker View

On the general truthmaker view, our ontological commitments are not particular, nor are they perspicuously determined. Rather, by affirming sentences, we just ontologically commit to there being *some things or other* that make them true. Those things needn't be what we quantify over in our sentences. In the remainder of the paper, I give the background of truthmaker views, explicate the general truthmaker view, and defend the general truthmaker view from potential objections.

Often talk of ontological commitment is in terms of figuring out what one is *already* ontologically committed to, simply in virtue of affirming sentences with an existential quantifier. But other kinds of commitment merely involve there being

⁷I think that all true sentences have truthmakers, which earns me the label 'truthmaker maximalist'. But there are those who think that some true sentences have truthmakers, and other true sentences do not — negative existentials, perhaps. There's a bit of danger for such people in accepting the general truthmaker theory. They would want to modify it in some way like the following: "When one affirms a sentence, if the sentence has a truthmaker, then one is ontologically committed to there being something or some things that makes or make it true". This is problematic, not in the least because one doesn't occur any ontological commitments by uttering false sentences. There are ways to modify it, but none that I can think of is obviously unobjectionable.

something to back up our actions. If I write you a check, I'm committed to there being something in my bank account to back up my action. It needn't be a precise amount or the specific bill that ends up being handed to you when you cash the check; I'm just committed to *there being something* in my bank account that justifies or makes proper my action. In the same vein, on the general truthmaker view, one isn't ontologically committed to anything in particular by affirming quantificational sentences; one is just committed to the sentences being true, and there being some things that make them true. According to the general truthmaker view, one answers the ontological question by looking at the sentences one takes to be true and figuring out what makes them true.⁸ The thought is that there are entities in the world such that their existence and the way they are makes true all (or most) true sentences.⁹ I shall call the thesis that there are entities in the world such that their existence and the way they are makes true all (or most) true sentences 'the truthmaker principle'.

The truthmaker principle is notoriously difficult to spell out in detail. Three main candidates have emerged. The first says that *a* is the truthmaker for *p* if and only if any world in which *a* exists is a world in which *p* is true.¹⁰ The second says that *a* is a truthmaker for *p* if and only if for any two worlds, if those worlds differ with respect to the truth-value of *p*, then they differ with respect to what *a* is or how *a* is.¹¹ The third says that *a* is a truthmaker for *p* if and only if *p*'s truth is grounded in what *a* is and how *a* is.¹²

There are problems for each of these formulations.¹³ I don't want to endorse

⁸By affirming a sentence, one already has committed to there being something or some things that make it true. Finding out which thing or things is or are the truthmakers is to answer the ontological question.

⁹I add the "or most" qualifier because many people who hold to a truthmaker principle think that certain sentences—negative existentials, necessary truths, or the like—don't have or need truthmakers. That is, they are not truthmaker maximalists.

¹⁰See Bigelow (1988), Armstrong (1997). Armstrong (2004, p. 17) adds 'and *p* is true in virtue of *a*'. Because they accept this formulation, they are forced to say that the truthmaker(s) for *p* exist in all and only the worlds in which *p* is true. This entails that any contingent thing *x* can't be a truthmaker for anything except for the proposition expressed by the sentence "*x* exists". Those who accept this principle usually go in for facts or concrete states of affairs as truthmakers.

¹¹See Lewis (2001) and Bricker (2006).

¹²See Schaffer (2010) and Schaffer (2008).

¹³For an overview of truthmaker principles, see Beebe and Dodd (2005). For formulations of truthmaker principles, see Armstrong (2004), Schaffer (2008), Cameron (2008a), and Cameron (forthcomingb). For arguments against, see Merricks (2007), Cox (1997), and Simons (2005).

or assume a specific version of the truthmaker principle. Rather, I want to discuss the general truthmaker view. It might seem illegitimate to discuss a thesis all of whose terms I can't define. But while I can't formulate the truthmaker principle precisely, I do have an intuitive understanding of it. This suffices in other areas of philosophy: people endorse the knowledge norm of assertion without being able to define "knowledge", they endorse the total evidence requirement without knowing exactly what evidence is, and they endorse endurantism without knowing exactly what whole presence is. My discussion of the truthmaker views is similar; I believe there's something that we're latching onto when we think about truthmaking, despite not being able to say (yet) precisely what it is.

The general truthmaker view comes apart from Quinean orthodoxy, which tells us that our ontological commitments are to the things that the ordinary English sentences we accept (in our most reflective and philosophical moods as being strictly and literally true) say exist.¹⁴ The proponent of a truthmaker view (hereafter 'a truthmaker theorist') responds that our ordinary English sentences might truthfully say "*Ps* exist" without our being ontologically committed to *Ps*. That is, we might think *Ps* exist and not be ontologically committed to *Ps*.

One might respond, "But to 'ontologically commit' to something just *means* to say that it exists." The truthmaker theorist responds in the voice of Cameron:

It's true that 'ontological commitment' is a technical term, and there are a bunch of claims we associate with it: the ontological commitments of a theory are what must exist if it is true; the ontological commitments of a theory are what counts against it when judging it for ontological parsimony; the ontological commitments of a theory are those things whose existence its truth entails that have real being. For the Quinean, of course, these don't come apart; but if we think they do come apart, we must make a decision about how to use the term 'ontological commitment'. I think they come apart: what has real being - what there really is - is what makes the true theory of the world true. (2010, p. 250)

Quine thought it was "obvious and trivial" that we are ontologically committed to the values of the bound variables of the translations of our theories into first-order

¹⁴I speak throughout the paper of English sentences and quantifiers and the like. The point generalizes, of course, to French and German and all other non-fundamental languages.

logic.¹⁵ But ontological commitment does have the other associations Cameron claims, and thus an argument is required to show that a single notion (being the value of a variable) plays all the roles that ontological commitment plays. The Quinean, of course, thinks that there is a single thing that plays these roles—quantification. Perhaps because she thinks that the existence claims of the theory *must* be made true (if they're made true at all) by the things quantified over; if she thought “*Ps* exist” could be true and made true by things other than *Ps*, then she would not insist that one *has to* be ontologically committed to *Ps* if one says they exist. The truthmaker theorist thinks that this needn't be the case: “there are *Ps*” can be made true by things that aren't *Ps*.¹⁶ So, “*Ps* exist” is true (as the theory says), but saying so doesn't ontologically commit us to *Ps*, only to there being truthmakers for “there are *Ps*”.

The Quinean responds, “If that's the case, you must paraphrase away your commitment to *Ps*.” To quote Quine:

When we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile we are committing ourselves to recognizing as entities the several species themselves, abstract though they are. We remain so committed at least until we devise some way of so paraphrasing the statement as to show that seeming reference to species on the part of our bound variable was an *avoidable manner of speaking*. (Quine (1948), 13, emphasis mine)

The truthmaker theorist responds by denying the need to paraphrase. When paraphrasing away existence claims, one gives another English sentence which quantifies over different things than the original sentence. The classic example is the mereological nihilist who denies the existence of tables but feels free to assert sentences like “this table is brown” in some contexts. If pressed, she would give one of a number of responses. One response is that she was asserting a sentence that is ontologically neutral, so to speak.¹⁷ She would then paraphrase, “There are

¹⁵See Quine (1992, p. 25-27).

