**Truthmakers, Events and Supervenience**

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Abstract

It is often argued that truths require truthmakers, entities whose mere existence necessitates the relevant truths. For example, the proposition that snow is white is made true by snow’s being white (or the whiteness of snow). In response to the objection that this is trivial, it is often insisted that there is typically not a one-one, but a many-one correspondence between truth-bearers and truth-makers. This is because truthmakers, like events, have more coarsely grained identity criteria than propositions. This paper will argue, however, that coarse-grainedness will not help us to justify truthmaker theory: on the contrary, it actually undermines it. It will further be argued that the non-trivial facts supposedly embodied in this many-one truth-relation nearly always turn out to concern supervenience, a notion that has little to do with the nature of truth.

Keywords: truthmaker; truth; event; supervenience; state of affairs; trope; identity criterion

1 Deflationism versus Substantivism about Truth

There has been much debate about the nature of truth, in particular, as to whether it involves a correspondence to facts in some non-trivial sense. Nearly everybody agrees that truth satisfies a minimal principle, the ‘Equivalence Schema’:

(ES) <*p*> is true iff *p*

Deflationists, such as Paul Horwich (1990), think that this is really all that truth consists in, and that there is not much more to be said on the matter. Slightly more controversially, we might also claim:

(ES′) <*p*> is true because *p*

but the difference, it may be thought, is only minor. Substantivists (coherentists, pragmatists, full-blown correspondentists, and so on), insist that much more needs to be said, and various additions are presented which amplify (ES) (and (ES′)) in much more substantial ways.

The debate is lively. In particular, robust versions of the correspondence theory of truth are now widely defended (and attacked), notably those that insist that true propositions need to be made true by virtue of *truthmakers*, entities whose mere existence is sufficient to guarantee the truths in question. Exactly what truthmakers are, and why they should have such an intimate relationship with the truth-bearers with which they are allegedly associated, is highly controversial. However, they are often thought to be *states of affairs*, which are entities typically denoted by nominalized sentences, such as ‘*a*’s being ϕ’.

If all this truthmaker talk were to amount to are claims along the lines of

*a*’s being ϕ makes it true that *a* is ϕ

then we might not unreasonably suspect that all we are getting is another version of (ES′). After all, the fact that sentences can be turned into noun-phrases, via the gerundial form of verbs, is not itself of any obvious metaphysical interest. However, David Armstrong and others have argued that we should not assume that there is a simple one-one correspondence between truth-bearers and truth-makers, and this is where matters become more interesting. It may be, for example, that we need to consider claims such as

*b*’s being ψ makes it true that *a* is ϕ

where *b*’s being ψ is, in some sense, more basic than *a*’s being ϕ, if we are *really* to understand what it is that makes <*a* is ϕ> true. Furthermore, Mulligan, Simons and Smith (1984) claim that it is typically an empirical matter to discover the truthmakers for a given proposition. For example, we might want to say that it is the crystalline structure of the atoms that compose the glass (or the state of affairs which is these atoms’ being so structured) that makes it true that the window is brittle. Such claims are evidently non-trivial (unlike, it seems, the claim that it is the brittleness of the window that makes it true that the window is brittle), so it apparently follows that the truth-relation itself must also be non-trivial.

However, there is a very simple manoeuvre that seems to undermine this defence of truthmaker theory. For example, take any interesting truthmaking statement of the form

(1) *b*’s being ψ makes it true that *a* is ϕ

It can, it seems, be split, without loss of content, into two components:

(2) *b*’s being ψ makes it true that *b* is ψ

and

(3) *a* is ϕ because *b* is ψ.[[1]](#footnote-1)

(2) is about truth but is not substantive, whereas (3) is substantive but is not about truth. Truth, it seems, is a very simple concept which should be left well alone, as the deflationists recommend; the substantive material concerns quite different issues.

