Ontology After Folk Psychology; or, Why Eliminativists should be Mental Fictionalists
T. Parent (Nazarbayev University)
nontology@gmail.com

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 et al. (2022a). But most mental fictionalists begin in skepticism about the reality of thoughts and related phenomena such as belief, desire, intention, etc. 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 P.M. Churchland (1980), Stich (1983), and P.S. Churchland (1986), mental fictionalists are concerned to offer 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 is so useful as to be

---

1 I thank William Lycan, Adam Toon, and Meg Wallace for invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.
2 One exception is found in 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 mental representation, but the two kinds of skepticism are separable. Even further, skepticism about qualia can give rise to “qualia fictionalism;” see Parent (2015a). Regardless, Sprevak-fictionalism and qualia fictionalism are not at issue in this paper. 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”). But mental fictionalism above concerns all varieties of representational states, whether they be occurrent or non-occurrent.
Another borderline “fictionalist” is Dennett. Even though Dennett (1992) is a fictionalist about the thinking self, and Dennett (1991; 2017) regards qualia as an illusion, Dennett (2022) is a “mental fictionalist” only in one sense of the term. To avoid needless controversy, I do not count Dennett as a “mental fictionalist.”
3 See also Stich (1978; 1991), Churchland & Churchland (1983), P.M. Churchland (1988), and P.S. Churchland (1994). Of note, the term ‘eliminativism’ can denote a variety of different views; this is explained well in Wallace (2016). I shall explain further what I mean by ‘eliminativism’ in section 2.
practically indispensable. The storytelling accounts thus hope to see its mode of speaking 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; 2021a, b; 2022; cf. Walton 1990; 1993).

Some of the first explorations of eliminativism in the 20th century were in fact in the vein of mental fictionalism. For example, Sellars (1956) offers the “myth of Jones” as a way to consider skepticism about folk psychology (and Toon 2016; 2022 explicitly uses Jones as a springboard). Witness also Quine’s (1960) remarks that propositional-attitude ascriptions are a kind of “dramatic idiom.” Yet contemporary eliminativists appear unmoved to join mental fictionalists in developing a storytelling account of mentalistic discourse. For one, it may seem trite that science justifiably uses metaphors, pretenses, etc., (Consider genetic “blueprints” or “missing links” in evolution.) So if folk psychology is also used as a convenient fiction, there may be little pressure to “legitimate” such a thing. Second, and relatedly, eliminativists often are eager to advance a successor theory to folk psychology, e.g., along connectionist lines. If so, then a fictionalist account of mentalistic discourse would not seem to be a priority.

Worse, standard eliminativists might see the storytelling accounts as deeply misguided. This is because such accounts look thoroughly imbued with the language of folk psychology.

---

4 Also, as per Wallace (2022), Carnap’s (1950) “framework” deflationism plausibly entails non-realism about the mental, where mentalistic discourse is nonetheless part of a pragmatically useful theory or “fiction.” I discuss Wallace’s view of Carnap further in sub-section 7.2.

5 Thus, although Stich (1983, p. 2 and p. 222) refers to folk psychology as a “myth,” he is not a mental fictionalist. For he does not use the “myth” label as a springboard for developing an account of how mentalistic discourse works.
Prefix semantics, for instance, seems concerned to analyze the meanings of mentalistic sentences in order to portray what such sentences represent. Metaphors per Davidson are also seen as uses of language which 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.

In fact, a common worry about mental fictionalism is that it is incoherent along such lines. It partakes of the folk psychological paradigm in the ways just mentioned, and yet simultaneously claims to be skeptical of folk psychology (for elaboration, see Wallace, Parent, Toon, op. cit. Joyce 2013, as well as Wallace 2022). Such incoherence would make the view unappealing not only to eliminativists, but also to anyone else. This, I suspect, explains why mental fictionalism per se has not garnered as much interest as other views of the mental.

I myself have come to think that some mental fictionalisms are self-effacing in one respect; see the end of section 4 and sub-section 7.1. Nevertheless, the main goal here is to show that a prefix-semantical mental fictionalism is not only self-consistent, it is also a boon in helping eliminativists defray a powerful objection from Boghossian (1990a, b), re: the ontological commitments of eliminativism. In this capacity, mental fictionalism helps develop a successor theory to folk psychology, concerning how to construct an ontology as an eliminativist. And such a thing is hardly trite. The overarching aim will be to illustrate these points and propose accordingly that eliminativists ought to be prefix-semantical mental fictionalists. As a by-product, I hope to convince others that mental fictionalism deserves more attention than it has received thus far.
2. Precisifying Mental Fictionalism

Mental fictionalism comes in a remarkable range of packages, and here we shall mention only some of the main ones. 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 fictionnalism 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 descriptive-prescriptive distinction is known as the difference between hermeneutic and revolutionary fictionalisms (Burgess & 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 much more within the purview of (empirically informed) philosophical consideration. Regardless of how mentalistic discourse is ordinarily used, should it be used in a storytelling manner in, e.g., neuroscience? That is the issue which drives the discussion here.6

Third, a mental ficticalist might end up applying one of several theories of narrative discourse. Again, my preference is for a prefix-semantics (modeled especially after the modal fictionalism of Rosen 1990 and Nolan 1997; 2002), and the reason for the preference will come out in due course. Yet since prefix semantics in this case is prescriptive, the term ‘semantics’ should be taken with a grain of salt. After all, semantics is typically understood as descriptive,

---

6 This represents a shift from Parent (2013), which focused exclusively on a hermeneutic fictionalism. I now find that the revolutionary version fits my purposes better; see note 19 for further explanation.
concerned with the workings of actual human languages. A prefix semantics, in the present instance, is thus better thought of as a *regimentation* of mentalistic discourse. Its aim is not to faithfully capture how English speech works “in the wild,” but rather to refine it in a way that removes ambiguity, confusion, and other infelicities in folk psychological talk.

The term ‘regimentation’ is unfortunate since it is associated with non-empirical work in logic—and eliminativists often balk at anything which is not thoroughly empirical. But the idea of regimentation (if not the word) is commonplace in science. It operates when specialists *develop a taxonomy* for the object of study. Note especially that a taxon is often a refinement (or “regimentation”) of an ordinary term: E.g, the ordinary noun ‘plant’ also has a taxonomic use where it denotes members of a specific phylum (and note that some plants in the ordinary sense are not plants in the refined sense, e.g., mushrooms). Eliminativists should be keen on developing a more advanced language for use in cognitive science; indeed, if folk psychological language is to be eschewed, then we must engineer something to replace it. The prefix “semantics” is offered in hopes of furthering this goal.  

