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Ontology After Folk Psychology; or, Why Eliminativists Should Be Mental Fictionalists

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ABSTRACT

Mental fictionalism holds that folk psychology should be regarded as a kind of fiction. The present version gives a Lewisian prefix semantics for mentalistic discourse, where roughly, a mentalistic sentence “p” is true iff “p” is deducible from the folk psychological fiction. An eliminativist version of the view can seem self-refuting, but this charge is neutralized. Yet a different kind of “self-effacing” emerges: Mental fictionalism appears to be a mere “parasite” on a future science of cognition without contributing anything substantial. The paper then rebuts the objection, illustrating that prefix semantics resolves a lingering problem for eliminativism from Boghossian. The problem is that eliminativists seem unable to adopt realism about neuroscience, for such realism implies that neuroscientific statements *represent* reality accurately. However, a deflationary version of prefix semantics allows the eliminativist to draw an ontologically relevant distinction (roughly) between truths that have a storytelling prefix and those that do not. (Deflationism means there is no implication that the unprefix sentences robustly represent reality). The overarching lesson is that eliminativists need to approach ontology carefully so as to avoid self-refutation; however, prefix-semantical mental fictionalism provides the resources for them to do so.

1 | Introduction

Mental fictionalism is the thesis that our talk about the mental is best seen as a kind of storytelling. There are a surprising number of ways to flesh this out; for an overview, see Demeter, Parent, and Toon (2022). But most mental fictionalisms begin with skepticism about the reality of *thoughts* and related phenomena such as *belief*, *desire*, *intention*, etc.¹ This skepticism might amount to agnosticism about whether such things exist, or it might manifest as full-blown eliminativism about such representational states. However, unlike typical eliminativists like Churchland (1980), Stich (1983), and Churchland (1986), mental fictionalists are concerned with offering a *storytelling account* of mentalistic discourse. This is because mental fictionalism hopes to legitimate such talk, even while maintaining skepticism about

its metaphysical underpinning. After all, as Dennett (1975, 1987) is known for saying, folk psychology (henceforth, “FP”) is so useful as to be indispensable. The storytelling accounts thus hope to see FP as an acceptable kind of narrative device, useful pretense, or apt metaphor in the service of understanding behavior. Much effort by mental fictionalists is thus exerted at applying theories of narrative discourse to talk of mental states; such theories include Lewisian prefix semantics (Wallace 2007/2022; Parent 2013; cf. Lewis 1978), Davidsonian metaphor theory (Demeter 2009, 2013, 2022; cf. Davidson 1978), and Waltonian pretense theory (Toon 2016, 2021, 2023; cf. Walton 1990).

Notably, some of the first doubts about FP in the 20th century were in the vein of mental fictionalism. For example, Sellars (1956) offers us the “myth of Jones” as a way to question

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certain aspects of FP (and Toon op. cit. explicitly uses Jones as a springboard). More seriously, Quine (1960, 219) describes propositional-attitude ascriptions as a kind of “dramatic act.” Regardless, mental fictionalism has mostly failed to attract interest from contemporary eliminativists. For one, it may seem trite that science justifiably uses metaphors, pretenses, etc. (Consider genetic “blueprints” or “missing links” in evolution). So even if mentalistic discourse is used in this fictionalizing manner, there would be little pressure to justify such a thing.

Worse, standard eliminativists might see the storytelling accounts as deeply misguided. This is because such accounts look thoroughly imbued with the language of FP. Prefix semantics, for instance, seems concerned with analyzing the *meanings* of mentalistic sentences in order to portray what such sentences *represent*. Metaphors, per Davidson, are also seen as uses of language that *express* some comparison. Whereas, Waltonian pretense theory describes an *attitude of make-believe* that we adopt toward certain sentences and “props,” an attitude adopted in the act of pretending.

My aim here is not to advocate for all varieties of mental fictionalism; it is focused just on promoting *prefix-semantical* mental fictionalism. The aim is to show that such a view is not only self-consistent, but also a boon in enabling the eliminativist to answer a powerful objection from Boghossian (1990a, 1990b) concerning her ontological commitments. In this capacity, prefix-semantical fictionalism helps develop a successor theory to FP re: how to do ontology as an eliminativist. And such a thing is hardly trite. The plan is to illustrate this and thus suggest that eliminativists ought to be prefix-semantical mental fictionalists.

2 | Precisifying Mental Fictionalism

We have already noted that mental fictionalism can come in an agnostic variety besides an eliminativist variety; however, in what follows, only an eliminativist version shall be of concern. (As it turns out, my own view is more agnostic—but again, the aim is to make prefix-semantical mental fictionalism compelling to eliminativists, specifically).

Second, as with a fictionalist account of any discourse, a mental fictionalist faces the choice of whether to *describe* or to *prescribe* the discourse as a kind of storytelling. In fictionalist circles, this is known as the difference between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalisms (Burgess and Rosen 1997). The hermeneutic brand of mental fictionalism may be interesting, but it is empirically risky—it is a substantive hypothesis about how actual language-users deploy sentences with mentalistic terms. A good-faith consideration of linguistic evidence would seem required before it could be accepted. In contrast, the “revolutionary” type of fictionalism seems more within the purview of (empirically informed) philosophical reflection. Regardless of how mentalistic discourse is ordinarily used, *should* it be used in a storytelling manner in, for example, neuroscience? That is the issue that drives the discussion here.

Third, a mental fictionalist might end up applying one of several theories of narrative discourse. Again, my preference shall

be for a prefix semantics; however, as a prescriptive program, the term ‘semantics’ should be taken with a grain of salt. Semantics is typically understood as descriptive, concerned with the workings of actual human languages. A prefix semantics, in the present instance, is thus better thought of as a *reinterpretation* of mentalistic discourse. Its aim is not to faithfully capture how English speech works “in the wild,” but rather to reframe it in a way that proves advantageous, at least for the eliminativist.

