Fictionalism and Eliminativism

1. Recapitulation of the central distinctions

Suppose that for some reason you deny many of the central claims of microphysics: you hold that there are no electrons, protons, neutrons or any of those things. So sentences like 'there are electrons', 'there is an electron in the cloud chamber', etc. are all false.

Still, there seems to be a very important difference between some sentences about electrons, like 'there are billions of electrons in my body', and others, like 'electrons are only found on the Moon'---a difference that's often relevant to the question whether one should utter these sentences in an assertive tone of voice (for short, *assert* them). A **realist** about microphysics has an clear account of the distinction: it's the distinction between the true sentences and the false ones. What account are you going to give?

If you're a **pragmatic hermeneutic fictionalist** about microphysics, you say that it's the distinction between false sentences that can *correctly be asserted* in ordinary (e.g. non-philosophical) contexts, and false sentences that can't correctly be asserted even then.

If you're a **semantic hermeneutic fictionalist** about microphysics, you say that it's the distinction between sentences that are false (in *this*, philosophical, context) but *true* in ordinary contexts, and sentences that are false in both sorts of contexts.

If you're a **pragmatic revolutionary fictionalist** about microphysics, you say that it's the distinction between sentences that we *could* correctly assert in ordinary contexts if only we made a certain beneficial change in our practice.

If you're a **semantic revolutionary fictionalist** about microphysics, you say that it's the distinction between sentences that would be *true* in ordinary contexts if only we made a certain beneficial change in our practice.

If you're an **eliminativist** about microphysics, you don't think that the distinction really ought to be relevant to the question whether the sentences should be asserted. The only distinction you will see is the distinction between false sentences that are widely (and incorrectly) accepted, and false sentences that no-one accepts.

2. Hermeneutic-revolutionary and the metaphysical beliefs of the folk

The question whether you should be a hermeneutic fictionalist, or instead be either a revolutionary fictionalist or an eliminativist, is closely connected with the question whether, when you voice your anti-realist commitment (e.g. when you say 'there are no electrons'), you think you are denying something that ordinary

people generally believe. In short, do ordinary people have false metaphysical beliefs about the subject matter we're talking about?

If you say **no**, it's pretty clear that you ought to be a hermeneutic fictionalist. Given that a typical use of the sentence 'there are electrons' won't express or convey any false beliefs, it's presumably correct (and maybe even true!).

If you say **yes**, there's some pressure for you to be either a revolutionary fictionalist or an eliminativist. But this pressure can be resisted. Given that a typical use of 'there are electrons' is liable to induce some false beliefs, it isn't *perfectly pragmatically appropriate*---but that needn't stop it from being true, or correct in the relevant sense. Pragmatic appropriateness is a complicated business to which all sorts of factors are relevant.

If you **reject the question**—because you think there are no interesting true generalisations about the beliefs of ordinary people, or because you think that they have contradictory beliefs, or because you think that it's indeterminate what they believe—you may not regard the hermeneutic-revolutionary distinction as a very important one.

3. Atheism and agnosticism

I said that you're an anti-realist in the relevant ('non-symmetric') sense about a subject matter if you deny some of the most important and central claims about the subject matter that are generally taken for granted.

If the subject-matter is microphysics, that might mean denying 'there are electrons'. Or it might mean, more cautiously, denying 'one can justifiably believe that there are electrons', or 'there is good evidence for the existence of electrons', or 'given the evidence we have, a rational person ought to believe in electrons'...

If you hold one of these epistemological views, you are presumably going to regard it as inappropriate to assert 'there are electrons', at least in strict and philosophical contexts. If you want to say that it *is* appropriate to assert it in ordinary contexts, or *would* be appropriate if only we instituted some desirable reform, you will have to give much the same sort of fictionalist theory about those contexts that you would have to give if you had denied the existence of electrons outright.

4. Explaining 'strictly speaking'

A challenge for semantic hermeneutic fictionalism: given that there are some contexts in which 'there are Fs' is true, and other contexts in which 'there are Fs' is false, and that the former contexts are much more common, why isn't the adoption of the latter sort of context in the metaphysics room just a capricious and arbitrary semantic change? What is it about doing metaphysics that warrants this unusual interpretation?

(A related challenge for pragmatic hermeneutic fictionalism: why is the semantics on which 'there is Fs' comes out false the correct semantics for English, given that uses of the sentence are generally correct?)

(A related challenge for revolutionary fictionalism and eliminativism: why should we interpret ordinary people as believing lots of falsehoods about electrons, rather than adopting some more charitable interpretation?)

One sort of answer: the strict and literal interpretation is the **maximally inclusive** interpretation.

> The picture: 'F' is a *cluster concept*; something counts as an F if it satisfies the "F role" or the "folk theory of F's"; nothing satisfies *all* of the role, but some things satisfy "enough" of the role. EG: it is claimed that the folk role for 'morally wrong' includes something like 'it is impossible to judge something to be morally wrong without being moved not to do it', and that there is in fact no property such that it is impossible to judge something to have it without being moved not to do it. So "ever so inclusively speaking" nothing is morally wrong; but perhaps there are some actions that satisfy enough of the rest of folk wrongness theory to count as 'wrong' in ordinary contexts.

> This only works when one holds 'there are no F's' on the grounds that the things normally taken to be F's aren't really F's. Doesn't work for antirealism about numbers, electrons, composite objects. A typical person who doesn't believe in numbers holds that nothing there is is even *remotely* like a number.

Another sort of answer: the strict and literal interpretation is the **face-value** interpretation.