To be clear, the revolutionary mental fictionalist regards ordinary mentalistic discourse as thoroughly false (except vacuously true conditionals, etc.). Nonetheless, prefix semantics stipulates an interpretation where many sentences of the discourse come out literally correct. As a simple illustration, 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)

---

7 Cf. the short preface to Parent (2017), where taxonomic development and regimentation are compared further.
should be regimented as (S'). Since the latter removes the appearance of ontological commitment, this creates a reading of (S) which is less apt to cause confusion; indeed, it assigns a reading where (S) seems uncontroversial.⁸

Similarly, with mentalistic discourse, prefix regimentation suggests that 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) is construed as true, but not because it accurately represents some fiction-independent state-of-affairs. It is because (A) accurately represents what folk psychology claims is the case, as per (A').⁹ This is not to say that (A) is equivalent to (A') in ordinary 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. It is like when an astronomer speaks of “sunsets;” this should not be construed literally as the sun moving relative to a stationary earth; it should instead be construed as expressing something else. But like the talk of “sunsets,” (A) may be a useful way of speaking on occasion; thus, the fictionalist reserves the right to use (A) interpreted according to her prescription.

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 folk psychology do not exist.

⁸ Caveat: The traditional difficulties with empty names like ‘Santa Claus’ persist, even for prefix semantics. And addressing that issue goes beyond the scope of this paper. Above, the point is that the prefix-story operator clearly removes the ontological commitment to Santa, even though the semantics of ‘Santa Claus’ might remain puzzling.

⁹ It is simply presumed here (without argument) that folk psychology is a kind of tacit theory accepted by the folk. A well-respected alternative is the view that the folk are habituated to a practice of simulating the psychological states of others (see Heal 1986, Gordon 1986). Unfortunately, however, I am unable to engage this debate here.
(SPS): Sentences of folk psychological discourse should be interpreted as relativized to a mentalistic fiction. In more detail: If “p” is a sentence of ordinary English which uses folk psychological vocabulary, “p” is true iff, according to the folk theory of psychology, p.

Let me clarify that (Elim) here is a stance against mental content, and correlative, mental representation, assuming mental representations would be “vehicles” or physical realizers of mental content. This entails elimination of propositional attitudes (beliefs, desires, intentions,…) and components of such attitudes, viz., thoughts and the attitudes directed toward those thoughts (the believing attitude, the desiring attitude, etc.). The elimination of thoughts, in turn, means the elimination of psychological processes operating on thoughts, viz., thinking and its subtypes. The present eliminativism is thus quite broad, but I take it to be aligned with the seminal eliminativist views found in the Churchlands and Stich (op. cits.). Even so, (Elim) is meant to be neutral on whether to eschew other mentalistic phenomena (most notably, qualia, what-its-like properties, “raw feels,” etc.). For convenience, I use ‘folk psychological posits’ and related terms to denote the relevant range of eliminated phenomena, though I acknowledge that other writers include more or less under the rubric of ‘folk psychology’.

To repeat, main advantage of supplementing (Elim) with (SPS) is that our mental fictionalist can retain the usual manner of talking and affirm that (A) is true. Though again, (A) in her mouth would not be a way of describing our psychological reality; it instead should be understood as describing our psychological reality according to our common mentalistic folklore.

---

10 One occasionally sees these writers using the term ‘representation’ and other folk psychological terms, apparently in earnest. But I take it these are convenient stand-ins for more complicated, non-intentional descriptions, or they should be interpreted as non-intentional as they stand. Thus, under one construal, a calculator screen has “representations” of numbers, but such pixel-aggregates do not exhibit original or underived intentionality.
The glaring problem for such a view, however, is that (SPS) itself seems couched in folk psychological terms. Most seriously, it suggests that (A) is to be interpreted as having the same meaning as (A'). Yet how could an eliminativist deploy such terminology in good conscience? Section 4 shall be devoted to this issue. Before diving into this, however, there are other criticisms which should be dispensed with first.

3. Opening Objections

One salient worry about mental fictionalism is as follows. Like the folklore about Santa, folk psychology 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. Observe that the common mentalistic folklore might imply that one of the following two sentences are true, yet remain thoroughly unclear on which:

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

(ii) Miley is able to quit smoking, but she doesn’t truly want to.\(^\text{11}\)

Our folklore may even be unclear on whether these two explanations 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

\(^{11}\) Such an example is familiar from the philosophy of action literature.
must preserve bivalence on matters psychological. More significantly, she might suggest that the gap in the psychological “facts” is explained by a gap in folk psychological theory (even in its most sophisticated guise). Since this is an explanatory hypothesis with some appeal, indeterminacy phenomena may ultimately increase the appeal of mental fictionalism.\(^{12}\)

However, a more pointed version of the worry is 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.’ Yet our mental fictionalist seems to require this in order to avoid an unpalatable kind of incompleteness. In reply, however, we could suggest that the folklore includes generalizations which would be applicable to a variety of individuals in a variety of situations. E.g., “The winner of a contest believes that s/he is the winner, ceteris paribus.” In conjunction with other (non-psychological) facts, such a principle might then allow us to infer the belief-attribution in question. The mental fictionalist thus could claim “In light other facts (and assuming that ceteris is paribus), the psychological folklore implies that Biden believes that Trump lost.”\(^{13}\)

But again, since our fictionalist is a revolutionary, she need not wallow in speculations about our actual psychological folklore. She can instead tailor the fiction to her preferences. For the important thing is that ‘Biden believes that Trump lost’ in her mouth does not outright

\(^{12}\) Wallace (2007/2022) argued much the same point. Other kinds of “weirdness” about the mind can be seen as merely imputed by a psychological fiction. E.g., this can explain why mental content and the proximate causes of behavior are not ‘in the head’ (Burge 1979, 1988, etc.). Similarly, Toon (2021a) argues that the “extended mind” can be de-mystified as mere part of a psychological fiction (cf. Clark & Chalmers 1998). And like above, Toon explains some of the indeterminacies in extended cognition by appeal to indeterminacy in folk psychology (pp. 199-200).

