

Arguing for the Natural Ontological Attitude¹

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In several recent papers, Arthur Fine has developed a far-reaching attack upon both the standard realist interpretations of science and their most prominent anti-realist alternatives (1986a, 1986b, 1986c). In their place, Fine proposes not another position on the realist/anti-realist axis, but an attitude toward science, the "natural ontological attitude" (NOA), which is supposed to remove any felt need for a philosophical interpretation of science.

In this paper I will be concerned with Fine's reasons for adopting NOA rather than his arguments against realism and anti-realism. Unless these reasons are adequate, Fine's papers are likely to set off a scramble for new and better arguments concerning realism, rather than the reorientation of the philosophy of science which his polemics are clearly intended to provoke. Thus for my purposes, we can presume that Fine's criticisms of standard positions are generally sound. The question is whether Fine's proposed alternative attitude can then satisfy the same argumentative standards.

Before we can examine the arguments Fine provides for NOA, we need to note briefly how he argues against various realist and anti-realist positions. This will enable us then to consider briefly what NOA is, and what positions this attitude commits us to. With this groundwork done, we can proceed to consider what arguments Fine can offer for NOA, beyond his criticism of alternative positions.

Although he has other criticisms, Fine's principal objection to the standard explanationist defenses of scientific realism is that they beg the question against the anti-realist. As Fine construes the debates between realists and instrumentalists, the issue is whether any of the epistemic virtues (e.g., explanation, coherence, simplicity) are truth-conferring. Realists typically believe that our best explanations, or perhaps our most coherent theories, are *true*, while instrumentalists counter that these virtues may give us reasons to use theories, but not to believe them. Because of this disagreement, the realist cannot appeal to arguments to the best explanation or arguments from coherence in order to justify the truth of realism, without assuming what is at issue, namely the truth-conferring power of such arguments.² Fine illustrates this with an analogy to metamathematics. A set-theoretic proof of the consistency of set theory gives us no rational reason to accept set theory. Likewise, a realist abduction to realism should not convince an open-minded inquirer.

Fine argues that the various anti-realist views fare no better. Such views either provide an alternative semantics to a realist interpretation of truth (as correspondence to a definite, mind-independent world structure), or else they argue on epistemological grounds that something less than full-blooded belief is an appropriate epistemic attitude toward some or all scientific theories. Fine claims that the views of the truthmongers, as he calls the semantic anti-realists, are deeply incoherent because they must utilize an *unanalyzed* notion of truth in order to render their analysis of truth (e.g., as idealized rational acceptability) intelligible. Epistemological versions of anti-realism (such as empiricism) turn out on Fine's view to be either arbitrary impositions upon scientific practice, or else they, too, are unintelligible. They are arbitrary if they use a philosophically specified distinction between the observable and the unobservable to determine the limits of reasonable belief in the results of science. But if we avoid the charge of arbitrariness by allowing science itself to determine what is observable, as van Fraassen does (1980), then the view becomes unintelligibly circular. We cannot know which parts of science to believe (rather than merely accept as empirically adequate) until we know which phenomena are observable. We cannot know that, however, unless we have reason to believe those parts of science which tell us what is observable.

Fine's conclusion from these various arguments is that we have no rational reason to accept either the inflationary metaphysics of realism, or the inflation of epistemology or semantics which is necessary to substitute an anti-realist alternative.

Fine's deflationary alternative (NOA) seems to incorporate the following four central points:

- 1) science is an historically contingent enterprise, with no essential characteristics;
- 2) scientific practice typically makes extensive *local* use of supposedly philosophical concepts like truth, reality, justification and explanation; these uses are governed by the practical needs of scientists within their social and historical situation;
- 3) the exercise of imagination and especially judgment within the local scientific context is sufficient to settle most issues which arise within the research context (this still leaves considerable room for reasonable disagreement about specific scientific issues, on local grounds);
- 4) there is no justification for overriding local scientific uses of these philosophical concepts on the basis of global philosophical interpretations of their application to science; philosophers should consequently quit looking for the global view of science exemplified by realism or anti-realism.

We can now ask what arguments Fine offers in defense of these claims, and ask whether these arguments are adequate. Clearly much of their support is supposed to derive from the specific arguments Fine has offered against various realisms and anti-realisms. But the need for additional argument should be evident from the programmatic character of NOA. Fine does not merely reject the specific realist and anti-realist positions in the literature. One could conceivably reject all of the available philosophical positions, but still insist that it is important to find more adequate realist or anti-realist alternatives. To adopt NOA is to suggest instead that we stop asking the questions to which these positions were answers, and refuse to look for or accept any other philosophical interpretations of science which would purport to be answers to those questions.