Now an eliminativist regards standard mentalistic discourse as thoroughly untrue (except vacuously true conditionals, etc). Yet prefix semantics stipulates a new interpretation where many sentences of the discourse indeed come out literally true. As a simple illustration of this sort of thing, consider that sentence (S) might be analyzed as (S’):

(S) Santa Claus wears a red suit.

(S’) According to common folklore, Santa Claus wears a red suit.

Here, there is an obvious sense in which (S) is true, although it could be interpreted as implying an absurdity, viz., the existence of a non-existent person. Accordingly, one might suggest that (S) should be interpreted by (S’). Since the latter removes the appearance of ontological commitment, this creates a reading of (S), which is less apt to cause problems.²

Similarly, with mentalistic discourse, an eliminativist can offer prefix semantics where a sentence like (A) is to be understood as (A’):

(A) Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires.

(A’) According to our psychological folklore, some actions are caused by beliefs and desires.

Here too, (A) can be construed as true, but not by accurately representing some fiction-independent state of affairs. Rather, (A) can be construed as accurately representing what FP *claims* is the case, in the manner of (A’).³ This is not to say that (A) is *equivalent* to (A’) in conventional English (not even approximately). Rather, the revolutionary stance is that if (A) is to be affirmed, it *should* be understood as saying what (A’) says.

In general, the mental fictionalist of concern will be one who accepts both eliminativism and a story-prefix prescription for mentalistic discourse:

(Elim) The posits of FP do not exist.

(SPS) If “*p*” is an English sentence that uses FP vocabulary, “*p*” is true iff, according to the folk theory of psychology, *p*.

(N.B., a “sentence” is throughout identified with a purely syntactic item).

Let me clarify that (Elim) is a stance against *mental contents*, and thus, *mental representations* (construed as “vehicles” of mental contents).⁴ This accordingly tells against any *propositional attitude* (belief, desire, hope, wishes, etc.) that consists of a thought and an attitude targeting the thought (the believing

attitude, the desiring attitude, etc.). The present eliminativism is thus quite broad, but it is consistent with the seminal eliminativist views found in the Churchlands and Stich (op. cit.). Even so, (Elim) is meant to be neutral on whether to eschew other mentalistic phenomena (qualia, what-its-like properties, etc.). For convenience, I use ‘posits of FP’ to denote the relevant range of eliminated phenomena, even though others might include more or less under such a rubric.

To repeat, the main advantage of (SPS) is that one can retain the usual manner of talking and affirm that (A) is true, while remaining faithful to (Elim). Yet the glaring problem for such a view is that (SPS) seems rooted in FP: (A) is to be *interpreted* as having the same *meaning* as (A’). How could an eliminativist deploy such a theory in good conscience? Section 4 shall be devoted to this issue. Before diving into this; however, there are other criticisms that should be dealt with first.

3 | Opening Objections

One salient worry about mental fictionalism is as follows. Like the folklore about Santa, FP may be incomplete, indeterminate, and somewhat arbitrary at various points. To take a familiar example, it seems indeterminate whether Santa has a mole on his back; the folklore does not make any pronouncement on this point. But in the same way, the folk theory of mentality might end up being rather incomplete regarding some psychological matters. If so, then mental fictionalism would be saddled with “gaps” in the truths concerning the mental.

However, this might not be a bug but a feature. For concreteness’ sake, consider addiction. The common mentalistic folklore could suggest that the following hypotheses are likely, yet remain non-committal on whether either is true:

(i) Miley really wants to quit smoking, but she is unable to.

(ii) Miley is able to quit smoking but doesn’t really want to.⁵

Our folklore may even be unclear on whether these two hypotheses are genuinely competing. Yet the chosen mental fiction need not follow the folklore in all this. If the folklore simply lacks adequate sophistication on the case, the revolutionary fictionalist can just fill in the gap. On the other hand, since our mental fictionalist is an eliminativist, there is no obvious reason why she must preserve bivalence on psychological matters. More significantly, she might suggest that the gap in the psychological “facts” is *explained* by a gap in FP.⁶

Regardless, a more pointed version of the worry begins by observing that there is no common folklore about the psychology of individual people. That is so, even though ordinarily, we would unhesitatingly affirm things like “Biden believes that Trump lost.”

But it is false that “according to our mentalistic folklore, Biden believes that Trump lost.” We have no shared folklore about Biden’s particular psychology. In reply, however, one could suggest that our folklore includes generalizations which would be

applicable to a variety of individuals in a variety of situations. For example, “The winner of a contest believes that s/he is the winner, *ceteris paribus*.” If other (non-psychological) facts are adopted as premises, such a principle might then allow us to infer the belief-attribution in question. The mental fictionalist could thus claim “Assuming other facts (and assuming that *ceteris paribus*), the psychological folklore implies that Biden believes that Trump lost.”⁷

Note that since our fictionalist is a revolutionary, this need not be speculative about our actual psychological folklore. She can instead simply stipulate that her prefix semantics is determined by a theory that includes not only mentalistic sentences that are affirmed by the folk, but also any desired additions, such as ‘The winner of a contest believes that s/he is the winner, *ceteris paribus*.’ For that matter, the tailored fiction could even explicitly include ‘Biden believes that Trump lost’. Indeed, as a first step toward avoiding a robust semantic notion of ‘entailment’, I am most interested in a view where all the desired consequences would be formally derivable from the tailored fiction **F**, for example, by means of a computer program.⁸ Then, the relevant interpretation of (A) might be as follows:

(A’) **F** ⊢ ‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’

(Granted, the sentences derivable from **F** will be logical formulae that translate⁹ English rather than English per se, but I will ignore this complication in what follows). More broadly, the semantics can be seen as prescribing:

(SPS_⊢) If “*p*” is an English sentence that uses FP-vocabulary, then “*p*” is true.

The sentence (A) would then be interpreted as expressing a truth, on the assumption that (A) is derivable for the right choice of **F**.