\(^{13}\) Joyce (2013, p. 522) also takes this line on the problem. Mölder (2022, p. 331) complains that the line is underdeveloped and does not answer how details of folk psychology are to be settled. Well, since this is philosophy rather than social-cognitive science, the underdevelopment complaint can always apply. But our general norms of disagreement and evaluating evidence can apply to matters concerning folk psychology; it would be akin to the norms of literary criticism governing how to interpret a novel. Mölder claims that adding such an “interpretivist” element renders the view into an “impure” prefix fictionalism, but these judgments strike me as tendentious, and once we get past the charged verbiage, it is not clear why the prefix mental fictionalist ought to be worried.
commit to beliefs, desires, etc. Rather, it is shorthand for what some theory implies about beliefs, desires, etc. In this light, our revolutionary fictionalist can just stipulate that her prefix semantics is determined by a theory which includes not only mentalistic sentences which are affirmed by the folk, but also any desired additions such as ‘The winner of a contest believes that sh/e is the winner, *ceteris paribus.*’ For that matter, the tailored fiction could even include a sentence like ‘Biden believes that Trump lost.’

Indeed, I am most interested in a view where all the desired implications would be derivable from the tailored fiction *F*, e.g., by means of a computer program.\(^\text{14}\) Then, the relevant interpretation of (A) might be formulated as follows:

\[(A’’) \quad F \vdash \text{‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires.’}\]

And in general, the semantics can be seen as prescribing:

\[(\text{SPS}) \quad \text{If ‘}p\text{‘ is a sentence of ordinary English which uses folk psychological vocabulary, then ‘}p\text{‘ is true iff }F \vdash \text{‘}p\text{‘}.\]

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

However, the story-prefix semantical approach apparently requires the existence of an *explicit list* of folk psychological sentences which specify *F*. And several writers reject the approach precisely because there is no such list. This criticism is of prefix-semantical mental fictionalism is especially prominent in some Hungarian writers (although it can be found elsewhere too); one might thus dub it the “Hungarian objection;” see, e.g., Demeter (2022) and Kocsis & Pete (2022).

\(^\text{14}\) 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.
Apparently, our mental fictionalist requires something like Doug Lenat’s CYC program, albeit narrowed to folk psychology (see cyc.com). But if so, so be it: Let F include all the sentences with folk psychological terms (or translations\textsuperscript{15} thereof) which are \textit{de facto} catalogued in CYC, modified with any additions or subtractions we like. For all practical purposes which interest us, it may be enough. Alternatively, one could imagine a hypothetical fiction which is tailored to taste. 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 \textit{per se}. The Hungarian objection thus seems surmountable.\textsuperscript{16}

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:

\[(B#) \text{ ‘Beliefs exist’ is true iff } F \vdash \text{ ‘Belief exists.’}\]

The fictionalist account affirms (B#) yet note that its right-hand side is also embraced. Thus, assuming that the truth predicate is disquotational, it follows:

\[(B) \text{ Beliefs exist.}\]

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

One reply, from Nolan (1997), Liggins (2008), and Woodward (2008), stresses that the RHS of (B#) has a certain priority, for it occurs in the fictionalist’s preferred idiom.

Concurrently, the story-prefixed statement on the RHS is used to interpret the LHS; however, the less perspicuous LHS is \textit{not} used to interpret the RHS. Accordingly, even though the truth of

\textsuperscript{15} For a rigorous, syntactic account of “translation” between formal languages, see Halvorson (2019, ch. 4).

\textsuperscript{16} Bill Lycan (in conversation) suggests a different reply to the Hungarian objection. It is that the mental fiction \textit{per se} need only consist in the ontological claim that there is mental content. (This could be modeled after some religious fictionalisms, where the relevant fiction consists just in positing a divine being.) Further particulars about addictions, the unconscious, etc., would be hashed out by appeal to behavior and other public dispositions. Some details on this are discernable from the mental fictionalist view described (but not endorsed) in Lycan (2022).
‘Belief exists’ follows from the present account, the RHS of (B#) tells us that this just means that belief exists according to the mental fiction. It does not mean that belief non-fictionally exists.

Although I endorsed this priority idea in previous work (Parent 2013), I now favor a slightly different approach, although it may amount to much the same thing. Let us simply distinguish ‘Belief exists’ as a sentence of everyday English from ‘Belief exists’ as a sentence of “regimented English.” Then, the Brock-Rosen objection correctly shows that ‘Belief exists’ is true in the mental fictionalist’s regimented English—but again, in that language, it means only that belief exists according to the mental fiction. There is no implication that ‘belief exists’ is true as ordinarily understood. In fact, (Elim) says it is false that belief exists, if ‘belief exists’ is interpreted in the non-prefixed way.

Accordingly, it is best to revise (SPS) to the following:

(PS†): If “p” is a sentence of ordinary English which uses folk psychological vocabulary, then “p” is true in regimented English iff \( F \vdash \text{“}p\text{“} \).

Let me confirm that (PS†) itself is not phrased in regimented English, even though it legislates the interpretation of that language. But this is how it should be; it would be viciously circular if we had to speak the new language before we could introduce the new language.

A loose end: If a mental fictionalist means something different by ‘Belief exists’, isn’t she 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 (PS†) as a guideline for “translating” what she says. And since (PS†) occurs in English (ignoring some technical vocabulary such as ‘\( \vdash \)’), such a translation-rubric can be used effectively by English speakers.
4. Self-Refuting or Parasitic?

Again, the main promise of prefix-semantical mental fictionalism is that it allows the use of mentalistic discourse while upholding eliminativist scruples. However, while the objections just reviewed are important, the most weighty issue is that the view looks at odds with itself. Even though prefix semantics is not truly a “semantics,” it still seems concerned to interpret the meaning of (A) in way that sits uncomfortably with eliminativism. Granted, (SPS†) itself does not use the term ‘meaning’, but it still 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 regardless of the terminological choices, how can a skeptic about folk psychology endorse such a thing as (SPS†)?

Toward an answer, consider first that standard eliminativists have been accused of incoherence as well (see Baker 1987, ch. 7; Boghosian 1990a, b). 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) says, 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.” For she would still answer ‘no’ to other questions 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. Instead of “A mental fictionalist affirms \( p \)”, one could say instead: In normal circumstances, a mental fictionalist is disposed to utter ‘yes’ when given as stimulus the interrogative ‘\( p? \)’\(^{17}\) Here too, the paraphrase should not be thought equivalent to “A mental fictionalist affirms \( p \).” We can instead see it as a superior replacement for what we might say in folk psychological terms.