It may be insisted that (2) is, in fact, highly substantive. Specifically, the phrase ‘*b*’s being ψ’ is not just the sentence ‘*b* is ψ’ in disguise but the name of a state of affairs or trope or some such thing, and it is a substantial metaphysical question whether such things exist at all and, if so, how they relate to the propositions that they make true. But if these truthmakers are meant to be worldly items then they will need worldly identity criteria and be open to nontrivial redescription. For example, the brittleness of the window will be the same state of affairs or trope as the crystalline structure of the atoms that compose it. However, if there is a one-one correspondence between true propositions and their truthmakers, then finding the truthmaker for a given true proposition will be an utterly trivial affair, and certainly not a matter of empirical research. Moreover, if truthmakers have fine-grained identity criteria, so that

(4) *a*’s being φ = *b*’s being ψ iff <*a* is φ> is true and logically equivalent to <*b* is ψ>

and

(5) <*a*’s being φ exists> is logically equivalent to <*a* is φ>

it will then follow that

(6) *a*’s being φ is an entity whose existence alone is sufficient to guarantee the truth of <*a* is φ>

It takes little more to say that

(7) <*a* is φ> is true by virtue of the existence of *a*’s being φ

After all, if *a*’s being φ did not exist, then <*a* is φ> could not be true! Yet all this is so minimal that it is hard to see why anyone should wish to dispute it, assuming that they can agree that fine-grained states of affairs exist in the first place (and there could be reasons for doing this that are quite independent of the truthmaking debate). Fine-grained truthmakers just do not have much impact. Perhaps there will remain something of residual interest, and it might still be insisted that there is significantly more to (7) than to (6); but attention will be restricted here to truthmaker theories that do not suppose a one-one correspondence, where truthmakers are not ‘sentence-shaped’ but are instead worldly items that can be redescribed in many ways. Such theories will invoke sentences like (1) and not just sentences like (2).

Obviously, the claim that (1) collapses into (2) and (3) in the way indicated needs to be developed in more detail. In particular, it needs to be explained what statements such as (3) really are about if they are not about truth or truthmaking. Relatedly, it also needs to be shown that the metaphysical insights supposedly attached to truthmaker theory can be adequately handled without appeal to truthmakers. This paper will argue that statements such as (3) concern, more than anything else, supervenience relations between the properties φ and ψ, and that supervenience is a concept that can be adequately explicated without saying much about truth. It will also argue that truthmakers are metaphysically robust, ‘worldly’ entities only in so far as they have coarsely grained identity criteria: for example, (1) could only be true if *a*’s being φ is the same (concrete) state of affairs as *b*’s being ψ. Yet not only are such identity criteria inadequately understood in themselves, it will also be shown that the coarseness cannot really be put to good use after all: it actually causes more problems than it solves. Properties (individuated finely), and the supervenience relations between them, turn out to do all the real metaphysical work.

2 Some Objections

Another difficulty is that, even if we agree that (1) can be split into (2) and (3), it is not obvious that that would prove that (3) is more basic than (1). (1) and (3) appear to be logically equivalent, and irrespective of whether we invoke (2), so why should one of them be preferable to the other? Why should we not say instead that (1) is actually more basic than (3), so that (3) must be about truth after all, given that (1) is? At best, the situation is symmetrical, which means that the point has not been proven; indeed, the whole issue may turn out to amount to nothing.

There are certainly some quite general difficulties in seeing how one proposition can be more basic than a logically equivalent one—indeed, with how the two are to be distinguished in the first place. Nevertheless, there are some fairly straightforward reasons for supposing that (3) is part of the analysis of (1), not vice versa. It certainly looks simpler in an obvious, intuitive sort of way: it uses fewer words, for example. More significantly, (3) does not seem to imply the existence of any truth-bearers: indeed, it does not explicitly invoke or presuppose any semantic notions whatsoever. Again, this might not be a conclusive point, for if truth-bearers are propositions, construed as Fregean thoughts, then they are necessary existents; in which case, (3) will technically imply their existence after all (given the paradoxes of strict implication, which are difficult to get past). Yet unless it can be shown, implausibly, that statements such as (3) cannot be properly analysed unless we discuss semantic notions, the asymmetry surely still holds up pretty well.