¹⁶Compare “there are water molecules” being made true by two hydrogen atoms covalently bonded to a single oxygen atom. Or “there are people surrounding the building” being true even though no person (and indeed no thing at all) is surrounding the building.

¹⁷She might also say that what she said wasn't in fact true, but quasi-true, or correct, or something else indicating falsehood but usefulness. But I'm less interested in these responses as in ones that maintain the truth of the assertion.

some simples here arranged tablewise and brownwise”. In this way, the Quinean story goes, the nihilist dodges an ontological commitment to tables. But why rest so much on the surface form of language? Why care about whether we’re clever enough to avoid speaking a certain way? There are ingenious proposals to paraphrase our sentences in a way that’s consistent with ontological nihilism — the view that nothing exists.¹⁸ Ontological nihilists should not be considered to have a more ontologically parsimonious theory just because they’ve come up with some linguistic and logical tricks to avoid affirming the existence of anything. And the dullards who recognize the power of the arguments for mereological nihilism but cannot for the life of them come up with paraphrases for sentences about tables should not be saddled with ontological commitment to tables in virtue of their lack of creativity.

Suppose one says, “The average family has 2.4 children”. And someone else responds, “You think there is an average family? Well, then you’re ontologically committed to an average family.” What if the first person is not sufficiently clever enough to think of a way to paraphrase the sentence so that it doesn’t quantify over average families?¹⁹ She may very well know that there’s no such thing as an average family (since she knows that no family has 2.4 children and 2.93 televisions), but she knows she’s saying something true, so she affirms the sentence. The Quinean is forced to say that she’s ontologically committed to an average family. The general truthmaker theory says that the nihilist and the no-average-familyist needn’t be able to paraphrase their sentences in order to avoid ontological commitment to tables or average families; by saying “there are three tables in the next room” and “the average family has 2.4 children”, she is just committed to those sentences being true!²⁰ The nihilist is ontologically committed, then, to there being something that makes it true that this table is brown—it may or may not be a table. The good neo-Quinean nihilist thinks it’s simples, so she paraphrases her table-sentence into a simple-sentence, thus allowing her to ontologically commit only to simples, and not tables. And the no-average-familyist is ontologically committed to there being something that makes it true that the average family has 2.4 children—it may or

¹⁸See Hawthorne and Cortens (1995) and Turner (2011).

¹⁹It’s not as easy as you’d think.

²⁰The specific truthmaker theory also says that she needn’t paraphrase (or be able to paraphrase) her sentence; she is just committed to the existence of the truthmaker.

may not be an average family. The neo-Quinean no-average-familyist thinks it's simples or people and some facts about numbers, so the intelligent neo-Quinean no-average-familyist offers a paraphrase: "The total number of children had by families divided by the total number of families is 2.5."²¹ But the less intelligent neo-Quinean no-average-familyists are stuck being ontologically committed to an average family. All this work is unnecessary, on the general truthmaker theory.

I'll suggest a more specific way of thinking about the general truthmaker view in §4. But it is worth spending some time looking at other truthmaker views in order to see where the differences are.

3 Other Truthmaker Views

3.1 The Specific Truthmaker View

I am not sure if anyone holds the specific truthmaker view, because proponents of truthmaker views have not yet filled in enough details; they have never made clear just what they take our ontological commitments to be. They talk about our ontological commitments being to the truthmakers, but that's not my view. First, I think people ought to incur *some* ontological commitment by uttering false sentences. On the specific truthmaker view, someone who says, "There are \aleph_0 unicorns" occurs no ontological commitment, because the sentence is false and thus has no truthmaker. But intuitively, they do incur some ontological commitment. If our ontological commitments are to the truthmakers the sentence *would have* if it were true, then what about necessarily false sentences? For example, what are my ontological commitments when I affirm "There are \aleph_0 unicorns and $2 + 2 = 5$ "? Again, it seems I ought to incur some ontological commitment, but on this view I do not.

Second, suppose Jonathan Schaffer (2010) is right; truthmaker monism is true, and the truthmaker is the world.²² The specific truthmaker view says that we

²¹And now it looks like she's ontologically committed to total numbers!

²²Truthmaker monism is the view that there is one truthmaker. According to Schaffer (2010), the leading (and perhaps only) proponent of the view, the one truthmaker is the world.

are ontologically committed, then, to the world—and this is the case even if we think that the truthmakers are simples, or ordinary objects, or we don't believe in truthmakers at all. I disagree. We are not ontologically committed to the world when we say “tables exist” and when we say “there are a few colors”, especially if we emphatically deny that the world is the truthmaker for those sentences. But that's what proponents of the specific truthmaker view are committed to. I like the general view — we're only committed to *there being* truthmakers. So, by saying “tables exist”, we're not ontologically committed to the truthmakers; we're just committed to there being truthmakers. Namely, we're committed to the sentence being true and having a truthmaker (or several). This sounds eminently reasonable to me, and it is good reason to prefer the general truthmaker view to the specific truthmaker view.

There are not many who have held truthmaker views. Though contemporary talk of truthmaking has its origins in 1984,²³ most of the discussion of truthmaking has been attempts to formulate an adequate truthmaker principle, discussions of which ontological category truthmakers belong to, and accusations that certain people (e.g. nominalists, presentists, actualists) cannot provide truthmakers for the sentences they so freely affirm. It is widely thought that John Heil was the first to accept a truthmaker view of ontological commitment, and he has been followed by David Armstrong. Ross Cameron has recently articulated his own truthmaker view in a series of papers.²⁴ In the remainder of this section I will discuss these three truthmaker views, pose some problems for each, and distinguish them from my own view. With that background, I will then turn to elaborating my own view and defending it from objections.

3.2 John Heil's View

John Heil (2003) was the first to allude to a truthmaker view of ontological commitment.²⁵ He seemed to take it for granted that someone who placed a lot of emphasis on the truthmaker principle would hold a truthmaker view of ontological

²³The paper to which I'm referring is Mulligan et al. (1984), who cite as inspiration the *Tractatus*.

²⁴Truthmaker views are held by Heil (2003) and Heil (2012, §8.5), Armstrong (2004, §2.14), and developed in much greater detail in Cameron (2008b, 2010).