However, it now seems that the story prefix-semantical approach requires the existence of an *explicit list* of FP-sentences constituting **F**. Several writers reject the approach precisely because there is no such list; see, for example, Demeter (2022) and Kocsis and Pete (2022).

Apparently, our mental fictionalist requires something like Doug Lenat’s CYC program, albeit narrowed to FP (see cyc.com). But if so, so be it: Let **F** include all the sentences with FP-terms which are *de facto* cataloged in CYC, modified with any additions or subtractions we like. For all practical purposes that interest us, it may be enough. Alternatively, one could imagine a hypothetical fiction which is tailored to taste.¹⁰ And while the ontology of hypothetical or counterfactual scenarios may be contentious, it is certainly not an issue that is specific to mental fictionalism. So while this second option would leave some unanswered questions, they would not tell against mental fictionalism per se.

A final objection, adapted from Brock (1993) and Rosen (1993), is that the offending ontological commitments still creep in through the back door, so to speak. Consider:

(B_⊢) ‘Beliefs exist’ is true iff **F** ⊢ ‘Beliefs exist’.

Then, the fictionalist will affirm ($B_{\equiv}$) yet embrace its right-hand side as well. So, assuming that the truth predicate is disquotational, it follows:

(B) Beliefs exist.

However, (B) is patently opposed to the fictionalist's commitment to (Elim).

One reply, originating in Nolan (1997), stresses that the RHS of ($B_{\equiv}$) occurs in the fictionalist's preferred idiom. This indicates that the story-prefixed statement on the RHS is a reinterpretation of the LHS; however, the LHS is *not* a reinterpretation of the RHS. Accordingly, while the mental fictionalist is committed to the LHS, the RHS tells us that this is the commitment that beliefs exist *according to the mental fiction*. It is not the commitment that beliefs *non-fictionally* exist.

Even so, if (B) is true in the fictionalist's mouth, then it may puzzling how she can express her commitment that beliefs do *not* exist. The best solution to this, I believe, is for the fictionalist to *limit* her reinterpretation of FP discourse just to those contexts where such discourse is practically indispensable in Dennett's (op. cit.) sense (henceforth, "Dennett-indispensable contexts").¹¹ Outside of those contexts, she will use mentalistic idioms in the manner of her native language. Granted, it is not easy to say exactly when FP-talk is Dennett-indispensable. But examples are readily available,¹² and the reader can probably generate several more. Also, it should be obvious that when our eliminativist affirms, "Beliefs do not exist", she does *not* regard the context as a Dennett-indispensable one.

The meaning of 'Beliefs exist' will thus be contextually shift for the fictionalist. In some cases, 'Beliefs exist' has its conventional interpretation (whereupon the fictionalist regards it as false). But in other contexts, it is just a convenient way to affirm " $F \vdash$ 'Beliefs exist,'" (which the fictionalist sees as true). This is not to suggest that *ordinary* FP discourse is equivocal between these two readings. Rather, the fictionalist is instituting by fiat a new interpretation of that discourse in order to clarify (at least) what *she* means when she uses it in a certain sort of context.

Accordingly, it is best to revise ($SPS_{\equiv}$) in a way that explicitly limits the fictionalist's reinterpretation to Dennett-indispensable contexts:

($SPS_{\equiv}$) If " p " is an English sentence which uses FP vocabulary, and d is a Dennett-indispensable context, then " p " is true in d iff $F \vdash$ " p ". In all other contexts, " p " is true iff p .

As before, this is not meant to be descriptive but rather prescriptive for an ontologically non-committal way of affirming " p " in a context where it proves useful. Let me confirm that ($SPS_{\equiv}$) itself is phrased in conventional English, even though it legislates a (contextually restricted) reinterpretation of English. This is how it should be—it would be viciously circular if we had to understand the reinterpretation before we could introduce the reinterpretation.

A loose end: If the fictionalist means something different by 'Beliefs exist' in d , isn't she in danger of simply talking past

the folk? Certainly, misunderstanding is possible, but it is not unavoidable. If the potential for misunderstanding arises, the mental fictionalist can subvert it by offering ($SPS_{\equiv}$) as a guideline for translating what she says. Since ($SPS_{\equiv}$) occurs in conventional English (ignoring some technical vocabulary such as ' $\vdash$ '), such a translation-rubric can be used effectively by English speakers.

4 | Self-Refuting or Parasitic?

While the objections just reviewed are important, the most weighty issue again is that mental fictionalism looks at odds with itself. ($SPS_{\equiv}$) assigns truth conditions to mentalistic declaratives—and a truth condition is the condition that a declarative *represents* (it is the condition on which the declarative is true). So how can a skeptic about FP endorse such a thing as ($SPS_{\equiv}$)?

Toward an answer, consider that other eliminativists have been accused of incoherence as well (see Baker 1987, ch. 7; Boghossian 1990a, 1990b). A simplified version of the objection is as follows. Suppose we ask the eliminativist whether she believes that there are no beliefs. If she answers 'yes', then she concedes the existence of at least one belief, contra eliminativism. But if she answers 'no', then she is no longer an eliminativist! This neglects a third option, however, which is that the eliminativist can (and should) reject the question. As Churchland (1980) observes, the objection presupposes the legitimacy of an inquiry into "what the eliminativist believes," and that is exactly the sort of folk psychological inquiry which the eliminativist rebuffs. At the same time, an eliminativist can qualify as such even if she rejects the question about "what she believes." For she will still answer 'no' to a question like "Are there beliefs?"

This last point can be expanded in a way that clarifies the discussion more broadly. Even though (Elim) is assumed, I have spoken freely about what the mental fictionalist "affirms." But this is a folk psychological verb insofar as it is representational. However, taking the cue above, we might paraphrase such a thing in an eliminativist-friendly manner. Suppose that S is a declarative sentence in a language in which the speaker has been adequately trained. Then,

- A speaker affirms S iff she is disposed to utter S in Normal conditions.