So, how do we analyse the ‘because’ of (3)? We are evidently not talking about a causal connection here, even though the notion clearly has an explanatory force (perhaps we have something like a formal or material cause, though not an efficient or final one).[[2]](#footnote-2) Rather, we are talking about a basic kind of metaphysical support, one which is clearly related to supervenience. Of course, supervenience relations hold primarily between sets of properties, rather than propositions or states of affairs, but this itself need not matter very much. It is plainly the connection between the properties ϕ and ψ that is fundamental here; and since supervenience is a notion that can be explicated without saying much about the nature of truth, it seems, once again, that the truthmaker theorist has been outflanked.

It may be protested that this is to lose sight of one of the most important motivations for truthmaker theory, namely the desire to underpin a strong metaphysical realism. This manifests itself in a kind of necessitarianism, the idea that if something is to be genuinely true, then there must be something real which makes it true in the sense that it could not possibly not be true given this real thing. Thus Armstrong (2004: 5), for example, claims that

[t]he idea of a truthmaker for a particular truth, then, is just some existent, some portion of reality, in virtue of which that truth is true. The relation, I think, is a cross-categorial one, one term being an entity or entities in the world, the other being a truth.

Exactly why truth should supervene on being in this sort of way is never proved conclusively. The main intuition to support it is that if T were to be cited as the truthmaker of *p*, and yet T’s mere existence alone is not enough to ensure the truth of *p*, then something must have been left out. Something else must also need to be true apart from <T exists>; and if that extra something has a truthmaker U, then it is clearly not T but T+U that we should have been talking about. Unless this process is to carry on *ad infinitum*, then T+U (or its ultimate successor) will be an entity whose existence alone ensures *p*. By contrast, ‘because’ does not denote a cross-categorial relation; it is, rather, a dyadic sentential connective, and cannot readily be used to formulate this sort of necessitarianism. Sentences such as ‘*a* is ϕ because *b* is ψ’ will hardly ever express necessary truths: nor would we want them to, given that we expect them to yield specific scientific information. Replacing (1) by (3) therefore results in losing a vital metaphysical insight, it seems.

This is not obviously right, however. We can agree that (3) is unsatisfactory in certain respects: if <*b* is ψ> does not entail <*a* is ϕ>, then it could be argued that it is simply not true to say that *a* is ϕ *just* because *b* is ψ. Rather *a* is ϕ because *b* is ψ—*and* (such and such). Yet having conceded this much, we should point out that we are seldom interested in the full picture, so we do not typically expect ‘because’ to stand for such a strong notion: background conditions are usually best left in the background. And on those rare occasions when we are interested in the full picture, we could always amplify matters as indicated. The realism does not shine through quite as strongly as with the original version, to be sure; but, again, there does not seem to much of a loss of actual content if we replace the cross-categorial relation by ‘because’.

It may be protested that we have no idea how to amplify matters in the relevant way—indeed, no guarantee that such amplification would ever reach a terminus. Truthmakers, by contrast, are not sentence-shaped, but are robust, worldly entities with far more coarsely grained identity criteria. For example, the existence of *a*’s being ϕ may well imply a lot more than just that *a* is ϕ (unlike the case of (5) above). Exactly what else it does imply may be uncertain, as we shall see. It may well be that this content cannot be captured by any sequence of propositions of the form ‘<*b* is ψ>’. But this, it may be said, just shows why sentences such as (3) are no substitute for sentences such as (1). Indeed, they may turn out not to be logically equivalent after all.

3 The Metaphysics of Truthmakers

Clearly, this strategy will not work unless we can say more about what these robust, worldly truthmakers are supposed to be. Various terms such as ‘facts’, ‘states of affairs’, ‘*Sachverhalte*’, ‘tropes’ and ‘moments’ are used here. A typical designator of a truthmaker is, as we have already noted, a nominalized sentence such as ‘the window’s having crystalline structure *x*’, ‘Jones’s being six foot tall’, ‘the heating of the metal ball’, and so on. We must therefore work out what sorts of entity such designators designate. We must then say more about their identity criteria and how to distinguish their essential properties from their accidental ones. Is this likely to prove a major problem?