²⁵And Ross Cameron (2010) cites Heil (2003, §16) as an inspiration.

commitment, so he did not take great pains to show how much of a departure this was from orthodoxy, nor did he explicitly state or defend the view. Nevertheless, one gets a foretaste of truthmaker views, though with almost no detail. The whole book, after all, is an argument against the thought that figuring out what there is can be done by reflecting on the way we talk about the world. Time and again Heil resists the move from “we talk about *Fs*” to “therefore, there are *Fs*”, and he does so by asking what the truthmakers for our discussion of *Fs* are. Only when we’ve given the truthmakers have we told “the deep story”. This thought, while perhaps not entailing a truthmaker view of ontological commitment, certainly supports one. While there is not much explicit discussion of such a view in Heil, there are a few quotations which lend support to thinking of him as holding a truthmaker view of ontological commitment.

The first occurs in the introduction, where he says, “Truth-makers for claims about statues or people could turn out to be configurations of the atoms in the void. This, however, while providing what might be thought of as the deep story about statues and people, falls well short of establishing that there are no statues or people” (11). It is natural to read this as an expression of a truthmaker view of ontological commitment; when one finds out the truthmaker(s) for claims about *Fs*, one is ontologically committed to those things — but *Fs* still exist. However, I don’t think it’s that simple. It’s not entirely clear that Heil equates “the deep story” with our ontological commitments. That is, I take it that someone like Jonathan Schaffer would agree that the truth-maker for claims about statues and people is the world, the world provides the deep story about statues and people, and there are statues and people; but Schaffer still thinks we’re ontologically committed to statues and people.²⁶ So it’s not totally clear just from this that Heil holds a truthmaker view of ontological commitment. Though he certainly holds a truthmaker view of “the deep story” — that is, when you find out the truthmaker(s) for claims about *Fs*, you have found the deep story about *Fs*. But this is about the importance of finding out truthmakers, not about ontological commitment.

The second is in §16.7, where he wonders just what exactly realism is. “What I should like to challenge is the idea that realism about an object answering to a sortal

²⁶See Schaffer (2008), where he says that we are ontologically committed to what we think exists.

obliges us to suppose that the sortal designates an object or a class of objects in a metaphysically robust sense of object” (185). So, one might be a realist about an x that is an F but not think that F s are objects in a metaphysically robust sense of object. Or, one can be a realist about F s but not think F s are objects in a metaphysically robust sense of object. (I’ll investigate two ways of cashing out this claim in §4, but I won’t do it in terms of realism.) Realism, as Heil understands it, is a claim about mind-independence. To be a realist about F s is to think that F s are mind-independent. So, the above is to be understood as saying that one can think that F s are mind-independent but not think they are metaphysically robust. This is because in some cases it depends on us what things we pick out when we talk use ‘ F ’, but the F s exist regardless of how we use the term. Once the quotation is fully cashed out, it’s not clear that this is at all a claim about truthmaking or ontological commitment, but rather whether a certain view of how sortal terms connect up with the world counts as realism.

Third, Heil asks:

What do we require in order to say that statues (or lumps) exist? ...God will need to create the atoms and the void (the elementary particles, or the fields, or what have you), and arrange them appropriately...Once this is accomplished, God will have created a world containing statues...it will be true, literally true, that there are statues (and, for that matter, that there are lumps of bronze).
(189)

There are a few ways to read this. One way is that Heil thinks that composition supervenes on the qualitative nature of the relata. Necessarily, if God creates atoms and the void and arranges them appropriately, then composition occurs. This is a reasonably moderate view. After all, anyone who wants to answer the Special Composition Question has to say something like this; answers to the Special Composition Question are just attempts at specifying what it takes to arrange the atoms *appropriately*. This is pretty standard fare, and it’s all that a strict reading of the text allows. But there’s another potential interpretation. Notice that the above quotation is in the spirit of what at least some proponents of the view that composition is identity want to say: a statue is nothing and above the atoms; what it is for the statue to exist is for the atoms to exist and be arranged a certain way;

if you already think the atoms exist, the statue is no addition to being.²⁷ But composition as identity neither entails nor is entailed by a truthmaker view of ontological commitment.

A third way of reading this is that composition *doesn't* occur even when God creates the atoms and arranges them, but even though composition doesn't occur, the world still contains statues. But how could that be? Given his other views, it's natural to read Heil as thinking that we are allowed to *say* that statues exist, because our concept of a statue is such that when we see in front of us *this*, then our concept of statue applies, and we can say "there's a statue in front of me". Heil doesn't think it matters whether we think there are genuine entities that are statues, or just modes, or just atoms in the void — we still speak truly when we say "there are statues". By holding these other views, what we're saying is that we've uncovered the deep story about statues. That is, we've discovered the truthmakers — the things out there in the world — that make true our sentences about statues.

Heil continues by asking us to suppose that "the deep truth about objects like statues and lumps of bronze would be that such things are in fact modes. Is our ordinary talk of states and lumps of bronze at odds with this possibility? Again, I do not see why we must think so" (189). So, even if statues and lumps are modes and thus not composite objects, their being so is consistent with our ordinary discourse. But as Heil sees it, this is more a comment about the fluidity of our concepts of things than it is about ontological commitment. He goes a bit further when he asks us to "Suppose that trees, mountains, human beings, and the rest are modes: ways the ultimate stuff is. Does this mean that macroscopic objects do not exist (or do not really exist)? Only a philosopher would want to say this" (190). Of course, Heil is a philosopher, but in this case one gets the feeling he's attempting to distance himself from the rest of us. He holds the commonsense view — macroscopic objects exist, and indeed they really exist, but they are (ultimately? really?) modes; this is what we learned in 8th grade science. But this strikes me as wrong. If I were to find out that

²⁷But Heil explicitly disavows composition as identity, saying that our concepts of statues and lumps have historical constraints that forbid us from identifying the two. Of course, this would be constitution as identity, not composition as identity. But the doctrines are quite similar, and if anything constitution as identity is the more plausible. So it's doubtful that Heil has anything like composition as identity in mind.

the deep truth about statues involved modes, I wouldn't want to *identify* the statues with the modes. I'd rather say that there are statues and there are modes, and statues are not modes, but modes are the truthmakers for statements about statues. I've thought all along that by saying "there are statues" I am not ontologically committed to statues; if I become convinced that modes are the truthmakers for statements about statues, I should add modes to my ontology.

These are the things Heil says that might cause one to classify him as holding a truthmaker view of ontological commitment. While he says many things that a truthmaker theorist would say, I'm not convinced that these quotations are enough to establish that he is. I think that a truthmaker view is likely consistent with what he says (although I worry about what he means when he says macroscopic objects "really" exist), and indeed it fits quite nicely with his desire to make ontology be about what there is and not how we talk; and of course there is his commitment to the importance of truthmakers in general. But as far as what he in fact says, he might hold this conjunction: (a) statues exist, (b) when we say that statues exist, we are ontologically committed to statues, but (c) the deep story about statues is in terms of atoms arranged certain ways. If that is his view, I urge him to abandon (b). He should think that his ontological commitments are to there being things that make true ordinary English sentences, and they are the things referred to in the true deep stories. And he should consider the conjunction of all the deep stories, identify what objects that conjunction is talking about, and have all and only those things in his ontology.