It will be my contention in this paper that Fine himself oscillates uneasily between two distinct strategies of argument for NOA, and that both of these strategies encounter *prima facie* difficulties of the same sort he attributes to realism and anti-realism. I will

then suggest that in the end, one of these strategies offers considerably greater promise for extricating itself from these difficulties than does the other, but that much more work needs to be done to redeem this promise.

Fine most frequently seems to want to recommend a minimalist strategy, which initially seems both appealing and highly plausible. The minimalist strategy emphasizes that NOA is an attitude rather than an alternative philosophical position, and suggests that a more modest sort of argument is appropriate to it. On this approach, the arguments against realism and anti-realism provide a motivation for NOA more than they do an argument for it. There are two stages to the strategy. The first stage is to reiterate the arguments that the various attempts so far to place science within an ontological, epistemological or semantic context have turned out to be arbitrary, unintelligible or questionbegging. The second stage is to note that there do not seem to be any terrible consequences to doing without such interpretations (after all, if the first arguments are right, science has managed quite well so far without any *good* philosophical interpretations of it), and to *ask* us, why not try NOA and see if we can learn to like it. In using this strategy, NOA appeals simply to our judgment as to whether there is any point to continuing to look for a general interpretive framework for science. Against the philosopher who nevertheless insists upon the importance of such a philosophical interpretation of science, NOA has no further *argument* to offer; it can only ask that she reconsider whether such a project really has any point any more. NOA thus treats philosophy in the same way it treats science, and claims on the basis of local, historically situated philosophical judgment that inflationary metaphysics, epistemology or semantics no longer seem to be worth pursuing.

This interpretation of NOA has the advantage of a kind of consistency, and it is explicitly supported in Fine's text (1986b, p. 141n4), but it also looks suspiciously prone to the kind of circularity for which Fine criticized explanationist defenses of realism. Fine is appealing to our local, contextual judgment to argue that only local, contextual judgment is adequate for the assessment of claims about truth, justification and explanation. But the general issue between Fine and both the realists and anti-realists is whether our local, contextual judgment, unbuttressed by further philosophical argument, can give us an adequate understanding of science and the adequacy of its claims. The realist (anti-realist) demands a metaphysical (epistemological or semantic) grounding for our judgment that we should "accept confirmed scientific theories in the same way we accept the evidence of our senses" (1986a, p.127), because she believes that such judgment alone is untrustworthy, and opens the way for an unacceptable relativism or irrationalism. To respond by appealing to the same sort of judgment at a metatheoretical level is to commit the same fallacy which Fine ascribes to the realist, who presupposes the truth-conferring ability of arguments to the best explanation in a metatheoretical argument for the truth-conferring power of arguments to the best explanation in science.

I do not see any clear way out of this difficulty if this is indeed the strategy of argument which Fine is proposing for NOA. It will not help to say that NOA is only an attitude (and therefore presumably it does not require the same sort of argument that a philosophical position would). If it is a reasoned attitude, then the question at stake between its proponents and realists or anti-realists should not be begged. If it is not a reasoned attitude, Fine confirms the worst suspicions of his opponents. Nor will it help to say that this sort of metatheoretical circularity need not be forsworn; such acceptance would rehabilitate realism along with NOA, since a parallel argument provided Fine's principal objection to realism. However initially appealing it may have seemed, the minimalist strategy for motivating NOA fails.

There is an additional difficulty as well. The success of this strategy depends upon whether NOA satisfies the best judgment of those sufficiently knowledgeable to make

reasoned judgments about it. Fine claims that NOA offers a better philosophical approach to science than do its realist and anti-realist opponents. But it seems clear at this point that the reasoned judgment of his peers is not generally in accord: realism or anti-realism still seem to command the allegiance of most philosophers of science. Perhaps more widespread consideration of Fine's papers will change this situation. But unless that happens, NOA's appeal to philosophical judgment seems not to redound to its favor.

Fortunately, the language of the NOA papers sometimes suggests that a less modest and perhaps more promising strategy of argument is being proposed. The "metatheorems" proposed in "Unnatural Attitudes" (Fine 1986c) suggest not an appeal to judgment that the various realisms and anti-realisms are unpromising, but an in principle argument that such interpretations *cannot* work. Such an intention seems also suggested when Fine says that,

NOA tolerates all the differences of opinion that science tolerates, [but] does not tolerate the prescriptions of empiricism or other doctrines that externally limit the commitments of science. (1986b, p. 150)

If the rejection of philosophical interpretations of science were only the outcome of considered judgment, we might expect NOAers to be more tolerant of dissenting judgments.

