Booknotes

Consider the following propositions:

> 'We can make no sense of there *being* a world that is not apprehended by any mind.'
>
> 'The correct image (of the facts which go to make up the world)... is that of blind explorers encountering objects that spring into existence only as they feel around for them.'
>
> 'When our descriptions have been completely purified, all that we are and can be left with are abstract mathematical models ... what (then) has happened to our ambition to know what things are like in themselves? It is not merely incredible that what there is in itself is a skeletal abstract structure: it does not so much as make sense to say that.'
>
> 'We cannot harmonize what we rightly acknowledge as equally true descriptions; and, in so far as we cannot, we do not truly know even how to characterize our world.'
>
> 'How things are in themselves consists in the way that God apprehends them.'

These are not the pronouncements of a latter day idealist; or if they do constitute a form of idealism in the historical sense, the idealist is none other that Michael Dummett, in his Gifford lectures, now published under the title *Thought and Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

It is important to realise that, as he conceives his position, Dummett takes his metaphysical views to be determined by semantics. They do not follow from any mystical or romantic intuitions, though in some of Dummett's readers they may give rise to some. Much of the present short book is indeed devoted to an outline of Dummett's decades-long struggle against truth-conditional semantics and in favour of what he here calls a justificationist theory of meaning. From the metaphysical perspective, the key point would appear to be that we initially learn our language through learning how to speak and understand sentences whose truth we know how to recognise (and this constitutes our understanding of their meaning); however our linguistic resources

doi:10.1017/S0031819107319074
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819107319074 Published online by Cambridge University Press

then enable us to construct sentences whose truth we have no means of determining and whose truth conditions we are therefore incapable of recognising.

Realism of a universal scope would have it that every sentence we are capable of formulating must have a determinate truth value. But, according to Dummett, semantic analysis gives no warrant to such a belief. Our understanding of what he calls 'inaccessible' statements cannot be analysed in terms of our ability to recognise or determine their truth, for we have no such ability, yet the statements are not meaningless (which distinguishes his position from verificationism about meaning). From these considerations we have to conclude that reality—which we can think about only in language—may itself be indeterminate.

In the lectures Dummett focuses particularly on two aspects of indeterminacy. First, as readers of his article 'Is Time a Continuum of Instants?' (*Philosophy* Vol 75, October 2000, 497–515) will already suspect, Dummett believes that physical magnitudes are irremediably indeterminate, and to insist that they must be precise is itself an unwarranted realist dogma. But very small variations in physical boundary conditions can produce quite big differences in the subsequent state of the system. So determinism must be false. Following on from this, why should every feature of the world be determinate, any more than every feature of a fictional work is determinate? Then, secondly, truth itself may be what he calls cumulative. That is until we (or some other enquirers) have probed and conceptualised them, certain objects or features cannot be said to exist. The point is not that we construct the world, for once we probe we have no control over what we find it to be like, but the 'world is, so to speak, formed from our exploration of it.' The facts which make it up are those which emerge through our conceptualisation of the world.

In his introduction to *Thought and Reality* Dummett says that in his later Dewey lectures he has back-tracked on cumulativity. He no longer wants to say that statements whose truth any suitably placed person might have been in a position to determine lack determinate truth value, so just because statements are progressively found to be true as research advances, truth would not appear to be cumulative. But the central point of the Gifford lectures presumably remains: that the world is constituted through concepts arising out of experience of it. It is because the idealised world-view of physics is too far removed from any experience whatsoever that we should be reluctant to see it as revealing the world as it is in itself.

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And—this is surely a further step—what are we to think of a world which was not experienced and conceptualised at all? There would be a sense in which it had no features at all, if having features follows on from probings by conscious beings. Dummett himself asks 'what would be the difference between God's creating a material universe, in the whole of which there was never any creature able to experience it, and His creating nothing at all?' Furthermore the various descriptions we are able to give of the world do not themselves harmonize, and, as is seen in philosophical discussions of topics like qualia and consciousness, we dismiss elements of these levels at our peril. If we cannot harmonize even our own conceptions, the only sense we could give to a notion such as the world as it is in itself will be through the harmonizing activity of a mind which comprehends the world completely, as it is in itself, the mind of God in other words.

It could not be said that in the brief compass of *Thought and Reality* (less than 120 pages) Dummett has given a full exposition of his metaphysical views, let alone a comprehensive defence of them. One wonders, for example, about the relationship between God's knowledge and our probings. One of dependence of the former on the latter would seem to fit in better with the Dummett's view that we constitute our world (the world) through our exploration of it. But if, as Dummett says in discussing God's changelessness, reality depends on God's knowing it to be as it is, one wonders in what sense it is really our exploring and experiencing which is crucial.

Some will be bewildered and some even dismayed by what they find in *Thought and Reality* and others heartened, not least because of its uncompromising theism. But what is undeniable from any point of view is that in this short book Dummett has opened up some extraordinary and unsuspected lines of thought.

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