In this, the capitalized 'Normal' is a term borrowed from Millikan (1984, 2005). Importantly, the Normal conditions for the use of S are not necessarily the most common conditions. Rather, they are the conditions that explain the continued proliferation of the S among users. Millikan (1984, 34) makes an analogy with sperm: What explains the continued production of sperm is that sperm fertilize eggs, even though virtually all sperm fail to fertilize an egg. But fertilizing an egg is what a sperm Normally does. Similarly, even though a declarative sentence might be usually uttered as a lie, this is not the sort of circumstance that explains why the sentence is used. It is rather the circumstance in which it is used to communicate information. In the present context, however, 'communicate information'

should be understood in a deflationary way. An utterance communicates information merely in the sense that it enables an audience to infer the truth of the sentence (where ‘truth’ is construed in line with semantic deflationism—more on this later).

Granted, Millikan herself attempts to reconstruct a specific *meaning* for the utterance from its Normal use—however, the eliminativist need not follow her in this. Instead, we can directly explain the function of an utterance by appealing to what it Normally does without invoking any semantic properties thereby. This non-representationalist approach to normalcy is detailed further in Hutto & Myin (2013, 4), and it is assumed here that this kind of line is defensible.

By the way, an affirmation of S need not imply the existence of a folk psychological “affirming attitude.” In Normal circumstances, it can indicate just that the person is disposed to use S in inferences, described computationally and/or functionally. It is akin to a computer “affirming” a syntactic string when it tokens the string (or being disposed to token certain strings in virtue of its programming). “Affirming” a token in this sense is just to say that the string is available as input to various computational processes.¹³

Now, even if *Elim per se* is consistent, the mental fictionalist faces additional worries about incoherence. For it easily looks like (Elim) and (SPS#) are *jointly* inconsistent: (SPS#) still seems to posit distinctly semantic relations, which hardly makes it hospitable to eliminativism. Several mental fictionalists have responded, however, by taking Churchland’s point about question-begging further (Wallace 2007/2022, 2016; Joyce 2013; Toon 2016). If a question was begged in asking “Does the eliminativist believe in beliefs?,” then allegedly, a question is also begged when asking “Should we interpret (A) as meaning (A’)?” This may seem odd, however, since it was the mental fictionalist who started all the fuss about (A)’s meaning. So if she now rejects such language, she must reject the language in which her own position is formulated. This would be a mental fictionalist who ultimately lands in *quietism* about the mental (Parent 2013). The view is not self-refuting exactly, but it is “self-silencing,” as it were. Mental fictionalism now forbids the very language used to articulate it. And while this may avoid self-contradiction, it is surely not alluring.¹⁴

However, mental fictionalists usually extend Churchland’s point along different lines. A question like “Should we interpret (A) as meaning (A’)?” is seen as question-begging *if* “meaning” is understood in the representational, folksy manner. But it might be understood differently. Remember that *qua* eliminativist, our mental fictionalist places hope in a future scientific psychology. As Wallace (2007/2022) says, “the eliminative materialist does not think that absolutely nothing is going on when, according to FP, we are saying something, advancing beliefs, proposing arguments, etc.” (p. 34). Accordingly, our mental fictionalist looks forward to a day when we have a proper scientific account of such things. At which point, she will replace the FP-talk of meaning in her account with something better.

Call the folk psychological phenomenon “meaning” and the scientifically respectable counterpart “meaning_{SR}.”¹⁵ Observe that

the eliminativist does not advocate a *reduction* of meaning to meaning_{SR}, for that would make her a reductionist rather than an eliminativist.¹⁶ Instead, according to our eliminativist, “ordinary, everyday [meaning] talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that is going on—so much so, that [semantic terms] fail to pick out any activity or process that’s actually in the world” (Wallace 2007/2022, 35). Nonetheless, there will be some phenomenon, meaning_{SR}, which will be the theoretical successor to meaning.

Thus, the current mental fictionalist holds that meaning is merely a convenient fiction—but still looks forward to a day when we have a theory of meaning_{SR}. Importantly, this allows her to elude self-refutation (or self-silencing) today, for she is able to affirm:

- In a Dennett-indispensable context, (A) is assigned the meaning_{SR} that (A’) has in conventional English.

Still, this is not so much a theory as a promissory note on a theory. For the notion of meaning_{SR} is a black box, to be opened only by a future science of cognition. The upshot is not quietism, but it is not altogether different: Silence has been replaced by unexplicated jargon.

Even so, there are substantive proposals about the direction a future science of cognition could take. We already mentioned Hutto & Myin (2013, 4), who cut out the semantic middleman from teleosemantics. Similarly, a deflationary inferentialism akin to Field (1994a, 1994b) takes the “semantics” out of an inferential role semantics (cf. Field 1977). On this sort of approach, ‘true’, ‘means’, and other semantic terms are seen as formal devices for disquotational inferences, seen as merely syntactic transformations. Also, many have championed neural net or connectionist models of cognition (Churchland and Sejnowski 1989; Ramsey, Stich, and Garon 1990; Ramsey 2007); these arguably can explain cognition without any folk representational elements. The successes of ChatGPT, Google’s Deep Mind, etc., evidence that neural nets are to be taken seriously. Regardless, the various options mentioned in this paragraph are not necessarily in competition; the best sort of view might weave them together.

In any event, mental fictionalism now appears self-effacing, even if not inconsistent. By its own admission, it is an inadequately developed theory that can be salvaged only if some other, more advanced theory undergirds it. Indeed, such undergirding is how mental fictionalism avoids *incoherence*. But this makes mental fictionalism look like a mere parasite. Cognitive science is left to do the hard part. And once cognitive science supplies a theory of meaning_{SR}, what is left for mental fictionalism to contribute?

This “parasite objection” is that mental fictionalism, even by its own lights, only takes and does not give in its relationship with cognitive science. The clause “by its own lights” indicates how mental fictionalism is *self-effacing*, but it would still seem effaced even if the view refused to acknowledge the situation. Let me stress, however, that the parasite objection is not an objection to standard eliminativism. Such eliminativists can fully invest themselves in (e.g.,) a connectionist view

of meaning_{SR} without any self-effacement even *prima facie*. Again, they need not be invested in a storytelling account of mentalistic discourse.