Alas, yes. Truthmakers, so understood, clearly resemble Davidsonian concrete events,[[3]](#footnote-3) and the literature on how to individuate events is sufficiently large and inconclusive to show that we are nowhere near obtaining usable criteria that tell us whether or not the ϕ-ing of *a* is the same event as the ψ-ing of *b* (or whether *a*’s being ϕ is the same state of affairs as *b*’s being ψ). Jaegwon Kim (1976) tells us that they will be identical iff *a* = *b* and ϕ = ψ, but this identity criterion is generally recognized to be too fine-grained.[[4]](#footnote-4) It makes events too similar to facts (construed as isomorphic to true propositions), and ignores the point that events may have more detailed constitutive properties than those used in their original specification. For example, Sebastian’s walk and Sebastian’s slow walk are one and the same event, even though *walks* and *walks slowly* are two distinct properties. The same applies to tropes, such as Jones’s illness and the crystalline structure of the window, for example; and we evidently need truthmakers to behave likewise if we are to draw any useful distinction between (1) and (3) in the manner suggested. At the other extreme, Quine regards spatiotemporal coincidence as the criterion of identity. But this will identify too many events that are clearly different, even on those occasions where we can set precise spatiotemporal boundaries (which is seldom). We need something in between, but have no idea what that could be.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Matters get even worse, for even if we did have such identity criteria, we would still be at a loss as to how to distinguish essential from accidental qualities. Thus suppose that we agree that the shooting of JFK was the same event (action/state of affairs/trope) as the killing of JFK (to use a well known controversial example): was this event essentially a killing? Perhaps not, for JFK might have survived the shooting. But was it essentially a shooting? We do not know: indeed, we do not even know how to find out. With ordinary physical continuants, we have, following Aristotle, a pretty good idea of what the essential/accidental distinction amounts to: it concerns what kinds of change such entities can undergo and still exist. This is why we know that human beings are essentially human beings, although teachers are not essentially teachers. (Leaving the teaching profession is not lethal; leaving the human race is.) With concrete events (states of affairs/tropes), we have no idea what the distinction even relates to, let alone how to apply it in particular cases.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This is crucial, for if such concrete event-tokens and their ilk are to function as truthmakers, then *their existence alone*—and not the fact that they instantiate some additional (i.e. accidental) properties—must necessitate various truths. This is what world-to-truth necessitation is all about. Yet if we do not know what the content of <the shooting of JFK exists> is, then we evidently cannot tell what is thus necessitated, and we cannot identify the content if we do not know what is actually essential to the shooting.

This problem is easily overlooked, for we tend to assume

(8) If T = T′, then <T exists> will entail the same things as <T′ exists>

If we accept

(9) If T = T′, then T necessitates *p* iff T′ necessitates *p*

which seems inevitable if we are to take seriously the idea that this sort of necessitation is a genuine (and hence extensional) relation between worldly truthmakers and propositions, and also

(10) T necessitates *p* iff <T exists> entails *p*

which is less obvious, although something like it evidently needs to be assumed if we are to have any idea of whether or not T really does necessitate *p*, then we have no choice but to accept (8). But should we do so? If terms such as ‘T’ and ‘T′’ are just undescriptive proper names, (8) might well be true. If, however, they stand for nominalized sentences, such as ‘the shooting of JFK’, and we are unsure whether shootings are essentially shootings, then we have no reason to assume this at all. The propositional operator ‘< … >’ yields an opaque context for its constituents (one reason why propositions are mysterious entities), which suggests that (8) must be false—unless severely restricted. We could try to avoid this problem by means of a scope distinction, and distinguish