3.3 David Armstrong's View

Armstrong seems to have been the first to say that if one postulates truthmakers for all the things one takes to be true, then, by doing so, one has an ontology. That is, he seems to be the first to realize that truthmaking could be used as a criterion for ontological commitment. He says, "To postulate certain truthmakers for certain truths is to admit those truthmakers to one's ontology. The complete range of truthmakers admitted constitutes a metaphysics..." (23). Of course, he does not explicitly say that one's ontology consists *only* of what one takes truthmakers,

but that seems to be his intent. He saw his view as starkly opposed to Quine's, and thought that "the great advantage, as I see it, of the search for truthmakers is that it focuses us not merely on the metaphysical implications of the subject terms of propositions but also on their predicates" (23). Quine thought that when we affirm " a is F ", we have to admit into our ontology only a . Armstrong thought that, since a is only a partial truthmaker for " a is F ", we must admit more into our ontology. Quine considered predicates ideology, but Armstrong thinks that, without admitting into our ontology something "corresponding" to the predicate, we can't provide a truthmaker for " a is F ".²⁸ Armstrong thought that requiring ontological commitment to truthmakers "leads us to consider whether we do not require at least selected properties and relations in our ontology" (24). He, of course, thought that we do. And indeed, he thought that we also need facts or states of affairs, both negative and general, to make true contingently true propositions.

This is all Armstrong says in the direction of a truthmaker view of ontological commitment. Of course, we could conjoin this view with his views about the truthmaker principle itself and get a pretty good idea of what Armstrong took to be his ontology. But it's difficult to tease out a more nuanced position of his criteria of ontological commitment. That said, I think we can say a few things for certain. First, that Armstrong rejects Quine's criterion of ontological commitment. Second, that he thinks we are ontologically committed to all and only the things we postulate as truthmakers for the propositions expressed by the sentences we affirm. His view, then, is neither a specific nor a general truthmaker view. If the way we postulate truthmakers is by affirming sentences like "I postulate a as a truthmaker for the proposition expressed by ' a is F '" (or the simpler " a is the truthmaker for the proposition expressed by ' a is F '"), then the general truthmaker view says that we are ontologically committed to there being something that makes true the proposition expressed by " a is the truthmaker for the proposition expressed by ' a is F '"; and the specific truthmaker view says that we are ontologically committed to whatever makes true the proposition expressed by " a is the truthmaker for the proposition expressed

²⁸One wonders if Armstrong is surprised at how the truthmaker view of ontological commitment is now being used — not to force people into admitting into their ontology *more* than Quine thought they should (as seems Armstrong's intent), but in fact *less*.

by ‘ a is F ’. Armstrong’s view has already come apart from the general truthmaker view. And if the truthmaker for the proposition expressed by “ a is the truthmaker for the proposition expressed by ‘ a is F ’” is not a , then Armstrong’s view also comes apart from the specific truthmaker view.

We might also wonder what Armstrong would say about our affirmation of sentences for which we don’t postulate truthmakers. The general and specific truthmaker theorists both have answers to this question. But Armstrong seems to think that ontological commitment is something that only happens when one postulates a truthmaker. And it seems he doesn’t think that we postulate truthmakers by affirming sentences like “ a is F ” — only by postulating a truthmaker for a proposition expressed by a sentence do we ontologically commit to anything. This is another point of departure. And it is also a problem. For on this view, only truthmaker theorists are ontologically committing to anything at all. And even then, we’re not ontologically committing to very much — just the things that we say make true the sentences that have been disputed by our opponents, and the things that we appeal to in our examples of truthmaking. That is, of course, too sparse an ontology. One needn’t perform an act of postulation in order to incur ontological commitment.

3.4 Ross Cameron’s View

Ross Cameron has offered the most sustained explication and defense of a truthmaker meta-ontology, and thus worth taking quite a bit of time to unpack. He sees an ancestor of his truthmaker view in Heil, and his two recent papers attempt to develop the view in much greater detail. The most natural reading of Cameron is as holding the specific truthmaker view; in this section I’ll show why, as well as offering some objections.

Cameron says, “It is true to say that there are such things [as tables and chairs], but that it is true does not commit us to admitting such things into our ontology” (2010, p. 249). This brings up a natural question about disquotation: is it also true that there are such things, or is it just true to say that there are? That is, does the truth of sentences part from truth of the propositions they express, or does existence

part from ontological commitment?²⁹ Cameron wants to endorse the latter, since he wants to retain disquotation (2008b, p. 6). He wants to say that by uttering, “The Taj Mahal exists”, we affirm the existence of the Taj Mahal, but we do not ontologically commit to it. I agree — so far, so good.

He also says, “If you want to hold that ‘there are Xs’ is strictly and literally true whilst resisting ontological commitment to the Xs, you should show that one can provide grounds for the truth of such claims without appealing to the Xs...” (2010, p. 249). Here we begin to differ. While I agree that you should eventually show (or at least argue) that something else can make true sentences about Xs if you don’t want to be ontologically committed to Xs, I think you don’t *have to*. That is, you needn’t show that you can provide grounds for “there are Xs” in order to maintain that ‘there are Xs’ is strictly and literally true while not ontologically committing to Xs. Cameron seems to disagree; he also says, “To resist commitment to tables I do not *need to* reject the truth of table-talk but rather show that table-talk can be made true by something other than tables” (2010, p. 250, emphasis mine). Saying, “I don’t need to X, but rather Y” implies that “I need to Y”. If that’s true, then Cameron thinks that to resist commitment to tables, he needs to *show* that table-talk can be made true by something other than tables. This is, of course, a nice advance over Quineanism, which says that he needs to paraphrase his sentence into one that doesn’t quantify over tables; Cameron just says he needs to provide truthmakers that aren’t tables.

But the spirit of the demand for truthmakers is very much the same as the demand for paraphrase. On my view, not only does Cameron not have to show what the truthmakers could be, he doesn’t even have to say what he takes them to be. He ought to, *qua ontologist*, be in the business of investigating what the truthmakers are/must be/could be for various sentences. But it’s not the case that the only way to resist ontological commitment to *Fs* is by offering a different truthmaker for sentences about *Fs*. It’s not clear what Cameron thinks about this. He talks about resisting ontological commitment to tables when we say “tables exist” because simples are all that’s required to make it true. What if we had no idea that simples exist? Would we then be ontologically committed to tables? I say no —

²⁹I will return to this issue in §4.

we're just committed to the sentences having truthmakers, and it's the ontologist's job to find out what they are. Perhaps it's the world, perhaps simples, perhaps tables...Every time Cameron says, "We aren't committed to Xs", he immediately supplies a truthmaker, "All that sentences about Xs commit us to are Ys". But on my view, we are not committed to Xs in virtue of being unable to supply Ys as candidate truthmakers.