But to repeat, mental fictionalism ends up confessing that it is an underdeveloped theory, and it becomes minimally adequate only if filled out by another theory, which would (apparently) render it superfluous.¹⁷ This, I fear, is a reason to reject many varieties of mental fictionalism—but not revolutionary, prefix-semantical mental fictionalism. I will show that the apparatus of prefix semantics contributes something important even after a theory of meaning_{SR} arrives. So although prefix-semantical mental fictionalism may be waiting on a theory of meaning_{SR}, the theory of meaning_{SR} shall also benefit from a fictionalist prefix semantics. In particular, it will remove various ontological confusions that would otherwise result after the fall of FP (so to speak). In this, we will see why eliminativists should be revolutionary, prefix-semantical mental fictionalists.

5 | Boghossian's Objection

The positive contribution of prefix semantics is seen in how it resolves a serious problem from Boghossian (1990a, 1990b). On its face, Boghossian's argument is just the self-refutation objection against standard eliminativism, and so it may seem that it has already been handled. However, closer inspection reveals that there is more to Boghossian's argument than that.

Boghossian (1990a) begins by observing that eliminativists are committed to something like the following. For any sentence S:

(E1) "S has a truth condition" is false.

It seems fair to attribute (E1) to the eliminativist, for a sentence has a truth condition only if the sentence *represents* that condition (where representation is patently folk psychological). Even so, (E1) appears self-refuting: (E1) says that "S has a truth condition" is false, for any sentence S. But the *falsity* of "S has a truth condition" would mean that at least one sentence has a truth condition. Therefore, at least one sentence both has and lacks a truth condition—contradiction.

However, the rejoinder (recognized by Boghossian, and elaborated further by Devitt 1990, Devitt and Rey 1991, and Taylor 1994) is to reformulate (E1) so that it relies only on a notion of *deflationary truth* (cf. Field 1994a, 1994b). Again, this is a view where 'true' does not denote some metaphysically robust property—the word functions merely as a device of disquotation. This means it allows inferring certain sentences from their metalinguistic counterparts, and vice versa, as per the following truth*-schema (where 'p' is replaced by any sentence of the language):

(t*) "p" is true* iff p.

(The asterisk is added to indicate the deflationary use). Thus, if the eliminativist is relying on a notion of truth* rather than a robust, inflationary notion of truth—henceforth,

"Truth"—then (E1) ought to be reformulated as follows. For any sentence S:

(E1*) "S has Truth condition p" is false*.

So unlike (E1), (E1*) does not imply that sentences of a certain form have a Truth condition, but merely a truth* condition. This would commit the eliminativist only to the following form of biconditional for use in disquotational and converse-disquotational inferences:

(E2) "S has Truth condition p" is true* iff S has Truth condition p.

Naturally, the eliminativist will deny both sides of (E2). But on a deflationist view, (E2) itself is permissible as allowing a class of inferences, seen as computational or purely syntactic transformations. Like (E1*), (E2) then does not saddle the eliminativist with the claim that some sentences *represent* a condition.¹⁸

So far, so good. However, there is a passage from Boghossian (1990a) which creates a further obstacle for such deflationary eliminativism:

Most proponents of content irrealism [roughly, eliminativism] came to that view by way of the conviction that neuroscience, or something else similarly physically basic, will ultimately provide the true story about the etiology of human behavior and cognitive activity and that ordinary content-based psychology will not, for one reason or another, reduce to that story. In short, irrealists about content tend to be realists about physics, and, indeed, the former because the latter...[But] how is a realist/irrealist contrast between physics and semantics to be formulated?...[I]f an irrealism about content is simply a deflationism about truth, then...such a view will entail that all declarative sentences, regardless of subject matter, must be treated on a par: there can be no interesting distinction between sentences that are genuinely in the business of stating facts and those that aren't. (p. 178).

The issue here resembles the "creeping minimalism" worry from the metaethics literature (see Dreier 2004). Boghossian's point is that if standard eliminativists use only a notion of truth*, then they can affirm only the truth* of neuroscience. They cannot regard this as ontologically different from the truth* of "Amy Schumer is funny" or "The U.S. economy in 2023 is large".

Granted, eliminativists may wish to reduce the truth* of the latter examples to other truths* (in some sense of 'reduce'). For example, truths* about the economy might be reduced to truths* about financial transactions during a certain period. But such a reduction might not amount to incorporating ontologically "superficial" facts into ontologically "deeper" facts. Assuming

deflationism, the reduction may just amount to certain equivalences between various conjunctions of truths*. Ontologically, all these truths* would remain on par.

The eliminativist, however, wants to give neuroscience more importance than so-called facts about humor. In particular, she will wish to affirm something like:

(E3) Neuroscience is *really true* and not just true*.

But the *truth* of neuroscience suggests that sentences of neuroscience have Truth conditions. Yet that would again be inconsistent with eliminativism.¹⁹

Boghossian's argument in our hands is not suggesting that eliminativism *as such* is inconsistent. An eliminativist can quite consistently adopt deflationism across the board, thus treating the facts about humor as ontologically equal to facts about synapses or ionized particles. (And she still counts as an eliminativist in affirming (E1*)). The problem arises when the eliminativist then adds some sort of realism to her platform, re: physics, neuroscience, or what have you. In this, she appears to forgo deflationism about truth—even though her deflationism was purportedly how she avoided self-refutation.²⁰ But to be clear, an eliminativist could just uniformly adopt deflationism and be done with it.

Could an eliminativist be *selectively* a deflationist, where she makes an exception for physics or neuroscience? It seems not. This would be an admission that *some* sentences have Truth conditions—which is another way of saying that they have a meaning or at least represent a condition. But representation, of course, is what the eliminativist eliminates. (I suppose she could retreat to being selectively an eliminativist, but that is not really “eliminativism.” Representation would not be *eliminated* so much as given a narrower scope).