<the shooting of JFK exists>

from

concerning the shooting of JFK: <it exists>

But not only is the latter very odd to look at, it only emphasizes even further the need to determine what is essential to shootings—which is exactly what we are unable to do.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It may be protested that there are many different accounts of what sorts of thing can be truthmakers, and that it should not be assumed that problems specific to events will damage all truthmaker theories. It is true that there are many distinctions here that have been treated only cursorily, notably that between states of affairs and tropes. State of affairs theorists tend to prefer locutions of the form ‘*a*’s being φ’, whereas trope theorists tend to prefer locutions of the form ‘*a*’s φ-ness’. It is far from clear that a person’s illness at a given time is really the same sort of thing as a person’s being ill there and then. The former is a trope, an individual accident that inheres in the person, whereas the latter is more abstract, perhaps a complex construction that contains the universal, *illness*,as a constituent. Whole swathes of metaphysics are devoted to these issues. Nevertheless, it is unclear that they are really going to make any difference here. The crucial point concerns how coarse or fine these entities are, and the identity criteria for events, states of affairs and tropes do seem to run parallel. That is to say, for any appropriate substitution for ‘*a*’, ‘φ’ and ‘ψ’, the following surely have the same truth-conditions:

the φ-ing of *a* is the same event as the ψ-ing of *a*

*a*’s being φ is the same state of affairs as *a*’s being ψ

*a*’s φ-ness is the same trope as *a*’s ψ-ness

In each case, it is not necessary that φ be the same property as ψ. A weaker relation is needed, and we do not know what it is. In fact, even if the parallel is not exact and we have slightly different relations in each case, this will not help, for any non-trivial identity criterion will present us with the difficulties in question. This problem applies across the board, and must be addressed by any theory that requires a many-one correspondence between truth-bearers and truth-makers—regardless of the details.

In any case, it is unclear whether the coarse-grainedness is really going to be put to good use, even if we can get past this problem. The contemporary debate about events originated largely with Davidson, and it helped to shape a linked set of problems about causation, mind–brain identity, action theory, and the semantics of adverbial modifiers. The need for an ontology of event-tokens, with coarsely grained identity criteria, was made fairly plain.[[8]](#footnote-8) With truthmaking, by contrast, it is unclear if such coarseness can possibly be an advantage, regardless of whether we are dealing with events, states of affairs or tropes. Identity, after all, is symmetrical, whereas supervenience and the ‘because’ relation most certainly are not. Moreover, the search for truthmakers nearly always involves looking for what really underpins the truth, and this is supposed to be something more basic than the original truth itself. It is, indeed, the search for what is basic, or at least more basic, that is crucial to this kind of metaphysics. If X underpins Y, then we may picture X as being literally below Y, and the underpinning relation thus provides the vertical dimension of this particular way of metaphysically structuring the world. However, if the relata are supposed to have coarsely grained identity criteria, then this vertical dimension is going to be collapsed, or ‘divided out’, and in a deeply unhelpful way. For example, let us suppose that *a* is ϕ because *b* is ψ (thus the latter true statement is vertically below the former). Suppose that we also agree that

1. <*a* is ϕ> (if true) is always made true by *a*’s ϕ-ness

i.e., regardless of what we substitute for ‘*a*’ and ‘ϕ’ (which ensures that it will also be true that <*b* is ψ> is made true by *b*’s ψ-ness). This says little more than (2), and seems a natural enough assumption. But if *a*’s ϕ-ness is the same (concrete) truthmaker as *b*’s ψ-ness, then not only will it follow that *b*’s ψ-ness makes it true that *a* is ϕ (which we want): it also follows that *a*’s ϕ-ness makes it true that *b* is ψ, and this we surely do not want! Admittedly, we have not quite committed ourselves to saying, disastrously, that *b* is ψ because *a* is ϕ, but matters are still clearly heading in the wrong direction. An example might make this clearer. Suppose we agree that

The window is brittle

is made true, in some sense, by the fact that

The window has (such and such) crystalline structure

More precisely, we agree that it is the crystalline structure that makes it true that the window is brittle, but we do not want to say that it is the brittleness that makes it true that it has this crystalline structure. Yet technically, this would be correct if the brittleness of the window and its (token) crystalline structure are the same concrete trope/state of affairs. So what is to be gained from moving from locutions such as ‘*a* is ϕ because *b* is ψ’ to ‘*b*’s ψ-ness (or *b*’s being ψ) makes it true that *a* is ϕ’? Nothing, it would seem: it is plainly the sentential form that does the real work. That is to say, all we have here is that: *the window is brittle because it has (such and such) crystalline structure*.[[9]](#footnote-9) There are no unwanted problems about false symmetries, essences and identity criteria to be found here—and no mention of truth either, or any other semantic notion: just some useful science. The point can surely be generalized across the board.