Cameron throughout says, "A theory's ontological commitments are to what *must exist* to make true the sentences of that theory" (for the first time on 2008b, p. 4, emphasis mine). I want to take issue with the two italicized words, in reverse order. First, what does 'exist' mean in this context? As I see it, there are three ways to understand the meaning of the sentence. The first is to say that it's not the case that tables must exist for the sentence "tables exist" is to be true; rather, some other things exist and make it true. The second is to say that of course tables must exist for the sentence "tables exist" to be true, but tables aren't the truthmakers for the sentence, and thus the theory is not ontologically committed to them; it's only ontologically committed to the truthmakers. The third is to say that tables must exist for the sentence "tables exist" to be true, but that the theory isn't ontologically committed to them – it's only ontologically committed to there being something that makes "tables exist" true.

I don't know which option Cameron wants to take. Sometimes he seems to take the first option. But at other times he makes a distinction between existence and real being, and says that tables must exist for "tables exist" to be true, but tables don't have to have *real being* for "tables exist" to be true; and we're only ontologically committed to things we think have *real being*.³⁰ On that basis, I think we can rule out the first option. And he thinks that we can ontologically commit to particular things, so option two is still on the table. But with respect to this particular case, I cannot tell whether he takes option two or three. I think that the most sensible thing for the truthmaker theorist to think is that existence and real being come apart. I think she should say that "*Fs* exists" requires the existence of *Fs* but might not be

³⁰Compare the following two quotations, which seem to be in tension: "I hold that the ontological commitments of a theory are just those things that must exist to make true the sentences of that theory" (TOC 4) and "the ontological commitments of a theory are those things whose existence its truth entails that have real being" (RMO 250).

made true by *F*s; so all we're ontologically committed to when we affirm "*F*s exist" is the real being of something or other that makes it true, even though we do affirm that *F*s exist. I'll talk much more about this in §4, including a way of making sense of "real being".

Second, what 'must' mean in this context? Is it that the ontological commitments are to things that *entail* the truth? Or the things that *in fact* make it true? The most natural reading is that 'must' here is a modal operator. But in that case our ontological commitments might very well be disjunctive; if "tables exist" is true, then what must exist to make it true is either tables or simples or thoughts or the world or distributional properties... So if every sentence is like this—being made true by different things in different worlds—then the most natural reading of Cameron's view is as a specific truthmaker view, but of a modal sort. He says that our ontological commitments are to a certain disjunction of things (truthmakers at various worlds); I say that they aren't even that particular — they're just to something or other.

In a similar vein, he says, "We should make a distinction, as indeed anyone must, between a sentence bringing an ontological commitment to some particular thing(s), and it ontologically committing you to some things or other. I say that a sentence *S* commits you to some particular thing *A* when *A* *has to* make *S* true if it is true" (2010, p. 253). This is great progress toward the general truthmaker view. But there are some concerns. Again, is the phrase "has to" supposed to be understood as modal? Doesn't any true thing, in some sense, *have to* be true? If I had a dram of Ardbeg yesterday, don't I, in some sense, *have to* have had it? But if "has to" here is modal—that is, in any world in which *S* is true, *A* makes *S* true—then is there any contingent truthmaking? I believe there is. And if there is contingent truthmaking, then what are we ontologically committed to when we affirm "there are *F*s": the thing(s) that actually make it true, the things that possibly make it true, one particular thing that actually or possibly makes it true, or something or other that actually (or possibly) makes it true? Obviously, I think the latter. I am not sure what Cameron thinks.

We can make the options more precise in order to bring out the distinction. For any person *S*, sentence *s*, and proposition *p* such that *s* expresses *p*, if *S* affirms *s*,

then:

1. If p is true, then for every x such that x makes p true, S is ontologically committed to x .
2. If p is true, then there exists an x such that x makes p true, and S is ontologically committed to x .
3. For every x such that there exists a world W such that x makes p true in W , S is ontologically committed to x .
4. For every world W and everything x in W such that x makes p true in W , S is ontologically committed to x .
5. For some world W such that there exists an x in W such that x makes p true in W , S is ontologically committed to x .
6. If there exists an x such that x makes p true, then S is ontologically committed to x .
7. If there exists a thing x such that there is a world W such that x makes p true in W , then S is committed to x .
8. If there exists a world W such that p is true in W , then for any x such that x makes p true in W , S is ontologically committed to x .
9. If there exists a world W such that p is true in W , then there is some thing x such that x makes p true in W and S is ontologically committed to x .
10. S is ontologically committed to there being some x such that for any world W , if p is true in W , then x makes p true in W .
11. S is ontologically committed to there being a world W such that p is true in W and there is some x in W such that x makes p true in W .
12. S is committed to there being a thing x such that there is a world W such that x makes p true in W .

13. S is ontologically committed to there being an x such that x makes p true.

(1)-(5) are specific truthmaker views. (6)-(9) are truthmaker views according to which nobody is ontologically committed to anything by affirming false or impossible propositions. (10)-(13) are general truthmaker views.

The best reading of Armstrong may have him holding one of (6)-(9). However, I rule them out, since uttering “there are \aleph_0 unicorns and $2+2=5$ ” ought to be ontologically committing, but on (6)-(9) it is not.

It is not clear which of (1)-(13) Cameron holds. A case can be made for (1), (2), (3), (4), and (10). I hold to (13). Cameron is a truthmaker necessitarian, and none of (1)-(13) entail the falsity of truthmaker necessitarianism.³¹ He can accept any of them; but it is not clear which one (if any) he accepts.

There are some things that I disagree with more strongly. For example, Cameron says “the truth of ‘beethoven’s ninth exists’ is actually grounded in beethoven’s having indicated a certain abstract sound structure, and that is compatible with the fact it might not have been so grounded.” (2010, p. 259). This does not bode well if Cameron holds (3), (4), (5), (11), or (12). For what are our ontological commitments? One of the things that might have grounded it, but no particular one thing? Or the thing that actually does? Or some thing or other? It’s not clear.

Cameron says that “if there are denumerably many electrons” is true, then we aren’t committed to a particular plurality of electrons, but rather *some denumerable plurality* of electrons. (2010, p. 254) This seems starkly at odds with a truthmaker view of ontological commitment. Why are we committed to some denumerable plurality of electrons, rather than to the truthmakers of that sentence, or there being some truthmakers? After all, what if I believe that “there are denumerably many composite objects” is true? Am I ontologically committed to some denumerable plurality of composite objects? The truthmaker theorist wants to say no; “there are denumerably many composite objects” is true? But why electrons? What if I think “there are denumerably many composite objects” is true? Usually the truthmaker theorist says that sentences

³¹He repudiated the view in his (2005). But see Cameron (2008a, p. 421, note 15). One can also glean this from his Cameron (2008c, p. 113): “So I think that if you are going to be a truthmaker theorist you ought to buy into the whole Armstrongian package and accept both maximalism and necessitarianism”, coupled with his affirmation of the antecedent.

about composite objects can be true if there aren't any composite objects. "There are denumerably many composite objects" is about composite objects, and a prime candidate for a sentence that the truthmaker theorist can be made true by things that aren't composite objects. If we're only ontologically committed to the truthmakers (or to there being truthmakers), why are we committed to some denumerable plurality of electrons by uttering "there are denumerably many electrons"?

