

In Defense of Hermeneutic Fictionalism

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Hermeneutic fictionalism about mathematics maintains that mathematics is not committed to the existence of abstract objects such as numbers are supposed to be. Mathematical sentences are true, but they should not be construed literally. Numbers are just fictions in terms of which we can conveniently describe things which exist. The paper defends Stephen Yablo's hermeneutic fictionalism against an objection proposed by John Burgess and Gideon Rosen. The objection, directed against all forms of nominalism, goes as follows. Nominalism can take either a hermeneutic form and claim that mathematics, when rightly understood, is not committed to existence of abstract objects, or a revolutionary form and claim that mathematics is to be understood literally but is false. The hermeneutic version is said to be untenable because there is no philosophically unbiased linguistic argument to show that mathematics should not be understood literally. Against this I argue that it is wrong to demand that hermeneutic fictionalism should be established solely on the basis of linguistic evidence. In addition, there are reasons to think that hermeneutic fictionalism cannot even be defeated by linguistic arguments alone.