By the way, uttering ‘yes’ in response to “\( p? \)” need not imply the existence of a special, folk psychological “affirming attitude.” In normal circumstances, it can indicate just that the person is disposed to use the sentence “\( p \)” 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.\(^{18}\)

Now again, even if (Elim) per se is consistent, the mental fictionalist faces additional worries about self-refutation. For it easily looks like (Elim) and (SPS\( \vdash \)) are jointly inconsistent: (SPS\( \uparrow \)) 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; 2016, Joyce 2013; Toon 2016). If a

\(^{17}\) Here, ‘normal circumstances’ would be cashed out in accord with the adaptationist account from Millikan (1984; 2005, etc.). The normal circumstances for tokening ‘yes’ would be those circumstances which explain the continued proliferation of such tokens in the community. These circumstances are thus an instance of evolutionarily adaptive circumstances for behaviors in general, although things are complicated by the reciprocal social conditioning that comes with language use. (For some hints on those complications, see Parent 2017, section 0.8.) However, unlike Millikan, the present mental fictionalist would not be endorsing a teleological theory of meaning or content. The account would be more like the teleological anti-semantics from Hutto & Myin (2013, ch. 4).

\(^{18}\) For more on such a computational-functionalist conception, see Field (2001, ch. 5). N.B. such functional processes should be individuated “widely” so that they include Sellars’ (1954) language-entry and language-exit moves. (Entry and exit moves are partly individuated by the worldly states-of-affairs in which these moves originate or terminate. Field himself may be unclear on this; see ibid., the end of fn. 1.)

The idea that the mind is like a computer is not entirely fashionable; however, there are indications that the fashion-pendulum is starting to rebound. See Miłkowski (2017). I myself agree that the mind is not a serial processor, but parallel distributed processing is still a kind of computational process. What’s more, serial processes can be recreated on a parallel processor; indeed, this is probably how we should regard the use of linguistic tokens deployed by a neural net operating system (Dennett 1991, p. 218).
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.
And while this may avoid contradiction, it is surely not alluring.19

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 [folk psychology], we are saying
something, advancing beliefs, proposing arguments, etc.” (p. 34). Accordingly, our mental
fictionalist looks forward to a day when we have properly scientific account of such things. At
which point, she will replace the folk psychological talk of meaning in her account with
something better.

   Call the folk psychological phenomenon “meaning” and the scientifically respectable
counterpart “meaning_{SR}.”20 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.

19 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. And for
that purpose, the quietist version clearly will not do.
20 The notation is adapted from Wallace (2016).
Instead, according to our eliminativist, “ordinary, everyday [meaning] talk is wildly disparate from the cognitive activity that is going on—so much so, that [semantical terms] fail to pick out any activity or process that’s actually in the world” (Wallace 2007/2022, p. 35.) Nonetheless, there will be some phenomenon, meaning$_{sr}$, which will be the theoretical successor to meaning, i.e., it will perform better the theoretical role (roughly) played by meaning. For again, there must be some sort of activity/process occurring when someone uses a sentence with a certain “meaning,” and this activity/process is what is labeled “meaning$_{sr}$”: $^{21}$

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 that:

(MF$_A$) In the regimented language, (A) has the same meaning$_{sr}$ as (A$′$).

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. Stich (1983; 1991), for example, proffers his syntactic theory of mind, which is roughly, Fodor’s (1975) language of thought hypothesis without a semantic layer superimposed on the syntax. Linguistic and other behaviors are thus to be explained not by invoking contentful mental representations, but just by appeal to the causal powers of internal syntactic strings (functionally realized). Similarly, a deflationary inferentialism akin to Field (1994a, b) takes the “semantics” out of an inferential role semantics (cf. Field 1977). Such a view regards ‘true’, ‘means’, and other semantic terms as mere formal devices for disquotational and converse-

$^{21}$ 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.
disquotational inferences. In consequence, language is seen as merely a play of syntax, although there is a naturalistic sense in which the play is “governed” by on-going social conditioning as well. Consider also Hutto & Myin (2013, ch. 4), who take the semantic middleman out of teleosemantics (cf. Millikan 1984; 2005). The aim is to explain an individual’s linguistic and other behavior directly via general adaptationist principles, without any semantic intermediary. Last but certainly not least, many have championed neural net or connectionist models of cognition (P.S. Churchland & Sejnowski 1989; 1992, Ramsey et al., 1990, Ramsey 2007, P.M. Churchland 2012). But don’t take their word for it: The successes of Google’s DeepMind are unmistakable signs that neural net models have arrived and must be taken seriously.  

Be that as it may, mental fictionalism now appears self-effacing, even if not self-contradictory. 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 meaningSR, 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 parasite objection is not an objection to standard eliminativism. Such eliminativists can fully invest themselves in (e.g.) a connectionist view of meaningSR without any self-effacement even prima facie. Again, they have no stock in a storytelling account of mentalistic discourse.

22 Note well: I take it that the various options here (connectionism, deflationism, etc.) are not necessarily in competition with each other. I suspect the best sort of eliminativist view would weave them all together.
But to repeat, prefix 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. On the contrary, however, I will show that the apparatus of prefix semantics still contributes something important even after a theory of meaningarrives. So although prefix semantical mental fictionalism may be waiting on a theory of meaning, the theory of meaning shall also benefit from the regimented language yielded by prefix semantics. In particular, it will remove various ontological confusions which would otherwise result after the fall of folk psychology. And in this, we will also see why eliminativists should be revolutionary, prefix-semantical mental fictionalists.

5. Boghossian’s Objection

The positive contribution of prefix semantics is best seen in how it resolves a problem from Boghossian (1990a, b). On the face of things, 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’s (1990a) objection 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,

---

23 In conversation, Meg Wallace objects that mental fictitonalists contribute by explaining the ordinary usage of mentalistic discourse. But this sounds like the hermeneutic brand of fictionalism which I am leaving aside (and which I regard as requiring independent linguistic evidence).
(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 & Rey 1991, and Taylor 1994) is to reformulate (E1) so that it relies only on a notion of deflationary truth (cf. Field 1994a, b; Horwich 1995). This is a view where ‘true’ does not denote some metaphysically robust property. Rather, the word functions merely as a device of disquotation—where 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):

\[(t^*) \text{ “} p \text{” is true* iff } p.\]

(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:

\[(E1^*) \text{ “} S \text{ has Truth condition } p \text{” is false*.}\]

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:

---

24 Field’s deflationism does not explicitly emphasize the anti-metaphysical dimension of the view. His tendency is to describe deflationism as the idea that truth should not have a “certain kind of ‘causal explanatory’ role” in behavior (2001, p. 29). See also Field (2005). However, as far as I can tell, the absence of such causal roles suffices for a kind of anti-metaphysics for truth regardless: If truth were a metaphysically real property, then presumably it would have such causal-explanatory role. Besides, other deflationists clearly see the anti-metaphysical aspect as crucial to their view, and I follow this lead.