I'll conclude this section with a prime example of Cameron's seeming commitment to the specific truthmaker view: "Perhaps what makes it true that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the *F*s and the *G*s are numbers; but in that case the stipulation of Hume's Principle isn't bringing about any *new* commitment — we were *already* committed to the existence of numbers in claiming such a one-to-one correspondence" (2008b, p. 12). But I disagree. In saying, "there is a one-to-one correspondence between the *F*s and the *G*s", we were committed to there being a truthmaker for that sentence. Perhaps numbers, perhaps some particular function mapping the *F*s to the *G*s, perhaps the world... But we are not ontologically committed to any of those particular things, even if it turns out that the existence of numbers makes it true that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the *F*s and the *G*s.

4 Two Ways of Understanding Truthmaker Views

The truthmaker theorist says that one can affirm "statues exist" without being ontologically committed to statues. There are (at least) two ways to do this. The best way of bringing out the distinction between the two is to look at the following argument against truthmaker views:

1. If *S* affirms "statues exist", then *S* believes that statues exist.
2. If *S* believes that statues exist, then *S* is ontologically committed to statues.
3. Therefore, if *S* affirms "statues exist", then *S* is ontologically committed to statues. (from 2,3)

The truthmaker theorist wants to deny (3), since she thinks our ontological commitments are to there being truthmakers for “Statues exist”, and the truthmakers might not be statues. Since the above argument is clearly valid, the truthmaker theorist must deny (1) or (2). In this section, I shall discuss each of these options.

4.1 Denying (1)

One way of understanding truthmaker views is as a claim about the relationship between sentences which seemingly express the existence of a thing and the existence of a thing. One could make the claim in different ways. One way would be to say that disquotation fails, either in general or just in the case that a sentence ascribes existence to something. The disquotation principle says that if a subject *S* assents to “*p*”, then *S* believes that *p*. There are well-known problems with disquotation, so it might not be so bad if the truthmaker theorist has to deny it.³² But I do not think truthmaker views should rise or fall with the truth of the disquotation principle. And the argument can be run a bit differently.

One could also accept the disquotation principle but reject a closely related disquotation principle: For any sentence *S*, if ‘*S*’ is true, then ‘*S*’. This is one direction of the Tarskian biconditional (‘*S*’ is true iff ‘*S*’).³³ One might think that if one affirms “statues exist”, then one believes that “statues exist” is true, but it’s not the case that “statues exist” is true if and only if statues exist.

Denying the Tarskian biconditional has some appeal for the truthmaker theorist. And she might motivate the denial by pointing to the liar paradox (is “this sentence is not true” true?) and suggesting that we need to re-interpret our understanding of truth-conditions anyway. This is an interesting avenue, but I will not pursue it for two reasons. First, I do not think that the truthmaker view rises or falls with the truth of the T-schema. Second, I think there is a better response to the argument — deny (2).

³²The principle was named by Kripke in his Kripke (1979), and he poses the problem for it as well.

³³Quine (1970) famously used “‘*S*’ is true if and only if *S*” as a “theory” of truth, but one needn’t do so to endorse the T-schema — neither the conditional nor the biconditional tell us what truth *is*.

4.2 Denying (2)

The truthmaker theorist ought to deny (2): if S believes that statues exist, then S is ontologically committed to statues. She should think that existence claims come apart from ontological commitments.

The best way to deny (2) is to understand truthmaker views as a claim about what is fundamental. Talk of fundamentality, fundamental things, and fundamental language (or languages) has taken center stage in metaphysics in recent years. A number of metaphysicians have defended the view that what matters in ontology is not the question of what exists, but rather the question of what is fundamental.³⁴ For some, the answer to the question is mereological simples.³⁵ For others, it's the world.³⁶ Nobody says that tables are fundamental. But they exist. The truthmaker theorist thinks that there are many things that our English sentences say exist, but some of these sentences are true in virtue of the existence of things that aren't quantified over in the English sentences. These things—the truthmakers—are what number among the ontology of the world.³⁷ They are, one might say, the fundamental things, in virtue of which true English sentences are true. I would like to pursue this version of truthmaker theory for the rest of the paper.

We can introduce a quantifier that ranges over all and only the truthmakers; since the truthmakers are the fundamental things, it seems natural to call the quantifier that ranges over them 'the fundamental quantifier'.³⁸ I shall use ' \exists_F ' for the fundamental existential quantifier, and ' \exists_E ' for the English existential quantifier.³⁹

³⁴See eg Schaffer (2009). Fine (2001) says we should investigate the question of what really exists.

³⁵See Cameron (2008b, 2010), and Sider (MS).

³⁶See Schaffer (2010).

³⁷Again, the truthmaker theorist might deny this, saying that "there are F s" is made true by things that are neither fundamental nor F . That project strikes me as much more difficult to motivate.

³⁸Most who think there is a fundamental quantifier think that it cannot be a restriction on the ordinary English quantifier (' \exists_E '). Presumably their reason is that when we do ontology, we want to talk about *everything* (wave the hands wildly for emphasis), and restricted quantifiers don't range over everything. McDaniel (2010) is a notable exception, though he thinks there are multiple fundamental quantifiers. I also disagree, but for different reasons.

³⁹I shall affix the subscript ' $_E$ ' to quantificational expressions to denote ordinary English quantification, and affix the subscript ' $_F$ ' to quantificational expressions to denote fundamental quantification. I'll continue to use 'exists' and ' \exists ', and I intend them to be deliberately ambiguous between ' \exists_F ', ' \exists_E ', or some other existential quantifier.

The truthmaker theorist thinks that what is fundamental are the truthmakers. So, \exists_F has in its domain all and only the truthmakers of true English sentences.⁴⁰

So then, what allows us to say that tables exist_E? Well, the sentence “tables exist” is true, and it’s made true by something (or some things). Since it’s true, tables are in the domain of \exists_E . Since it’s made true, whatever makes it true is (or are) in the domain of \exists_F . What enables one to say that tables and chairs may not exist_F? It’s a recognition that the English quantifier isn’t the fundamental quantifier. That is, in our English assertions we quantify over tables, and our assertions are true, but in the fundamental language we might not (and probably don’t) need to. The reason: the fundamental quantifier ranges over only the fundamental things, the fundamental things are the truthmakers for our English sentences, and tables are (probably) not truthmakers or fundamental things. This is why they don’t exist_F.