It may be protested that we are still assuming too close a connection between ‘*a* is ϕ’ and ‘*a*’s being ϕ’ (or ‘*a*’s φ-ness’). Truthmaker theory should perhaps concentrate only on ‘sparse’ properties, which, in Armstrong’s (2004: 17) words (following David Lewis 1986), are the ‘ontologically significant properties of objects, those in terms of which the world’s work is done’. So if ‘ϕ’ designates a non-sparse property (e.g., a dispositional property, such as brittleness), then it will not be that case that *a*’s being ϕ is the same truthmaker as *b*’s being ψ (where ‘ψ’ does stand for a sparse property). Rather, ‘*a*’s being ϕ’ will not designate a genuine truthmaker *at all*: it is just not a sufficiently real sort of entity, because ϕ is not a sufficiently real sort of property. Thus, although the (token) crystalline structure genuinely exists, the brittleness of the window does not (or if it does, it is not a genuine truthmaker). In general, vertical collapse is avoided by insisting that genuine truthmakers do not emerge until we have already reached the bottom. We thus reject (11), except in those cases where ‘ϕ’ designates a sparse property.

If world-to-truth necessitation is to be taken seriously, then we can see why this move might be attractive. But it has its drawbacks, if only because we do not know what the bottom is going to look like, or even if there is one. ‘Basicness’ comes in degrees, after all. Thus, ask: what makes it true that the UK economy was in a recession in 2009? We can start by talking about two consecutive quarters of negative growth. But we may also ask what makes *that* true, and may answer by talking about profits and losses of individual firms. And so on. We may eventually reach what Anscombe (1957) calls ‘brute facts’, i.e., facts about ordinary objects and persons and what they are doing (irrespective of their institutional contexts), though this is by no means obvious. And if that still does not suffice, we may probe further and give a microphysical story about what makes it true that macrophysical objects and persons have the ordinary properties that they have, and so on down to superstrings and beyond (if there is a beyond—no one knows). Do we really have to reach this terminus (if there is one) before we encounter the truthmakers of the original truth, namely that the UK economy was in a recession in 2009? If it is simply brute facts that we are looking for, then we shall find them, alas, painfully close to the surface—at least, if the term ‘brute facts’ (or ‘hard facts’, if you prefer) is to retain anything like its usual meaning. It may well be that financial properties metaphysically supervene on microphysical ones, but no one actually wishes to *reduce* economics to particle physics. It is difficult to see how far down we need to go before we reach our ‘sparse’ properties, or why we should have to worry about them anyway if all we want to do is talk intelligently and reliably about what makes it true that the 2009 UK economy was in a recession—even if we were to accept this extreme physicalist sort of metaphysics.

4 Supervenience and Truth

Supervenience is clearly playing an important part in this discussion, but we need to make its role more explicit. The notion of a ‘sparse property’ is obviously significant, since the ‘ontologically significant properties of objects, those in terms of which the world’s work is done’, are exactly the sort of properties that we want as our supervenience base (i.e. the properties on which the other properties supervene). Should φ fail to supervene on the set of sparse properties, then the instantiation of elements of the latter will not necessitate the truth of <*a* is φ>, and hence cannot generate the truthmaker. So if we do get the truthmaker, then by *modus tollens* we must have supervenience. For example, we suppose that dispositional properties such as brittleness supervene on microphysical properties such as crystalline structure, and that this is why such structure necessitates (i.e. makes true) <the window is brittle>. Should brittleness not so supervene, then the crystalline structure will not supply the truthmaker.