6 | Ontology Chez Deflationism

However, the deflationary eliminativist can construct a proper reply to Boghossian's fortified argument using prefix semantics. Yet since the eliminativist wishes to limit herself to deflated semantic terms, prefix semantics will need to be reformulated in accord with this. The result is:

(SPS*) If “*p*” is an English sentence that uses FP-vocabulary, and *d* is a Dennett-indispensable context, then “*p*” is true* in *d* iff $F \vdash$ “*p*.”²¹ In all other contexts, “*p*” is true* iff *p*.

In the spirit of Davidson (1973), let us also regard (SPS*) as equivalent to the following:

(SPS**) If “*p*” is an English sentence that uses FP vocabulary, and *d* is a Dennett-indispensable context, then “*p*” means* in *d* that $F \vdash$ “*p*”. In all other contexts, “*p*” means* that *p*.

This clarifies how the fictionalist's earnest talk of “meaning” should be understood. Of course, unlike the theories of Davidson, (SPS*) and (SPS**) explicitly utilize a deflationary notion of meaning and truth. What is more, (SPS*) and (SPS**) are deployed as prescriptive rather than descriptive programs—this

makes the approach unlike deflationism as usually conceived.²² But again, this will provide a vantage point by which the eliminativist can neutralize Boghossian's argument.

Most basically, (SPS*) and (SPS**) prescribe truth* conditions to mentalistic declaratives rather than Truth conditions. This, in turn, is just to say that certain biconditionals are available for certain forms of inference. For example, where *d* is a Dennett-indispensable context:

(A_≡) “Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires” is true* in *d* iff $F \vdash$ “Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires”.

As indicated, this allows the truth* of the mentalistic sentence to be deduced from the derivability condition on the RHS, and vice versa.

Recall now that the issue from Boghossian is whether the eliminativist can make an ontological distinction between truths* of neuroscience and truths* of psychology. But our fictionalist already has something functionally like the distinction between “superficial” and “deep” ontology, despite having only deflated semantic terms at her disposal. In a biconditional such as (A_≡), we are told that the quoted sentence contextually expresses the lightweight claim that *according to the fiction*, beliefs and desires cause some actions. This contrasts with typical Tarski biconditionals for non-mentalistic sentences, which (we may assume) are also part of our total semantic package. Take the following example concerning gamma-aminobutyric acid.

(G_≡) “GABA is present at the synapse” is true* iff GABA is present at the synapse.

Such a thing is not restricted to any specific kind of context. So even in a Dennett-indispensable context *d*, this tells us that an ascription of truth* to the quoted sentence is inferentially equivalent to the following:

(G) GABA is present at the synapse.

And crucially, (G) states what *is* the case, and not just what a certain fiction *says* is the case. This is quite unlike what is indicated by the truth* of (A) in *d*. For the latter indicates merely that a certain syntactic string is derivable from *F*. So in *d*, the fictionalist secures an ontologically relevant distinction between the truth* of (A) versus (G).

But we now come to a key question. When the fictionalist affirms (G), does this genuinely suffice for capital ‘R’ Realism about a specific chemical kind? One could easily imagine a deflationist denying as much. After all, the deflated truth term in (G_≡) suggests that affirming (G) simply makes (G) available for certain formal derivations. That alone does not imply any kind of metaphysical Realism.

I believe this is indeed the correct conclusion to draw; however, our mental fictionalist should not see it as a threat. Partly, that is because there remains *some* sort of ontological distinction in *d* between the truth* of (G) versus (A): There is still a difference between affirming a sentence about GABA versus a sentence about something being derivable from fiction. The other part is

that she should not wish to magnify the truth* of (G) more than this.²³ For if she inflates it into a Truth, then she again falls prey to Boghossian's objection: If (G) is True, then it has a Truth condition, contra eliminativism.

Since (G) is an arbitrary example, the point generalizes: The deflationary eliminativist cannot be a Realist about anything. Note well that this does *not* preclude (E1*), nor does it preclude (E2), although it of course precludes affirming the Truth of neuroscience. Even so, the ontologically important distinction between (A) and (G) remains. Again, in *d* the truth* of (A) indicates merely $F \vdash (A)$, whereas the truth* of (G) indicates that GABA is present at the synapse. So, the mental fictionalist can affirm (E3) if it is construed as: Neuroscience is true* and not just derivable from fiction.²⁴

Just to be clear, a neuroscientific truth* like (G) does not indicate what is The Case, where the claim that *p* is The Case would be, at minimum, allow semantic ascent to the claim that "*p*" is True. But again, the mental fictionalist can still affirm "realism*" about neuroscience, and in this, there remains an ontologically relevant contrast with FP.

Nevertheless, the deflation seems to cut both ways. She is not a Realist about anything, but by the same token, she cannot be an Anti-Realist either. That is surprising, given that eliminativism is naturally seen as Anti-Realism about the mental. But this again is the lesson of Boghossian's objection: An eliminativist cannot declare that "Beliefs exist" is False, on pain of ascribing truth conditions to that sentence. However, she can still say that it is false*—as a declaration of anti-realism* as it were. Even further, she can uphold that 'Beliefs exist' is true* in a Dennett-indispensable context, where this is construed as affirming that belief exists according to the mental fiction. This allows her to deploy mentalistic discourse without a hitch.

It follows that there is a kind of "quietism" in our eliminativist's position.²⁵ She refrains from affirmations of what is True or False, what is The Case or not The Case. Put differently, she refrains from the kind of metaphysics that attempts to "step outside" the language and see how it maps to Reality. Although, the metaphor of "stepping outside" has a lot of metaphysical baggage. Better to say just that, on pain of contradiction, the eliminativist refrains from unqualified ascriptions of 'True' or 'False' to sentences.²⁶

One final objection. It would seem that truth* would be the minimum requirement on Truth. Hence, when our eliminativist affirms that 'Belief exists' is not true* in one kind of context, she thereby implies that the sentence is not True. If it is not True, then it is False. This lands her Anti-Realism. Thus, she is forced once again to take Truth conditions seriously, contra her eliminativism.