So, all and only the truthmakers exist_F. We can use \exists_F , then, as the quantifier of ontological commitment. In order to show that something x exists_F, we have to show that x exists_E, and that it does some truthmaking work — perhaps by being the best or only candidate for making true the English sentence “ x exists”.⁴¹

The reason the truthmaker theorist think that tables don’t exist_F is that she thinks that at least some sentences with ‘exists’ express propositions which aren’t made true by the objects quantified over in the original sentence. Take, for example, the English sentence ‘there are_E tables’. The logical form of the sentence is ‘ $\exists_E x(\text{Table})x$ ’. This sentence quantifies over tables. So, the one who affirms the sentence affirms the existence_E of tables. So according to the Quinean, the one who affirms the sentence is ontologically committed to tables. But the specific truthmaker theorist thinks that in affirming sentences with ‘exists_E’, we aren’t ontologically committed to the things in the domain of \exists_E ; we are just committed to whatever makes the sentence true. And the general truthmaker theorist thinks that in affirming sentences with \exists_E , we are just committed to there existing_F something

⁴⁰My usage of ‘the fundamental quantifier’ may differ from that of Sider (2012) and others, since they think that fundamentality is primarily a property of ideology. Saying that “in the fundamental sense of the word ‘exists’, only fundamental things exist” is a substantive thesis; I defend it in Rettler (MS), but Sider and others deny it.

⁴¹This entails that it’s not the case that there is_F a truthmaker for some sentence that isn’t ranged over by the English quantifier. I defend this claim in Rettler (MS).

(or some things) that makes (or make) them true. We need an additional argument that it has to be tables.

This mirrors an ongoing debate in the philosophy of science about theory replacement, revision, and reinterpretation. Consider the case of electricity and magnetism. Before 1973, electricity and magnetism were thought of as separate forces; each showed up in scientific laws and theories, and various claims were made about them. But it turns out neither of those forces exist_F; there is_F just one force — electromagnetism. And yet we might want to say that it's not that the laws were false, but rather that they are made true by different things than scientists thought. At any rate, there is a debate among scientists as to whether these are instances of theory replacement or theory refinement or theory re-interpretation. There is a substantive question as to whether the laws as formerly formulated are now false, or whether they are made true by things the scientists didn't know about at the time of their original formulation. I think philosophers ought to be the ones to answer those questions, and I think the answer the truthmaker theorist would give is a sensible one.

4.3 Advantages of Truthmaker Views

There are three main advantages of truthmaker views. The first was brought out in the story; truthmaker views give the right answers to the questions about the story, and Quineanism does not.

The second advantage is that it allows us to resolve ontological questions by doing metaphysics, not by investigating our use of language. Truthmaker theorists think that Quineans rely too much on the surface form of language in determining someone's ontological commitments. We say that the sentence "tables exist" is true. The logical form of this sentence is $\exists x(\text{Table})x$. Therefore, there are tables; that is, tables number among the things in the world. According to the Quinean creed, the only way to avoid this ontological commitment is to paraphrase the sentence into one that doesn't quantify over tables. If we can't do so, we're stuck with an ontological commitment to tables. But the paraphrase is still being done at the level of sentences. Why think that English sentences are ontologically perspicuous? And why think

that the truth of propositions expressed by those sentences ontologically commit us to tables? In order to answer these questions, the Quinean must make more substantive assumptions about the relationship between sentences and propositions and truth (and I daresay truthmaking) than the truthmaker theorist—something like the surface form of the sentences indicating the nature of the propositions expressed by them, and the surface form of the sentence determining what makes it true if it is true.⁴²

The third advantage of truthmaker views is that we can say that sentences that quantify over tables and the like are strictly and literally true without populating our ontology with what some consider untoward entities. We can say that “tables exist” is true, but not be ontologically committed to tables. This is because, on truthmaker views, we are only ontologically committed to the existence_F of whatever makes true “tables exist”. And on the general truthmaker view, we are only ontologically committed to there existing_F something (or some things) that makes (or make) true the sentence “tables exist”. One candidate is simples arranged tablewise. If one thinks that simples arranged tablewise make true “there are tables”, then one can affirm “there are tables” without even considering being ontologically committed to tables; we get the best of both worlds! (Of course, nobody who affirms “there are tables” is ontologically committed to tables simply in virtue of affirming it.) Cameron puts the point nicely: “...the nihilist is right about the ontology but the universalist is right about what sentences are true” (Cameron 2008). In other words: the nihilist is right about what exists_F, but the universalist is right about what exists_E. Or Sider: “We’re trying to find our way in a world with a minimal ontology, and we don’t know much about particle physics” (Sider MS). The principle thought is that we’ve introduced words, some of them quantificational, to describe the world around us. And we’ve said true things, even when describing what things there are. But what exists_F are the things that make the propositions expressed by those sentences true.

⁴²Remember, the specific truthmaker theorist says that one’s ontological commitments are to whatever makes true the true propositions; she needn’t say anything about what those things are. And the general truthmaker theorist says that one’s ontological commitments are to there being things that make true the true propositions; she also needn’t say anything about what those things are.

I think “there are tables” need not be made true by tables. But my view leaves open the question of what the truthmaker(s) for the sentence “there are tables” is/are. It could very well be tables, or it could be simples.⁴³ But we are not able to distinguish between whether tables or simples-arranged-tablewise are the truthmakers for sentences about tables. And our ontological commitments are to there being_F truthmakers. So instead of arguing about whether or not tables exist (of course they do!), metaphysicians ought to argue about whether simples can make true sentences about tables. If they can, we ought to not ontologically commit to tables. If they cannot, then we ought to ontologically commit to tables. What we should not do is existentially generalize from “There is a table in the next room” to “There are tables”, and then insist that we are ontologically committed to tables in virtue of affirming the first sentence. The story shows us why.

5 Objections and Replies

Another objection: “You say that nihilism is true because composites aren’t fundamental; but nihilism is a theory about what there really is. That suggests that you identify what there really is with what’s fundamental. But you allow that there are quantifiers with bigger domains—and remember, domains have members!—than the fundamental quantifier, which suggests that you *don’t* identify what there really is with what’s fundamental. So it looks like the view is internally inconsistent.”⁴⁴

Allow me first to restate the objection in the lingo of this paper: Suppose that \exists_F has in its domain only simples. \exists_E has in its domain simples, and many more things. So there *really are* all those things (the simples and the tables and the like). And if there *really are* all those things, then either (a) they are in the domain of \exists_F , or (ii) \exists_F doesn’t have in its domain all the things there really are. But not (a). So

⁴³It could not, of course, be three-legged unicorns; there is a limit as to what can do the truthmaking for sentences. This seems obvious, but you might wonder why it’s true. If we don’t say anything about what the truthmakers are, what eliminates unicorns as candidates? The answer is that I don’t have an argument against unicorns making true sentences about tables. If you were to press me on the point, I would respond with glee. After all, the truthmaker theorist thinks that this is just the sort of debate we should be having—not over whether “there are unicorns” is true, but about whether unicorns do any truthmaking.