25 For the record, my preference would be to formulate the disquotational schema as follows. For any sentence \( \phi \), the following is a theorem: \( \langle \phi \rangle \text{ is true* iff } \phi \). (The corner quotes here are Quine’s 1951 quasi-quotes.) Similar remarks holds for (SPS*) below. But the technical reasons for these things need not detain us, and the schema above is more like what one sees in the literature.
(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. If this sort of thing exhausts the role of ‘true*’, then (E2) does not saddle the eliminativist with the claim that some sentences represent a condition. 26

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 Drier 2004). 27 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 is complex’.

Granted, eliminativists may wish to reduce the truth* of the latter examples to other truths* (in some sense of ‘reduce’). E.g., 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

26 For a time, there was controversy on whether truth-conditional semantics was compatible with deflationism about truth, but Boghossian assumes here that it is. I concur with the assumption for reasons given in Bar-On et al. (2000).

27 The anti-Carnapian argument of Wallace (2022) is also related; see sub-section 7.2.
deflationism, the reduction may just amount to certain equivalences between various conjunctions of truths*. Ontologically, all these truths* would remain on par.

Now while it is an important truth* that Schumer is hilarious, the eliminativist wants to give neuroscience more importance. So I assume she will wish to affirm something like:

\[
(E3) \text{Neuroscience is really true and not just true*}. 
\]

But the truth of neuroscience suggests that sentences of neuroscience have Truth conditions. Yet that would be flatly inconsistent with (E1).\(^\text{28}\)

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. The problem arises when the eliminativist 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.\(^\text{29}\) 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—and this 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.)

\(^\text{28}\) 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, p. 611.) So the view would still collapse into incoherence.

\(^\text{29}\) As Devitt (1990) and Devitt & Rey (1991) note, the eliminativist can also avoid self-refutation by refusing deflationism yet also refusing to offer an alternative to Truth conditional semantics. Still, this sort of view seems to succumb to quietism or unexplicated jargon. Devitt & Rey concur that the eliminativist should hope to do better.
6. Ontology Chez Deflationism

However, the deflationary eliminativist can construct a proper reply to Boghossian’s revived argument using prefix semantics. But to do this, we will first need to take prefix semantics a bit farther. We need to distinguish between prefix semantics as articulated in ordinary English from prefix semantics as articulated in *regimented English*. So far, we have just presented the former sort of theory. This was right and proper since the regimented language must be introduced via an antecedently known language if we are to have a chance at understanding it. But in so presenting the theory, we made use of the ordinary English term ‘true’. Yet for the eliminativist’s purposes, we need a theory that features a deflated truth term. And it is contentious whether the ordinary English term ‘true’ is a deflated truth term.

In contrast, the eliminativist’s regimented language can include whichever terms she desires. Thus, we can formulate *in* that language the deflationary semantics that will help her thwart Boghossian.

(SPS*): If “$p$” is a sentence of regimented English using folk psychological vocabulary, then “$p$” is true* in regimented English iff $F \vdash “p.”$

In the vein of Davidson (1973), I shall also regard (SPS*) as equivalent to the following (which, again, is a theory about regimented English formulated *in* regimented English): (SPS**): If “$p$” is a sentence of regimented English using folk psychological vocabulary, then “$p$” in regimented English means* that $F \vdash “p.”$

This allows clarification on how my earnest talk of “meaning” should be interpreted. Of course, unlike the theories of Davidson, (SPS*) and (SPS**) explicitly utilizes a deflationary notion of

---

30 I thus concur with Price (1997), against Horwich (1995), that a deflationist about truth ought to be a deflationist about semantics in general. As Price says, this leads into (what I call) inferentialist anti-semantics, of the sort developed by Field (op. cit.).
meaning and truth; concurrently, I am adopting such theories as prescriptive rather than descriptive programs. This makes the present deflationary view unlike deflationism as usually conceived.\textsuperscript{31} But again, the motive is to construct a theoretical approach which the eliminativist can neutralize Boghossian’s argument.\textsuperscript{32}

Beyond this, however, it is pleasing that the regimentation makes essential use of the deflated truth term only. Consider that, although ‘true’ among English speakers may be commonly used in a robust, inflationary manner, that is a usage which has historically created much perplexity. The general aims of regimentation would therefore advise \textit{legislating a use of ‘true’ which does not breed such philosophical mayhem}, where it is instead a straightforward logical device.\textsuperscript{33} (For more on truth* versus Truth, see the Appendix.)

But for independent reasons (relating to Boghossian), the mental fictionalist now proposes (SPS*) and (SPS**) to prescribe truth* conditions to mentalistic declaratives rather than Truth conditions. This, in turn, is merely to say that certain biconditionals are available for disquotation and converse-disquotational inferences within the regimented language. The following might be an example:

\[(A \equiv) \text{‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’ is true* in regimented English iff } F \vdash \text{‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’}.\]

\textsuperscript{31} Field (2001, p. 143) seems to allow 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, p. 263 \textit{passim}).

\textsuperscript{32} Technically, prefix semantics in ordinary English is not equivalent to the prefix semantics in regimented English (unless one accepts, tendentiously, that the ordinary ‘true’ is deflated). But we should regard the latter as the “official” version of the semantics. The former we can regard as a Tractarian ladder to kick away once we have acquired the regimentation. (And fortunately, it is possible to acquire language just by knowing only rough approximations of its meanings; witness dictionaries.)

\textsuperscript{33} Of course, many complicated refinements are necessary for a truth-deflationary semantics to accommodate various linguistic phenomena. But see Field (op. cit.) for such details. The point remains, however, that ‘true’ as a mere logical device avoids the metaphysical detritus that is otherwise associated with ‘true’.
Again, this should be seen as a biconditional *within* the regimented language, and as a means by which the LHS can be inferred from the RHS as well as vice-versa.

Again, the issue from Boghossian is whether the eliminativist can make an ontological distinction between truths* of neuroscience and truths* of, e.g., humor. But our fictionalist already has something functionally like the distinction between “superficial” and “deep” ontology, even if the regimented language is interpreted only by deflated semantic terms. In a biconditional such as \((A \iff)\), we are told that the quoted sentence merely 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 Tarski-biconditional as an example:

\[(G \iff) \text{ ‘Gamma-aminobutyric acid is present at the synapse’ is true* in regimented English iff gamma-aminobutyric acid is present at the synapse.}\]

Again, let us regard this as an interpretation of regimented English which is formulated in regimented English, then, \((G)\) tells us that the truth* of the quoted sentence is inferentially equivalent to the following in regimented English:

\[(G) \text{ Gamma-aminobutyric acid is present at the synapse.}\]

And \((G)\) states what *is* the case, and not just what a certain fiction *says* is the case. So it is quite unlike what is indicated by the truth* of ‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’ within regimented English. That indicates merely that a certain syntactic string is derivable from \(F\). In this respect, then, the regimented language respects an ontologically relevant distinction between the two truths*.