These facts suggest that supervenience is doing all the real work here, and that truthmaker theory should be discarded as superfluous. But this assumes that we can understand the concept of supervenience without a prior understanding of truthmaking, which is not immediately obvious. Unless we can rule this out, there remains an alternative possibility: namely that truthmaking and supervenience are mutually supporting notions, and that we cannot have the one without the other.

However, this possibility does not seem plausible. Supervenience is a well understood notion, and it is invariably defined in purely modal terms. Thus we say that a set of properties A supervenes on a set of properties B just in case B-indiscernibility ensures A-indiscernibility. We can make this notion more precise, and distinguish between weak and strong supervenience, and between local and global supervenience (and so on). The formal apparatus of possible worlds gives us all we need, and there is no need to talk about truthmaking. Textbooks on modal logic do not mention truthmakers, and it is just wrong to suppose that an understanding of the former presupposes an understanding of the latter. True, as Matthew McGrath (2003) points out, following Kim, supervenience itself does not guarantee asymmetry between the relevant sets of properties, so the basicness of the subvenient set needs further analysis. McGrath speaks of a notion of ‘accounting for’ that plays a fundamental explanatory role, and claims that the ordinary modal definition of supervenience does not reveal why it should have such a role. More is therefore needed. This, no doubt, is true, but what is needed surely is a more general account of what it is for one thing to explain another. It is unclear why we should require a substantive theory of truth before we can produce one.

A related objection is that, even if the notion of supervenience can be adequately defined in purely modal terms, we need to talk about truth and truthmaking if we are to explain why the notion is of any real importance. The only reason why we should ever search for a supervenience base, it may be insisted, is because such a base will explain why various things are true: lose sight of truthmaking, and we lose all reason to search for supervenience bases. But this is surely unlikely. Metaphysicians aim to give simple and comprehensive descriptions of the world, and this means that a vast number of ordinary facts and things must go unmentioned: for example, diverse Rylean entities, such as prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies, are likely to go unmentioned. However, if it can be shown that such things (and their ordinary properties) all supervene on the limited set of items mentioned in the metaphysics, then we need not worry. We can retain our simple metaphysics without denying the reality of such ordinary Rylean entities, and the commonsensical facts that go with them, and it is quite clear why this is an advantage. No mention of truthmakers yet.

However, we could go further, and insist that what supervenience gives us, more than anything, is a means of legitimizing certain discourses, namely the discourses associated with the supervening entities and properties. Before discovering supervenience, a no-nonsense physicalist, for example, would have difficulty in justifying her very use of terms such as ‘Wednesday’, ‘navies’ and so forth. Thanks to supervenience, she can now attach respectable meanings to sentences that use such terms, and this is because their truth-conditions are now understood: specifically, their truth-values can be seen to be determined by subvenient truths whose credentials have already been established. This does seem to introduce truthmakers into the matter.

But this is not very convincing either. A physicalist may worry whether consciousness and values, for example, really exist given that it is hard to demonstrate that they supervene on the physical. If supervenience were to fail, she would be forced into a dilemma: either reject consciousness and values, or else abandon physicalism. It is easy to see why each horn is undesirable: she must either reject the obvious, or else abandon a nice, simple theory. However, it is not clear that the legitimation of the associated discourses of consciousness and values is at stake. After all, she must already understand what is meant by ‘consciousness’ and ‘values’ before she can even address this issue. Her worries are more likely to be ontological rather than semantic, and we have seen that the ontological questions do not demand a search for truthmakers.

