

**AN «ANTI-REALIST PERSPECTIVE»
ON LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, LOGIC
AND THE HISTORY OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY:
AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL DUMMETT**

*(Philosophical Investigations, vol. 19: 1, January 1996,
Blackwell Publishers, pp. 1-33)*

The interview which is here briefly summarized took place on 10 September 1992 at Michael and Anne Dummett's home in Oxford. I must thank Michael Dummett for his patience, and both he and Anne Dummett for their kind hospitality. The following points were discussed:

1. Frege and Wittgenstein.

It is unusual for a philosopher of the analytic tradition to devote most of his work to the study of a particular author. Things are bound to be different when it comes to Frege and Michael Dummett has notoriously taken Frege's work as a starting point for thinking about traditional philosophical questions. He has also claimed to be, up to a certain point in his career, a follower of Wittgenstein and thinks that Wittgenstein's conception of meaning as use was foreshadowed by Frege's conception of the objectivity of sense [*Sinn*].

This naturally leads me to ask the following question: Why is Frege's idea that to know the meaning of a sentence is to know its truth-conditions, as opposed to the conditions of its correct use, a cornerstone of what Dummett calls 'realism'?

Dummett thinks that the answer to this question is related to Frege's opposition to the intrusion of psychology into logic in the following way. If we define a mathematical concept, say the concept of number, in terms of the mental operations needed to grasp the concept, we end up with definitions which may not help us to prove mathematical propositions. In order to fulfill that purpose, the definition of a mathematical term must tell us under which conditions a sentence containing the defined term is true, and so, in Frege's view, objective truth-conditions play a key role in our understanding of these propositions.

2. Inconsistency, Holism, Harmony and Intuitionism.

There is a further question concerning the relation between meaning and use,

which concerns logical laws. How could the idea that meaning is use lead to a revision of the laws of classical logic, e.g. the law of excluded middle? Dummett argues that Wittgenstein's insight does indeed lead to such a rejection and disagrees with Wittgenstein's idea that philosophy cannot alter linguistic practice and that forms of inference do not need justification, something which, at least implicitly, commits Wittgenstein to holism.

The ground for Dummett's position is that there is the possibility of a mismatch between the way we reason deductively and the way we use the conclusions we arrive at by such reasoning. The rules of deductive inference are fixed by the meaning we attach to the logical constants, to expressions such as «not», «and», «or», «if...then» and the like. Classical logicians and intuitionist logicians disagree about what these expressions mean. For instance, they attach different meanings to the negation sign. Dummett thinks, along with intuitionists, that the classical law of double-negation elimination is invalid in that it does not preserve warranted assertibility, and that the conception that either a proposition p or its negation $\text{not-}p$ is determinately true, is deeply mistaken. Although classical logic does not lead to anything as bad as inconsistency, it leads to a disharmony between the different parts and aspects of our linguistic practice. Determinism, as a general conception of states of affairs and as a description of them subject to classical logical laws should be abandoned. The intuitionistic continuum is a better model of physical reality.

3. Austin, Ryle and Carnap.

Wittgenstein's influence inoculated Dummett's thinking from the influence of Austin. Austin thought that the philosophical analysis of ordinary language would dissolve all philosophical problems; Wittgenstein struggled with genuine perplexities. Dummett acknowledges the influence of Gilbert Ryle, especially in that he did not take Carnap's program seriously for a long time, something which I find rather puzzling. Carnap once defended a kind of verifiability theory of meaning where meaning is understood in terms of probabilistic gradual confirmation, and his thinking on testability shares many of the worries with unverifiability and undecidability which motivate anti-realism as Dummett conceives it.

4. Analytic Philosophy, its History and the Priority Thesis.

Dummett thinks that analytic philosophy should now come to terms with its own history. It was originally founded on the so-called "priority thesis", on the idea that the analysis of language is prior to the analysis of thought. There are philosophers like Gareth Evans and Christopher Peacocke who, although they clearly belong to that tradition, nevertheless reject that assumption. Since we cannot identify a particular cluster of positions which all analytic philosophers would hold and which would make them analytic philosophers as opposed to

something else and since, moreover, some of them reject the methodological thesis, how should we identify analytic philosophy? Dummett's answer is that analytic philosophers advocate a compositional semantics which is, in some way or other, Fregean, and that the syntax of the language and thought to which this semantic applies is roughly like that of standard predicate logic.

5. Anti-Realism, Verificationism and the Philosophy of Mind.

It is important, although by no means easy, to distinguish Dummett's anti-realism from verificationism and behaviourism. Many critics think that his anti-realism smacks too much of an old-fashioned positivism. Dummett wishes to distinguish his own position from that of the Vienna Circle by insisting that sentences do not have a meaning independently of their belonging to a language. In stark opposition to Quine, he also wants to hold to the analytic-synthetic distinction. I formulate his position in the following way: the meaning of a statement is determined by justification conditions which may not be construed atomistically.

Given that the realism vs. anti-realism debate is not merely about truth and linguistic understanding, but also about concept formation and mental content, what should an anti-realist position in the philosophy of mind look like? Suppose for instance that, as Gareth Evans has suggested, the sense of a singular *term* is determined by the way his referent is *thought* of (as its referent), so that our analysis of sense proceeds from thought (or from what Evans calls our «epistemic attitudes») to language, and not the other way around. Dummett thinks that the same contrast will appear between an account of these thoughts in terms of truth-conditions on the one hand, and an account of them in terms of justification on the other.

6. Anti-Realism and Ethics.

Should we express moral realism in terms of facts or in terms of values? Should a moral realist claim that there are objective moral facts *which are part of the fabric of the world*, or should he claim that we may discover which values we should promote and which values which should reject and that, when we discover that, *we discover something objective*?

Dummett rejects the idea that ethical anti-realism is akin to subjectivism: justification, whether in mathematics or in ethics, must be an objective matter, a matter of *cognition*.

Fabrice PATAUT
(Paris)