Here is a brief reply. Some writers, most notably Dummett (1959, 1975, etc.) claim that a mark of anti-realism vis-à-vis a discourse is a rejection of the Law of Excluded Middle. For example, if an anti-realist intuitionist rejects the truth of the Gödel sentence, she does not thereby affirm that it is false. Similarly, our deflationary eliminativist could thwart the objection by resisting the

move from "not True" to "False," since that maneuver apparently requires LEM.

Still, this reveals that she affirms not only that "Belief exists" is untrue* but also that it is unTrue. So, this goes beyond our initial characterization of anti-realism*. It remains; however, that she is not an Anti-Realist, for the unTruth of the sentence does not suffice for its Falsity. This delicate position might be dubbed anti*-Realism, although this makes the viewpoint sound more contrived than is. The basic datum is that our eliminativist affirms that nothing is True or False. So, "Belief exists" in conventional English is neither True nor False even though it is false* (and even though it is construed as true* in a Dennett-indispensable context).

7 | Ontology After FP

The preceding sections argue that prefix-semantical mental fictionalism allows an ontological distinction between truths* of neuroscience and truths* of FP, such that the latter are ontologically less significant than the former. The ontological distinction allows the eliminativist to subvert Boghossian's concern—and for this reason, eliminativists are well-served to adopt prefix-semantical mental fictionalism. Concurrently, the "parasite" objection to such fictionalism is unwarranted: Insofar as prefix semantics contributes a useful ontological framework, mental fictionalism does not simply leech off cognitive science. It contributes to the relationship too.

More broadly, all this is relevant to answering a rather under-explored question: Without FP, how is ontology possible? The eliminativist thinks it is possible; her eliminativism, after all, is an ontological position. This may appear unobjectionable since the paradigmatic ontological question—as Quine (1948) says—is "What exists?" And eliminativism does not problematize this question per se. Yet, as Quine also illustrated, ontological pronouncements imply pronouncements about language and representation. In English, to affirm that the Earth exists is to affirm "The Earth exists" is true. So in English, one cannot affirm ontological views without implying semantical views. Yet, semantics is precisely what our ontologist, the eliminativist, rejects.

As an escape, the mental fictionalist has proposed a reinterpretation of English, one that severs the tie between affirming a sentence and affirming its Truth. Even so, the computational equivalence is upheld between affirming "The Earth exists" and affirming its truth*. Such pronouncements do not suffice for Realism, but nor should they, according to her. She thinks it is enough to be a realist* about the Earth, in contrast to her anti-realism* about Pegasus (and, of course, about mentality). That is how ontology gets done *chez* deflationism; that is also how it gets done after FP.

Others should find this approach to ontology attractive as well. There is a current in contemporary physics against "metaphysics," even though physics itself addresses questions of ontology. Partly, this is just a stance against non-empirical speculation. Another part of the attitude, however, seems to be distrust toward questions of Realism and Anti-Realism. If superstrings are a fecund source of explanation and further inquiry, then

it is somewhat obstructionist to press whether string theory is Really True. It's not clear what is to be gained in asking this. In contrast, if microphysics is left to itself, a variety of interesting theories result. The current approach to ontology is congenial to this attitude. Our ontologist could affirm that some of these theories are true*, others are false*, and that some are true* only in fiction. Yet there would be no implication about what is True; this coheres well with the thought that, for scientific purposes, questions of Truth may not be very useful (even if not nonsense).

If the approach is so attractive, then one might wonder why I have not endorsed it outright. I have cagily spoke of “what a mental fictionalist might say.” But in fact, I am agnostic only on whether the story-prefixed interpretations should apply to *mentalistic discourse* in particular. Such a semantic can be rightly applied to other discourses—for example, what is true* according to the phlogiston theory—and a general deflationary approach to ontology is indeed one I accept.²⁷ What remains to be seen, however, is whether it is best to regard FP as true* only in fiction.²⁸

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ One exception is Sprevak (2013), who describes (but does not endorse) a fictionalist view of subpersonal neural representation. Such a view may fit into a broader skepticism about FP, but not necessarily.

One might also mention a fictionalist view limited only to *tacit* or *dispositional* representational states; Crane and Farkas (2022) hold such a view (though they resist calling it “fictionalism”). Another borderline fictionalist is Dennett; see Dennett (2022) for discussion. To avoid needless controversy, I classify neither Dennett nor Crane & Farkas as mental fictionalists.

² The traditional problems with empty names like ‘Santa Claus’ persist, even for prefix semantics. Addressing these goes beyond the scope of this paper. Above, the point is that the prefix-story operator clearly removes the ontological commitment, even though the semantics of ‘Santa Claus’ might remain puzzling.

³ It is simply presumed here (without argument) that FP is a kind of tacit theory accepted by the folk. A well-respected alternative holds that the folk are habituated to a practice of *simulating* the psychological states of others (see Heal 1986; Gordon 1986). Unfortunately, I am unable to engage this debate here.

⁴ It is not uncommon to see eliminativists speaking in earnest of “representations.” But presumably, these are regarded as mere syntax, without any sort of mental contents.

⁵ Such an example is familiar from the philosophy of action literature.

⁶ Wallace (2007/2022) suggested much the same point. Other kinds of “weirdness” about the mind might be explained by its fictional moorings. E.g., Toon (2021) argues that the “extended mind” can be de-mystified as merely part of psychological fiction (cf. Clark and

Chalmers 1998). Like above, Toon explains some of the indeterminacies in extended cognition by appealing to indeterminacy in FP (pp. 199–200).

⁷ Joyce (2013, 522) also takes this line on the problem.

⁸ Such a program can include algorithms for generating probabilistic or statistical conclusions as well. I don't mean to suggest that probabilistic or statistical claims cannot be part of the mental fiction.