But we now come to a key question. When we assert \((G)\), 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 \((G_n)\) indicates that asserting \((G)\) simply makes \((G)\) available for disquotational and converse disquotational inferences. That alone does not imply any kind of metaphysical Realism.

Again, we are here speaking of \((G)\) as a sentence of regimented English; we are leaving aside what asserting \((G)\) amounts to in ordinary English. Once this is clear, it also seems clear that the deflationary point is right: \((G)\) in the regimented language is regarded as equivalent to the truth* of \((G)\). And so, if asserting the truth* of \((G)\) does not suffice for metaphysical Realism, neither does asserting \((G)\). But our mental fictionalist should not see this as a liability. Partly, this is because it leaves untouched that there is some sort of ontological distinction between the truth* of \((A)\) versus \((G)\) in regimented English: There remains a difference between affirming a sentence about GABA versus a sentence about something being derivable from a fiction. The other part is that she should not wish to magnify the truth* of \((G)\) more than this.\(^{34}\) 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, moreover, the point generalizes: The deflationary eliminativist cannot be a Realist about anything. Note well that this does not preclude \((E_1^*)\), nor does it preclude \((E_2)\), although it of course precludes affirming the Truth of neuroscience. Yet happily, she still has an ontological distinction between the truth* of \((A)\) and the truth* of \((G)\). Again, the truth* of \((A)\) indicates merely that \(F \vdash (A)\), whereas the truth* of \((G)\) indicates that GABA is present at the synapse. So she can affirm \((E_3)\) if it is construed as: Neuroscience is true* and not just derivable from a fiction.\(^{35}\)

\(^{34}\) Even so, our deflationist could semantically ascend to a regimented meta-metalanguage in which ‘\((G)\) is true*’ is true*. Yet such a meta-metalanguage truth* also is insufficient for bona fide Realism, for it is not the same as Truth.\(^{35}\) There 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.
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 there remains an ontologically relevant contrast with folk psychology, where she affirms that truths* of folk psychology are merely sentences that are derivable from a certain fiction, rather than homophonically disquotable as they stand.\(^{36}\)

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. However, I take this to be the lesson of Boghossian’s objection: An Eliminativist cannot declare that ‘Belief exists’ is False, on pain of ascribing Truth-conditions to her declaration. Yet she can still say that ‘Belief exists’ is false*, as a declaration of anti-realism* as it were. Even further, we have seen that she can even retain a sense in which ‘Belief exists’ is true, where it is reconstrued as affirming that belief exists according to the mental fiction. And again, the latter allows her to deploy the useful parlance of folk psychology without a hitch.\(^{37}\)

One final objection. It would seem that truth* would be the minimum requirement on Truth. Hence, if our deflationary eliminativist affirms that ‘Belief exists’ is not true* in ordinary English, she thereby implies that the sentence is not True. And if it is not True, then it is False.

\(^{36}\) See Yablo (1998, 2001, etc.). But in contrast, the present approach features a three-way distinction between Truths vs. truths* according to a fiction \( \mathbf{F} \) vs. other truths* within the regimentation. (And our deflationist does not affirm anything as True, even though she embraces plenty of truths* of both the prefixed and unprefixed varieties.)

\(^{37}\) Mödler’s (2010; 2022) ascriptivist view is similar in adopting deflationism toward folk psychology. Yet his view differs not only in rejecting prefix semantics, but also in otherwise embracing inflationary ontology. And per Boghossian, I reject all inflated ontology as inconsistent with eliminativism. (Also, Mödler’s view differs from the present mental fictionalism in that his seems more of a descriptive rather than a prescriptive program.)
This lands her Anti-Realism, and thus, is again implicated in taking Truth conditions seriously, contra her eliminativism.

Here is an all-too-brief reply. Some writers, most notably Dummett (1959, 1975, etc.) have claimed that a sign 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 above by resisting the move from “not True” to “False,” since that maneuver apparently requires LEM. Still, this would reveal that not only does she affirm that ‘Belief exists’ is not true*, she also affirms that ‘Belief exists’ is not True—even though the latter does not amount to affirming that it is False. Perhaps this peculiar combination of views should be dubbed anti*-Realism in contrast to mere anti-realism*. On reflection, however, the position should not seem all that strange. Since she affirms that nothing is True or False, it is only natural for her to say that ‘Belief exists’ (in ordinary English) is neither True nor False.

It follows that there is a kind of “quietism” in our deflationist’s position.38 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 which attempts to “step outside” her regimentation and see how it maps to Reality. Although, the metaphor of “stepping outside” also has a lot of metaphysical baggage. Better to say that she withholds declaratives where ‘True’ or ‘False’ is used (in unnegated and unconditional form).

38 This 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 folk psychology altogether. It instead uses the language under the prefix-semantic interpretation. Though again, it also refuses Realist or Anti-Realist pronouncements, on pain of inconsistency.
7. Some Esteemed Colleagues

The preceding sections argue that prefix-semantical mental fictionalism nonetheless allows an ontological distinction between truths* of neuroscience and truths* of folk psychology, such that the latter are ontologically “lighter” 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 regimentation for scientific sophistication, mental fictionalism does not simply leech off cognitive science for its legitimacy. It contributes something to the relationship too.