Fine also gives us an indication of where to look for the sorts of arguments which would justify such intolerance. Its justification is found in anti-essentialist arguments about truth, justification, explanation, and the like. As Fine says,

the antiessentialist aspect of NOA is intended to be very comprehensive, applying to all the concepts used in science, even the concept of truth. Thus NOA is inclined to reject *all* interpretations, theories, construals, pictures, etc., of truth, just as it rejects the special correspondence theory of realism and the acceptance pictures of the truthmongering antirealisms. For the concept of truth is the fundamental semantic concept. Its uses, history, logic, and grammar are sufficiently definite to be partially catalogued, at least for a time. But it cannot be "explained" or given an "account of" without circularity. (1986b, p. 149)

Fine's argument for this is to be found in his various attempts to *show* how such circularity arises in specific attempts to give an account of truth (1986b, p. 139-42; 1986c, p. 169-70), and his suggestion that the import of these arguments is quite general. The basic strategy of Fine's arguments is this: in order to fix the nature of truth (e.g., as idealized rational acceptance), one must presuppose an unanalyzed conception of truth to be applied within the analysis of truth itself. Typically, he argues, this circularity prevents us from ever actually seeing what the proposed analysis of truth tells us. In accounts of truth as idealized rational acceptance, for example,

it looks like what we are called upon to do is to extrapolate from what is the case with regard to actual acceptance behavior to what *would be* the case under the right conditions. But how are we ever to establish what is the case, in order to get this extrapolation going, when that determination itself calls for a prior, successful round of extrapolation? It appears that acceptance locks us into a repeating pattern that involves an endless regress. (1986b, p. 141)

Such an analysis of truth is self-defeating, because if truth needs an analysis, we can never determine what the analysis is.

In making these arguments, Fine accepts that the concept of truth is contextually situated ("the concept of truth is open-ended, growing with the growth of science; ...the significance of the answers to [our questions about truth] is rooted in the practices and logic of truth judging" (1986b, p. 149)), but rejects any *theory* which characterizes truth as contextual. Although Fine does not explicitly develop these arguments, NOA also seems to call for similar treatments of justification (as holistic and pragmatic), explanation (as contextual and pragmatic), and existence (as not a real predicate). Fine would be no more happy with a contextualist theory of justification, which attempted to show how a sentence in question must be related to other sentences and practices in order to count as "justified," than he would with an acceptance theory of truth. Yet what NOA stands for above all is a pragmatic turn to local contexts of use in order to settle any questions which arise concerning supposedly philosophical concepts such as truth, existence, justification or explanation.

The question which these arguments insistently raise is why Fine's own discussions of these philosophical concepts are not themselves the sort of global philosophical interpretations prohibited by NOA. His specific arguments against realism and anti-realism repeatedly aim to expose self-defeating circularities in these positions by turning their accounts of truth, justification and explanation against themselves. If NOA is to be an adequate replacement (or displacement) of these views, it should itself be free of this sort of circularity. Yet it should not be difficult to see where such circularity is likely to manifest itself. NOA develops a distinction between global and local interpretations of scientific practices in order to show (meta-theoretically) that global criticisms or proposed constraints which do not engage specific scientific concerns locally are either arbitrary, unintelligible or questionbegging. The question which naturally arises however, is whether this distinction between global and local criticism is arbitrary, unintelligible or questionbegging.

The problem is that Fine's application of the distinction seems to be based upon global interpretations of fundamental philosophical concepts, of precisely the sort which NOA aims to prohibit. And ironically, his "no-theory" of truth (and *ceteris paribus*, similar discussions of justification, explanation and existence) does for philosophy what NOA says philosophy cannot do for science: it rules out globally and in advance certain kinds of positions and arguments, and does so on the basis of a general conception of what a philosophical account or explanation is. Why aren't all of these claims underlying NOA just more philosophical interpretations which have no local justification within scientific or philosophical practice, and which consequently require NOA to be turned against itself?

It is not hard to see why Fine thinks that his discussions of truth, reality, justification, and explanation are different from realist or anti-realist accounts, and why he calls them "no-theories" (1986c, p. 176-77). The realist demands that scientific theories must have converging ontologies if their terms are to count as genuinely referential; the empiricist limits justification for belief strictly within the bounds of what is observable; the neo-Peircean truthmonger stipulates that we should accept only those beliefs around which an ideally rational consensus might form; and so forth. NOA's philosophical concomitants place no constraints of this sort upon the practice of science, and on Fine's view this restraint is its principal virtue as well as its distinction from other interpretations of philosophical concepts. The question which he needs to answer if NOA is to be viable is why this distinction, between global views which constrain local practice and those which do not, is so important, and in particular, how this distinction rescues NOA from the charges of arbitrariness, unintelligibility, or questionbegging which he believes plague the philosophical views he rejects.