> The picture: 'there are Fs' gets to be true in ordinary contexts only because its surface form is highly misleading as a guide to the 'logical form' it has in ordinary contexts (i.e. the proposition it expresses in those contexts). Despite its apparent simplicity, 'there are Fs' in ordinary contexts is really very complicated. E.G. perhaps 'there are chairs in the next room' expresses some very complicated counterfactual claim along the lines of 'If I were to have opening-the-door-into-the-next-room sense data, I would have chair-seeing sense data'.

> That's the tradition. But very often, there is no need for a semantic hermeneutic fictionalist to give such complicated analyses. It's often possible to give much simpler ones that do the job by using *operators* attached to the original sentence. E.G. the phenomenalist will analyse 'there are chairs in the next room' (as used in an ordinary context) as 'All actual and possible sense-data are *as if* there are chairs in the next room' or as 'If there were material objects at all, there would be chairs in the next room', or as 'According to the material object fiction, there are chairs in the next room'. (Of course, these operators stand in need of analysis themselves).

In fact, it is often possible to stay even closer to the 'surface form' of the sentence by using non-standard quantifiers. E.G. a phenomenalist might analyse 'there are chairs in the next room' as 'there are* chairs in the next room', where the quantifier 'there are*' is analysed in turn as 'if there were material objects, there would be…' Using this trick, anti-realists can avoid having to depart from the surface form of the problematic sentences.

If we do the analysis like this, we face the question why, given that there are these two meanings for 'there are', and given that it *normally* means 'there are*', we should take it to mean something different when we're doing philosophy. What's special about 'standard' quantifiers as opposed to non-standard ones?

Reduction and ontological commmitment

1. Alston's question

Suppose that the sentence 'The number of people in the room is 2' is a "translation" of, and so means the same as

> S: 'There are x and y such that x and y are both people in the room, and $x \neq y$, and for all z, if z is a person in the room then $z=x$ or $z=y$'.

Far from showing that there aren't any numbers, this shows that 'there are numbers' is an analytic consequence of some claims that don't mention numbers—since 'there are numbers' obviously follows from 'the number of people in the room is 2'. In fact, if a similar account is given of 'The number of things that are not identical to themselves is 0', it is an *analytic truth* that there are numbers!

So what on earth were people (e.g. Russell) thinking when they made these synonymy claims and went on to say things like 'there are no numbers'? Platonism is still platonism if it is combined with some odd views about what is and isn't an analytic truth!

2. A response: it's semantic fictionalism

I say the best way to respond to this question is to distinguish strict contexts from ordinary ones. Talk of "translation" is appropriate, because there are two different languages: the're the language we speak in ordinary contexts and the language we speak in strict contexts (like this one). When we say that 'The number of people in the room is 2' is to be translated as S, we mean that S in strict contexts means what 'The number of people in the room is 2' means in ordinary contexts.

It seems likely that S itself means the same in strict language as in ordinary language. So in ordinary contexts, S is synonymous with 'the number of people in the room is 2', and 'there are numbers' is an analytic truth. But it's certainly not an analytic truth, strictly speaking—maybe it's even false.

Not only do I think that this is the best way to respond to Alston's question, I think that it's what more or less everyone who thought that they could somehow relieve themselves of the need to believe in problematic entities by translating sentences that entail the existence of the entities into sentences that apparentlhy don't had in mind. This goes for Russell, I think; also Quine.

3. Another response

If we refuse to make a distinction between strict contexts and ordinary ones, how else might we respond to Alston?

We might combine our unorthodox view about which entailments *are* analytically valid with an even more unorthodox view about which entailments *are not* analytically valid. That is, we could agree that S analytically entails 'the number of people in the room is 2', but deny that that sentence analytically entails 'there are numbers'.

There is something quite implausible about this, particularly if it is extended to other ordinary number-sentences like 'there are prime numbers between 2 and 12'. The only plausible explanation I can see for the badness of the inference from 'the number of people in the room is 2' to 'there are numbers' involves a contextual shift: even if we started off in an ordinary context, the latter sentence tends to make us adopt a strict one.

(Van Inwagen sometimes writes as if he thinks this is the sort of thing we have to say. Does he really?)

4. A slightly better response

If you were determined not to admit all this talk of different contexts, and wanted to maintain the correctness of the "translations", I think you ought to grant Alston's point: there are numbers, etc.; indeed their existence is generally an analytic truth. What you should say to express your sceptical ontological view is something positive: e.g. that everything there is is concrete. You can also say that no numbers are concrete.

But doesn't it follow from this that there are no numbers? It certainly *seems* to follow; but it doesn't look *quite* as implausible to me to claim that it doesn't really follow as it does to claim that 'there are numbers' doesn't follow from 'there are prime numbers between 2 and 12'.

Analogy: let me introduce you to the word 'superangel' by showing you a systematic way to translate sentences involving 'superangel' into sentences of your old language. The rule is this: a declarative sentence which includes the word 'superangel' is synonymous with the sentence derived by (i) replacing every occurrence of 'superangel' in the original sentence with 'angel', and (ii) writing 'If there were angels, it would be the case that' in front of the whole thing?

So we must agree that 'There are superangels' is true. Nevertheless, we can if we like continue to maintain that there are no angels, and that all superangels are angels.

A would-be antirealist about numbers might want to adopt this as a model for the functioning of words like 'number'. 'Number' doesn't just function as a predicate; its occurrence in a sentence triggers a complicated semantic mechanism. (This fits with Russell's talk of 'contextual definitions' and his emphasis on the analogy between talk about the entities he regards as "logical constructions" and his theory of definite descriptions. So maybe I'm wrong, and this is Russell's real view?)