7.1 Toon’s Pretense Theory

However, it is only prefix-semantical mental fictionalism which touts the regimentation. Other mental fictionalisms, such as Toon’s (op. cits.) pretense theory and Demeter’s (2009; 2013; 2022) affective theory refuse prefix semantics when cashing out the sense in which folk psychology is a “fiction.” Still, like the prefix semantical view, these other mental fictionalisms face worries about self-refutation. Pretense-theoretic fictionalism, for example, seems to require not just the folk notion of “meaning,” but also the folk attitude of pretending: An utterance like ‘Some actions are caused by beliefs and desires’ is not asserted but rather pretend-asserted. But again, pretense theory could piggy-back on future cognitive science to garner scientifically respectable successors to “meaning” and “pretense.” However—this is where the parasite objection looms. What does pretense theory have to contribute once cognitive science has rescued it from incoherence?
Actually, the situation is not so straightforward with Toon’s pretense theory. Toon in fact embraces the reality of linguistic content, even while rejecting mental content (see his 2022 especially, but also his 2021a, p. 189 and pp. 193-194). Briefly, this is the how he avoids self-refutation when speaking earnestly of “meaning.” Accordingly, he is not waiting on cognitive science to appoint a successor-notion of meaning.\(^39\)

Nevertheless, I find Toon’s view less than ideal for two reasons. First, I confess sympathy with Boghossian (1990a, pp. 170ff.), who suggests that if arguments against mental content are any good, then they are equally good against linguistic content. He delves into this in detail, but the basic idea is that “these arguments have nothing much to do with the items being mental and everything to do with their being contentful” (p. 170). Second, even if Toon does not require a theory of meaning\(^{SR}\) Toon admits a need for a theory of pretending\(^{SR}\) (see p. 397 of his 2021b)—even though \emph{de facto} his view is heavily invested in Waltonian, folk psychological mechanics (“principles of generation,” “prop-orientation,” etc.). So it seems especially self-effacing to imply that all this Waltonian theory will be \textit{eliminated}—not reduced, mind you—once we have a proper theory of pretending\(^{SR}\). Why, then, should we bother with pretense theory \textit{per se}? It seems unmotivated, an improper investment of time and resources. We should switch to straight neuroscience.\(^{40}\)

I hesitate to criticize such a nice chap as Toon, yet I am allayed by the thought that it is payback for his (2016, p. 289) attack on prefix semantics. I remain unpersuaded by the modal objection that, if the mental fiction had been appropriately different, then according to prefix

\(^{39}\text{In conversation, Toon says he prefers to say that he rejects mental representation but not mental content. In line with his (2021a), he suggests that mental content might be “grounded” in behavioral patterns of the agent (especially patterns of linguistic acts), rather than in facts about the agent’s internal state. Yet if there are mental contents, there still would apparently be propositional attitudes (attitudes toward mental contents). In which case, I don’t see how Toon is truly a skeptic about folk psychology. He would instead be skeptical of an internalist view of folk posits, while remaining ontologically committed to such posits. But there is likely more to debate here.}\)

\(^{40}\text{For further criticism of Toon, see Bourne & Caddick Bourne (2020), Hutto (2022), and Ross (2022).}\)
semantics, none of us would have Freudian unconscious desires. For it is plausible that, according to our mentalistic folklore, even if people never heard of “unconscious desires,” they still would have unconscious desires. And we prescriptivists can prefer our own mental fiction over a counterfactual, impoverished mental fiction. (See also Wallace 2007/2022, pp. 38-39 on the modal objection.)

7.2 Wallace’s Mental Fictionalism cum Neuroscientific Realism

Wallace (2007/2022) has also defended prefix-semantical mental fictionalism, although in her (2016), she adopts a more neutral stance between prefix semantics and other approaches to fiction. In Wallace (2022), however, her view contrasts with the present one insofar as she endorses realism about neuroscience. This she sees as part of the “waiting on cognitive science” reply to the self-refutation charge. Now in fact, I wonder whether she might be equally happy to accept the kind of realism* about neuroscience I described above. However, the language of her argument suggests she prefers an ontologically heavier sort of realism.

The relevant argument from Wallace is as follows. A global non-realist such as Carnap (1950) could be accused of self-refutation, akin to the charge against eliminativism and mental fictionalism. That’s because Carnap’s global non-realism entails non-realism about the mental—and yet, Carnap makes serious use of folk psychological posits, e.g., in his earnest talk of analyticity and of “accepting” linguistic frameworks. Yet if Carnap is a non-realist about folk psychology, he does not endorse such talk on its literal construal. So how can we make sense of what Carnap is saying? Wallace elaborates as follows:

41 Also, I fail to see why Toon’s (2016) own solution to the problem of concern cannot be adopted by the prefix semanticist, mutatis mutandis. Fictions, like pretenses, can involve actual people. Consider, e.g., Napoleon’s appearance in War and Peace. (The example is from Kripke 1973/2013.)
If accepting a framework is not a mentalistic activity, then what else could it be? What exactly are we doing when we accept a framework? Is it exercise? Is it bodily movement in space? Are we looking at a work of art? Evaluating it aesthetically but non-propositionally? … One may be tempted to explain: these frameworks are themselves an (abstract?) new language with new rules that someone constructs and introduces for the purpose of having a new way of speaking, to describe a new kind of thing. Yet all of these actions seem to presuppose folk psychological notions - understanding and constructing a language, intending it to mean or describe things in a certain way, etc. So, whatever it is that accepting a framework involves, it is at the very least some kind of mentalistic activity, as understood by folk psychology. But then the activity of accepting a framework presupposes folk psychological notions. (2022, p. 280)

Again, the point is that Carnap eschews folk psychological posits while simultaneously being invested in them.

Wallace then takes this as an opportunity to boast the advantages of (her brand of) mental fictionalism. Since she is not a global non-realist, she can cash out her own use of folk psychological terms by appeal to her other ontological commitments:

[F]or the mental fictionalist, there is an answer as to what is going on when we are engaging in the mental fiction... about whatever non-psychological activities are occurring when we make noises, flap our mouths, wave our arms, gesticulate at powerpoints [etc.]… This literal answer will not involve any reference to folk psychological entities or activities…But we will nonetheless have an explanation for the event taking place when it seems for all the world that we are engaged in the very folk psychological activities that the mental fictionalist (speaking strictly) denies exists. (2022, p. 282)

She calls these non-psychological ontological commitments her “foothold against cognitive collapse.” But again, since a global non-realist has no ontological commitments, they seem unable to exchange their mentalistic talk with some other, ontologically respectable discourse. So Carnap lacks an ontological foothold, and in his case, the worry about self-refutation remains.

Now, regardless of whether this is fair to Carnap, Wallace’s argument also seems relevant to the deflationary eliminativist from previous sections. We have not spoken of accepting frameworks as such, but there is something closely analogous: We have introduced a
regimented language which is to be understood in a certain way, where folk psychological discourse is intended to mean something different than is typical. So again, how does all this fit with eliminativism about folk psychological posits?

Like Wallace, I suggest that mental fictionalists should regard folk psychology as a stand-in for what is really going on, neuroscientifically. But unlike Wallace, I am not a realist about neuroscience, at least not with a capital ‘R’. Indeed, the deflationary stance seems to imply a kind of global non-Realism, of the sort that Carnap endorsed. Wallace therefore might say that I have pulled the rug out from under my own feet. I have no ontological commitments by which to explain what is “really going on” when my mental fictionalist engages in folk psychological talk.