⁴⁴This objection is due to Mike Rea.

(b). But \exists_F is supposed to range over all the things there really are.

My response, in short, is that the objection is ambiguous. Talking about “what there really is” is ambiguous between talking about what there really is_E and what there really is_F. So, there really are_E tables, but it’s false that there really are_F tables. So, (ii) can be true or false depending on how you read ‘all the things there really are’. \exists_F is not supposed to range over all the things there really are_E. Now, if the addition of ‘really’ is supposed to move one from using the English quantifier to the fundamental quantifier, then there aren’t really_F all the things in the domain of \exists_E ; there just are_E those things.

(For the remainder of this paper, I shall avoid “really” talk. We have, I hope, a reasonably firm grasp of the meanings of ‘ \exists_F ’ and ‘ \exists_E ’, and it seems we lack a firm grasp of the semantic content of “really” when affixed to some quantificational expression. So, since I need only employ ‘ \exists_F ’ and ‘ \exists_E ’ below, I shall do so.)

Another objection: “Isn’t this just Meinongianism in sheep’s clothing? The Meinongian says that there are some things that don’t exist, and so do you.” But on my framework, there are four ways of reading the Meinongian claim.

1. There are_E some things that don’t exist_E.
2. There are_E some things that don’t exist_F.
3. There are_F some things that don’t exist_E.
4. There are_F some things that don’t exist_F.

The Meinongian, in making a distinction between what there is and what exists, accepts (1), and perhaps would accept (4) if presented with it. I deny (1) and (4), and also (3). I do accept (2). If one has objections against Meinongianism that tell against the truth of (2), she is more than welcome to offer them. But my suspicion is that non-Meinongians object to (1), and perhaps (4). I do not think the standard objections to Meinongianism tell against the denial of (2). So the truthmaker theorist is not to be lumped in with the Meinongians.

6 The Quinean Contrast

Before concluding, I want to address one final worry. After we've gotten this far in laying out the view, one might wonder just how different this is from Quineanism.⁴⁵ van Inwagen (1998) lays down five theses that the Quinean accepts. They are:

1. Being is not an activity
2. Being is the same as existence
3. Being is univocal
4. The single sense of being or existence is adequately captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic
5. Quine's criterion of ontological commitment, which van Inwagen explicates as follows:

One takes sentences that the other party to the conversation accepts, and by whatever dialectical devices one can muster, one gets him to introduce more and more quantifiers and variables into those sentences... If, at a certain point in this procedure, it emerges that the existential generalization on a certain open sentence F can be formally deduced from the sentences he accepts, one has shown that the sentences that he accepts, and the ways of introducing quantifiers and variables into those sentences that he has endorsed, formally commit him to there being things that satisfy F .
(246-7)

The truthmaker theorist may agree with (1) and (2). She disagrees with a certain way of thinking about (3); sometimes 'being' means existence_E , and sometimes 'being' means existence_F . If you ask whether existence_E or existence_F is being, the truthmaker theorist says that they are two distinct notions and being is ambiguous between the two. If being is the thing that objects must have in order to figure in the fundamental description of the world, then being is existence_F . If being is the thing that some thing x must have in order for the sentence " x exists" to be true, then

⁴⁵I am thinking of the Quineanism of van Inwagen (1998), which has its ancestry in Quine (2008, 1948, 1951a,b).

being is existence_E. The truthmaker theorist invites the believer in the univocity of being to say which of existence_E or existence_F being is.

The truthmaker theorist takes issue with (4) for the same reason she takes issue with (3) — she is not convinced there is a single sense of existence, and there is certainly not a single sense of ‘existence’. She agrees that each sense of ‘existence’ can be captured by the existential quantifier of formal logic, in that each sense of existence obeys the introduction and elimination rules of the existential quantifier of first-order logic. If it is true that “*a* is *F*”, then it is true that “ $\exists_E xFx$ ”. And if *a* names something in the fundamental language and *a* is *F*, then it is true that “ $\exists_F xFx$ ”. But since we speak English, regimenting our ordinary discourse into first-order logic is done using the English quantifier. It’s not clear how ordinary language maps onto the logic of the fundamental language, but certainly “*a* is *F*” expressed in English does not license one to infer that $\exists_F xFx$.

The truthmaker theorist also denies (5), and this is the biggest departure from Quineanism. One could perhaps be a Quinean and grant all the above points about the English quantifier. She would do so by saying that speakers of English very often use “there is” or “there exists” idiomatically, and not to express existence. This, she might say, is what the truthmaker theorist is trying to describe with the invocation of existence_E. Rather than think “existence” often expresses existence_E, this Quinean would say that “existence” is often used idiomatically and not to express the single sense of existence.

That is all well and good, but the Quinean is very much interested in catching ontological cheats — those nominalists who say things that seem to be inconsistent with nominalism, but then insist that they’re using the quantifier idiomatically so as not to express existence. In this way, the nominalist hopes to dodge ontological commitment to non-nominalist things.⁴⁶ But Quine mandates that in all such cases of idiomatic usage of apparently quantificational expressions, one paraphrase one’s sentence into a sentence that doesn’t use a quantificational expression. If she can’t do so, Quine insists, then she is ontologically committed to the things over which she’s quantified. And this the truthmaker theorist cannot accept. The truthmaker theorist thinks that one can utter “there are numbers” and still be a nominalist, thinking that

⁴⁶For some delightful examples of nominalist things, see Fitzgerald (2003).

the sentence is made true not by numbers but by other things. Nominalism on the truthmaker view, then, isn't a view about what exists_E, but rather what makes true sentences seemingly about abstracta — namely, such sentence aren't made true by abstracta.

7 Conclusion

In conclusion, on the general truthmaker view, one's ontological commitments are to there being_F entities which make true the propositions expressed by the sentences one accepts as expressing true propositions. The sentences one endorses will include sentences like “*a* exists”, “*P*s exist”, and the like. So, the everyday English quantifier has in its domain *a*, things that are *P*, and the like. One's ontological commitments are to there being_F entities that make those sentences true.

There are three advantages the general truthmaker view. One is that it allows us to make sense of cases like the Nihilo case. Another is that it allows us to rely less on language to determine what we ought to be ontologically committed to. And a third is that it allows us to say that English sentences that nearly everyone accepts are true, but without the ontological baggage that Quinean meta-ontology requires. These are good reasons to accept the general truthmaker view. There are putative reasons not to accept the general truthmaker view, but I hope I have shown why they are not good reasons.

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