⁹ For a rigorous, syntactic account of “translation” between languages, see Halvorson (2019, ch. 4). When I speak of “translation” here and below, I will have in mind such a syntactic account.

¹⁰ A referee asks for more details on what should determine the sentences included or excluded from F. I am deliberately hoping to leave that open. The point being developed is that if the eliminativist tailors F to her liking (whatever that may be), then prefix-semantics affords her a way to indicate clearly her ontological commitments.

¹¹ I assume that “contexts” are not FP-positives. If preferred, one may replace my talk of contexts with talk of “occasions of use.”

¹² Think of a perfectly mundane event such as the family going out to dinner. Millions of neural firings occur at a breathtaking rate, and yet we can readily predict behavior via folk psychological ascriptions such as ‘Dad wants margarine instead of butter because he believes it is healthier and thinks it tastes just as good.’

¹³ For more on such a computational-functionalist conception, see Field (2001, ch. 5).

¹⁴ In Parent (2013), I was plumping for quietism as a way for mental fictionalism to avoid the self-refutation charge. This was simply to argue that mental fictionalism is *possible*. I still stand by that point, as far as it goes—but in the present context, I am trying to go further, to make the view positively appealing to standard eliminativists. For that purpose, the quietist version will not do. (Nevertheless, a limited kind of quietism still results from the present version—see section 6.)

¹⁵ The notation is adapted from Wallace (2016).

¹⁶ There is, of course, controversy on whether eliminating mental states is substantively different from reducing them. But the eliminativist has a definite stance on this, and here we are simply fleshing out eliminativist fictionalism.

¹⁷ In conversation, Meg Wallace objects that mental fictionalism contributes by explaining the standard usage of mentalistic discourse. But the problem is that, given (Elim), the coherence of the “storytelling” explanation depends on future cognitive science to give the *real* explanation. So, the implication is that the storytelling explanation is *not* the real explanation, and thus, it is unclear what scientific value it has.

¹⁸ For a time, it was controversial whether truth-conditional semantics was compatible with deflationism about truth, but Boghossian holds that it is. I concur for reasons given in Bar-On, Horisk, and Lycan (2000).

¹⁹ Or at least, there will be *propositions* of neuroscience that are true in some more full-blooded sense. Yet propositions, like truth conditions, are rejected by standard eliminativism. (Propositions, after all, are the *contents* of representations; cf. Parent 2013, 611.) So the view would still collapse into incoherence.

²⁰ As Devitt (1990) and Devitt and Rey (1991) note, the eliminativist can also avoid self-refutation by refusing truth conditional semantics yet refusing to give an alternative semantics as well. Still, this sort of view seems to succumb to quietism or unexplicated jargon. Devitt & Rey concur that the eliminativist should hope to do better.

²¹ (SPS*) might appear to conflict with (t*). For in a Dennett-indispensable context *d*, (SPS*) suggests that “*p*” is true* is equivalent not to “*p*” but rather to ‘*F* ⊢ “*p*”.’ However, in *d*, an ascription of truth* to ‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’ remains equivalent to the sentence itself. It's just that in *d*, (t*) and (SPS*) imply

that the sentence and its truth*-ascription are *each* equivalent to 'F ⊢ 'Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires.' (N.B., inferring the last bit from the truth*-ascription would not be a *disquotational* inference. Yet the inference from truth* to F-derivability is similarly legitimate as a purely computational maneuver.)

Of course, many other refinements are necessary for a truth-deflationary semantics to accommodate various linguistic phenomena. But see Field (op. cit.) for such details.

²²Field (2001, 143) allows that his deflationism could be a prescriptive or a descriptive program. Yet his tendency is to speak as if the aim is to describe truth; see, for example, his claim that deflationism is a "working hypothesis" and related remarks in Field (1994a, 263 *passim*).

²³Even so, our deflationist may semantically ascend to a meta-metalanguage in which "(G) is true*" is true* holds. Yet such a meta-metalanguage truth* is insufficient for bona fide Realism, for it is not the same as Truth.

²⁴There is a kinship with Yablo's neo-Carnapian view, where Carnap's internal/external distinction is rejected in favor of a literal/figural distinction—which is basically a distinction between fictional and non-fictional discourse. See Yablo (1998, 2001). But in contrast, the present approach features a *three*-way distinction between Truths vs. truths* according to a fiction F vs. other truths* within the deflationist's language. (And our deflationist does not affirm anything as True, even though she embraces plenty of truths* of both the prefixed and unprefixed varieties.)

²⁵This differs, however, from the kind of quietist mental fictionalism suggested in Parent (2013). Quietism there was a response to the self-refutation charge that mental fictionalism talks the folk psychological talk without walking the folk psychological walk. (The 2013 response, accordingly, was just to refuse the talk as well.) But above, quietism follows from a more general, "deflationary" approach to ontology. The deflationary approach is motivated by worries about self-refutation, as per Boghossian's objection, but it does not refuse the language of FP altogether. It instead uses the language under the prefix-semantic interpretation in Dennett-indispensable contexts.

²⁶An anonymous referee observes that none of this addresses truths* about humor, assuming we are not fictionalists about humor. How can we make an ontological distinction between such truths* and neuroscientific truths*, without embedding them into a humor-fiction? I am not so opposed to the idea of humor-fictionalism, however. But exploring this, of course, is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, suffice it to say that the mental fictionalist has secured an ontological distinction between psychological and neuroscientific truths*, even though she also may need to secure different ontological distinctions for other regions of discourse.

²⁷There are broader reasons for a deflationary approach to ontology that are separate from eliminativist or fictionalist concerns about self-refutation. For details, see Parent (2015).

²⁸Note that even if FP is largely in error, it does not follow that its posits will be *eliminated*. (The theory of lightning in ancient Greece was radically mistaken, but lightning did not get eliminated from meteorological ontology.) For elaboration, see ch. 1 of Stich's (1996), especially section 5.

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