But like the talk of “realism,” talk of what is “really” going on can be interpreted (!) in different ways. The regimentation of the previous sections should make clear that deflationary eliminativism is not committed to the Truth or the Reality of anything, given that this would force a commitment to Truth-conditions. Even so, prefix semantics allows us to talk of the reality* of neuroscience in a way that distinguishes it from folk psychology in an ontologically relevant way. So folk psychological discourse can be traded in for a more ontologically significant discourse, while still resisting Realism. As I put it before, our eliminativist deflationist is as realist* about neuroscience and an anti-realist* about folk psychology (where the difference basically lies in whether truths* permit homophonic disquotation).

8. Ontology After Folk Psychology

It has been an underexplored question: Without folk psychology, 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—"What exists?" And eliminativism does not problematize this question per se. Yet, as Quine also illustrated, ontological pronouncements implicate 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. And yet, semantics is precisely what our ontologist, the eliminativist, rejects.

As an escape, the eliminativist has proposed a regimented version of English, one which severs the tie between affirming that the Earth exists and affirming that ‘The Earth exists’ is True. 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, and this is 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 folk psychology.

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, which coheres well with the thought that, for scientific purposes, questions of Truth are not very useful (even if not nonsense).
If the approach is so attractive, then one might wonder why I have not endorsed it outright. My language has been cagey in speaking 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 semantics can be rightly applied to other discourses—e.g., what is true* according to the phlogiston theory—and a general deflationary approach to ontology is indeed one I accept.\(^{42}\) What remains to be seen, however, is whether it is best to regiment folk psychology as true* only in fiction.\(^{43}\)

Appendix: truth* and Truth

It is a bit puzzling how to handle the inflated truth-term ‘True’ in the regimented language, and in particular, how to distinguish it from the deflated truth-term ‘true*’. The basic datum to accommodate is that, given a neuroscientific truth* like (G), its Truth does not follow.

Datum: Given that (G) is true*, it does not follow that (G) is True.

This is how the deflationary eliminativist can affirm the truth* of (G) without thereby affirming its Truth. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge just how inconvenient Datum is, at least from the point of view of logic. Its implication is that:

(?) Possibly, (G) is true* and (G) is not True.

Yet it is hard to see how (?) is correct, no matter which kind of “possibility” is relevant. First, suppose that model-theoretic possibility is at issue, so that (?) suggests the existence of a model

\(^{42}\) However, my own reasons for deflationary ontology are entirely separate from eliminativist or fictionalist concerns about self-refutation. Details may be found in Parent (2015b).

\(^{43}\) Note that even if folk psychology 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.
where (G)’s truth* and its Truth come apart. Then, (‽) conflicts with the fact that the following schemas hold in any model (if ‘true*’ and ‘True’ are given their intended interpretations):

(t*) “p” is true* iff p.

(T) “p” is True iff p.

And from these, it follows:

(Tt*) “p” is true* iff “p” is True.

Thus, the extensional equivalence between truth* and Truth appears model-theoretically necessary—which is inconsistent with (‽).

Note, moreover, that metaphysical, physical, chemical, etc., possibilities are subsets of model-theoretic possibilities. So (‽) would present the same sort of problem even if ‘Possibly’ concerned these other possibilities. But what about epistemic possibility? Unfortunately, it seems (‽) is unappealing even under that construal. For we just concluded that (Tt*) is model-theoretically necessary by means of a very straightforward argument. This supports that the model-theoretic necessity of (Tt*) should be uncontroversial, suggesting it is epistemically necessary (at least for us). But then, (‽) presents a problem even where ‘Possibly’ is construed in terms of epistemic possibility.

We may put the problem a bit less abstractly and a bit more succinctly. Consider the following exchange:

Annie: Gamma-aminobutyric acid exists.

Danny: I grant that this is true*, but is it True?

Annie: Well, I just affirmed that gamma-aminobutyric acid exists. Doesn’t its Truth follow?
Danny seems stuck. It seems Truth should follow if Truth allows semantic ascent from what Annie said. But Danny acts as if its Truth does not follow (i.e. that it is “possibly” not True). Yet how could that be? 44

It is at this point that a Carnap-inspired deflationist might say that Danny’s question is meaningless. But instead, one might grant that Danny’s question is meaningful, yet concede that a term like ‘True’ does not always allow semantic ascent. On such a view, this is just a fact about how the robust truth-term functions in English, as illustrated in the Annie-Danny dialogue. It would be another instance in which the English language proves less than elegant and reveals why the robust term can create philosophical havoc.

Fortunately, our concern is with regimentation rather than trying to describe the mechanics of conversational English. And for this purpose, we may simply legislate which kind of language is of most interest. We observed, moreover, that (t*) seems non-negotiable: Indeed, the whole point of introducing the asterisked ‘true*’ was to make clear that this was merely a device for semantic ascent and decent. The straightforward argument thus seems to motivate a rejection of (T). But unlike in the previous paragraph, this does not imply anything about how a robust truth-term works in actual English. We are simply trying to respect the difference between truth* and Truth within the regimented language.

By the way, the falsity of (T) in the regimented language coheres nicely with (E1*). For it seems clear that, for any sentence S:

(E4) “S has Truth condition p” is true* iff: S is True iff p.

44 The observation bears some resemblance to Hofweber’s (2009) comments on mainstream metaphysics, re: talk of what is the case versus what is metaphysically the case. It seems Hofweber might equally refer to this as talk of what is Truly the case. And like Hofweber, I take the point to be a puzzle for such a brand of metaphysics.
Since the RHS of (E4) is the same as (T), and since (T) fails in our language, it follows “S has a Truth condition \( p \)” is likewise false*—which is precisely what the eliminativist said at (E1*).

And here, (E1*) is a consequence of our deflationary semantics in which ‘true*’ is non-equivalent to ‘True’. This is should not be entirely unexpected; after, deflationism agrees with eliminativism that sentences do not have Truth conditions.

Yet our deflationary eliminativist still needs a term like ‘True’ in the regimented language so to articulate things like (E1*), (E2), and (E4). However, if (T) fails in the language, how should ‘True’ be defined? I admit not having a good answer. One option would be to leave ‘True’ as primitive or undefined. Another would be to define ‘True’ as inconsistent—where \( p \) is and is not equivalent to “\( p \)” is True. The latter may seem perverse, although it would effectively clarify why both declarations of Realism and of Anti-Realism are to be avoided. But I must leave this matter unresolved.

References