I can see only three possible responses to this question which would be even *prima facie* plausible:

1) Fine could claim that his own global discussions of truth, justification, etc., are of heuristic and/or polemical value only; NOA does not depend upon the acceptance of these views (this, however, would be a return to the first strategy of argument for NOA, which I have already argued is a failure);

2) Fine could claim that his own apparently global discussions of truth, justification, etc., are not really philosophical accounts of the "nature" of truth, explanation, etc.; they are something less than (and also less objectionable than) a philosophical theory, perhaps in a way suggestive of Rorty's distinction between systematic and edifying philosophical projects (Rorty 1979, chapter 8);

3) Fine could accept that his own discussions of truth, justification, etc., are philosophical and global in the same way that realism and anti-realism are, but are preferable because they offer better philosophical accounts of these concepts; what NOA objects to on this reading would not be philosophical interpretation per se, but only bad philosophy.

The prospects for these responses seem to me quite uneven. Having already argued earlier in the paper that the first response faces insuperable problems, I can move directly to the suggestion that Fine is not really offering philosophical accounts of truth, justification, etc. This second response also has two difficulties which must be overcome if it is to be promising. First of all, Fine's views really do seem like philosophical positions. His view that "truth is the fundamental semantical concept" (1986b, p. 149) which all intelligible discourse presupposes, or his implicit view of justification and explanation as inevitably contextual and pragmatic, seem straightforwardly philosophical. They impute a unity to our use of these concepts which derives from their function rather than their content, but this does not seem to make the sort of difference that would challenge their status as philosophical or global. Second, the difficulty would seem to be displaced rather than removed by this ploy. If Fine's views about truth, justification, etc., are to escape NOA's strictures against global philosophical interpretations because his views are not really "philosophical," then we need an account of what justifies this appeal to the boundaries of "philosophy." If NOA were to be anti-essentialist about everything philosophical except "philosophy" (which is taken to be essentially essentialist), the reasoned acceptance of NOA would still depend upon the kind of global philosophical view Fine wants to eschew. This illustrates the intractability here of the more general problem so elegantly displayed in Fine's own arguments against realism and anti-realism. Fine uses a metatheoretical distinction between global and local uses of philosophical concepts to escape the reflexive application of his own thoroughgoing antiessentialism. But this distinction seems vulnerable in any of its possible guises to parallel imputations of unintelligibility, arbitrariness, or questionbegging. Just as Fine doubts that more sophisticated versions of realism or anti-realism are worth pursuing any more, it is not clear how a more sophisticated anti-philosophical NOA would fare any better either.

This leads us to the third response. Here, the argument strategy which is at work in Fine's criticisms of truthmongering anti-realisms would seem an appropriate model for NOA as a thoroughly philosophical anti-essentialism. Fine sketches arguments that begin from the fact that "there is no form of life, however stripped down, which does not trade in truth," and that "the redundancy property of truth makes truth a part of any discourse that merits the name" (1986c, p. 170). To have the general import that this interpretation of NOA would require, these arguments would then need to be developed to show that such use of an unanalyzed notion of truth, which places no constraints on *what* can be true, is a *necessary* condition for "any discourse that merits the name." If

this could be shown, and if similar arguments were developed for the necessity of unanalyzed, contextualized *uses* of (rather than interpretations of) concepts like justification, explanation and existence within the practice of science, then NOA would not be vulnerable to charges of reflexive circularity.

There are, as I noted earlier, parallels for such arguments in Wittgenstein (1953) and Davidson (1984). More recently, Mark Okrent has argued that Richard Rorty's pragmatism also requires such arguments, for similar reasons, in order to justify its own philosophical underpinnings (Okrent, forthcoming).³ Along with Okrent, I believe these are fundamentally transcendental arguments of a very special sort. There is insufficient space to work out the details of such arguments here. But the work of developing such arguments and adapting them to Fine's anti-essentialist philosophy of science is what must be done if NOA is indeed to prove to be "a decent philosophy for post-realist times."

Notes

¹Earlier versions of the argument in this paper were presented to Arthur Fine's NEH Summer Seminar on "The Legacy of Realism" in 1987. I am grateful to Professor Fine and the other participants in the seminar for their comments and criticisms.

²Note that the realist cannot get out of this dilemma by concluding that realism is at least empirically adequate. To say that scientific realism (as a theory purporting to explain the contingent and empirically discovered success of science) is empirically adequate, is simply to deny realism. Realism would be empirically adequate if our scientific theories were empirically adequate. But the latter claim is just a version of anti-realism.

³Okrent characterizes these arguments for pragmatic antiessentialist accounts of meaning, truth and justification as transcendental arguments which attempt to display the necessary conditions for the possibility of a discourse having semantic content. They differ from classically Kantian transcendental arguments in rejecting what Kant calls the Highest Principle of Synthetic Judgment, according to which the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience are also constraints on what can be an *object* of experience. This rejection of the second stage of Kantian transcendental argument aptly suits Fine's discussion of NOA, for Fine similarly wants to claim that the fundamentally philosophical concepts which are constitutive of local scientific practice and discourse place no constraints upon what can count as a real object, as genuine evidence or explanation, or as truth.

References

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