It is often said that the main purpose of truthmaker theory is to identify ‘cheaters’ or ‘suspicious truths’, that is to say, statements which purport to be true but which lack truthmakers.[[10]](#footnote-10) This, it is held, provides an indispensable tool for weeding out illegitimate discourses. Yet it is far from obvious that it is anything other than suspicious properties, not truths, that are under investigation. If we worry about the truthmakers of moral and aesthetic truths, for example, it is primarily because we are unsure of the status of moral and aesthetic properties. In particular, we are unsure whether they supervene on ordinary physical ones, and if so in what way (strongly or just weakly), and for what reason. Likewise, truthmaker theory is often invoked to test the credentials of truths about the future and the past, and some well known issues about the nature of time (presentism versus eternalism) and whether physical objects have temporal as well as spatial parts are sometimes discussed in this context. But what seems to be at stake, once again, is the status of certain questionable properties, namely tensed ones: whether they supervene on untensed properties, and if so how and why. Causal and mathematical truths are likewise often targeted by truthmaker theorists but, once again, it remains obscure why the relevant philosophical problems that underlie these areas have to be understood in this way.

5 Conclusion

What, then, has been established? I have not attempted to show conclusively that deflationism is true or that truthmaker theory is false: there are many other objections to deflationism and many different versions of truthmaker theory to examine. However, if truthmakers, like events, are to be worldly items, and such that more can be said about the truthmaking relation than simply that *a*’s being φ makes it true that *a* is φ, then we need to look carefully at the metaphysics of truthmakers. It has been shown that this metaphysics is very difficult to get clear about. It has also been shown that more interesting truthmaking claims tend to be interesting for reasons that have nothing to do with truthmaking, but a lot to do with supervenience—a notion that is metaphysically significant for its own, rather different reasons.

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1. It is difficult to explain the difference between (1) and (3) (and their variants) if the target proposition is identified by a single letter. I use ‘*a* is ϕ’ rather than ‘*p*’ (and so on), not because of a predilection for sentences of the subject-predicate form, but because the former lends itself to nominalization (‘*a*’s being ϕ’) in a way in which the latter does not. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Benjamin Schnieder (2006) talks here of a ‘conceptual’ connection, but this may be too restrictive. Although it may apply to his example, ‘Thorsten is my brother in law because he is my sister’s husband’, the claim ‘The window is brittle because it has crystalline structure *x*’ surely does not express a conceptual connection. Yet it is also non-causal in so far as we do not have a real separation between cause and effect (as we have in ‘The window broke because it was brittle’, for example). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Friederike Moltmann (2004) also compares truthmakers with events. However, although she contrasts Kim’s and Davidson’s views, she does not focus on the problems discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kim also insists on a time reference as well. Since a given object might acquire a given property on more than one occasion, this is important, especially if we are to attend sufficiently closely to the distinction between event tokens and types. However, I shall disregard this here, and shall assume that a phrase such as ‘the ϕ-ing of *a*’ will unambiguously designate a given event-token. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jonathan Bennett (1995) argues that there is a serious indeterminacy here, though semantic rather than metaphysical. See also [author article] for a critique of Bennett. Davidson’s own identity criterion, that events are identical iff they have the same causes and effects, is quite unusable, as is shown by J.E. Tiles (1976). The claim that truthmakers are identical iff they necessitate the same truths would be equally useless, and for much the same reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This fact renders unusable Myles Brand’s (1977) identity criterion, namely that events are identical iff they are (*de re*) necessarily contained within the same spatiotemporal regions. Stipulating that all nonrelational properties are essential will not help us, for we equally have no idea of how to disentangle the nonrelational properties of distinct spatiotemporally coincident events. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lewis (1973) assumes that, for each event *e*, there is a determinate proposition that *e* exists, *O*(*e*), such that if *e* =*f* then *O*(*e*) = *O*(*f*), though he does not investigate the problems of event-identity in any great detail. (10) is endorsed explicitly by John Bigelow (1988: 126), and John F. Fox (1989: 189) who insists that the modality involved is *de re* (i.e. essentialist). This question is also discussed by Trenton Merricks (2007: 11–14). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Though not conclusively so. See Horgan 1978, for example. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Or: *because it is structured in (such and such) a crystalline way*. Only windows need to be reified, not crystalline structures. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, Theodore Sider (2001, p. 40) and Trenton Merricks (2007, pp. 3–5 *et passim*). The basic idea is implicit in Armstrong 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)