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Michael Dummett's most recent book, published originally in Italian in 2001, is something of a survey of the general themes of his philosophical career. It touches on the clarificatory ambitions of philosophy, the centrality to the analytic tradition of the linguistic turn, the importance of Frege to the tradition, the prospects of a global anti-realism, the priority of semantic issues in debates over realism, and the dangers of analytic scientism to a rapprochement between the analytic and continental philosophical traditions. Dummett's views on each of these subjects are broadly repeated from his classic works on anti-realism, Frege and the history of the analytic tradition, and students of Dummett will find here echoes, rather than amplifications, of that more rigorous material -- evocations of famous arguments and views from 'Truth', 'The Reality of the Past', 'The Philosophical Foundations of Intuitionistic Logic', The Logical Basis of Metaphysics and Dummett's interpretative works on Frege. Nor does the book provide much of an update of Dummett's philosophical position. In other work from the period in which this book was originally published, Dummett makes important concessions and restatements of his view with respect to -- for instance -- the knowability principle, or the prospects of an anti-realism about time. Here there are no such subtleties on show.

What does give the present work some novelty for Dummett's general philosophical audience are some of the digressions made along the way -- his discussion of the relationship between philosophy and religion, the role of the philosopher of faith, a rather curious discussion of Gadamer's views on understanding, and sketches of an argument for the existence of God. On the whole, these passages concern the boundaries and possibilities of the analytic tradition, and perhaps the greatest value of the book is as an assessment of Dummett's philosophical position. In this short review, we will look at Dummett's claims regarding the split between the analytic and the continental traditions that he invokes on the issue of language and meaning, and detail some of his thoughts on philosophy's divided house more generally.

In Truth and Other Enigmas, Dummett set out a conception of the analytic tradition that he has generally remained faithful to:

Only with Frege was the proper object of philosophy finally established: namely, first, that the goal of philosophy is the analysis of the structure of thought; secondly, that the study of thought is to be sharply distinguished from the study of the psychological process of thinking; and, finally, that the only proper method
for analysing thought consists in the analysis of language... The acceptance of these three tenets is common to the entire analytical school (458).

Many critics have pointed out that this characterization -- even with Dummett's later elaborations -- fails to distinguish analytic philosophy from, say Derridian deconstruction, and also, as Dummett himself admits, fails to include those analytics (such as Gareth Evans) who invert the explanatory order here. Yet Dummett's credo does pick out the key features of a large and important tract of analytic philosophy that does genuinely differ from almost all continental philosophy. In his earlier texts, Dummett has generally contrasted this Fregean/Russellian analytic tradition with the work of Husserl to make the point; Dummett's recent book instead contrasts it with a Heideggerian/Gadamerian trajectory with respect to language and meaning. In the two or three chapters in which this theme is developed, Dummett does not hide his conviction that the continentals come off rather more poorly in the comparison:

Philosophers of the analytic school accept without cavail that theses about the logical form of sentences or other linguistic expressions are among the proper concerns of philosophy. Those of the type generally termed 'continental' usually have little interest in them... although they may extol language... they do not seek to analyze it or explain its workings (16).

Now this is perhaps a bit too quick; of course, it all depends on what one means by analysis, and this is a topic that both traditions have rung many changes on. The continental tradition does, for instance, encompass decompositional and etymological analyses of concepts and linguistic expressions. Arguably, it is not linguistic analysis, loosely construed, nor the linguistic turn per se, that is absent from the continental tradition, but rather any kind of commitment to the systematic or compositional approach to language inaugurated by Frege and Russell, which has remained influential - - though not always dominant -- within analytic philosophy ever since. Michael Beaney, for instance, suggests that what is distinctive about analytic philosophy is not simply an emphasis upon the importance of analysis, since all philosophers have done and continue to do analysis (including linguistic analysis), but the use of what he calls "transformational analysis" in which everyday language is translated into an ideal language (with the help of logic), before a further analysis of some other (often decompositional) kind.

Arguably, this analytic interest in systematicity extends beyond a commitment to formal or semantic methods in the philosophy of language. Peter Strawson is far from the most formally inclined analytic philosopher, but in Analysis and Metaphysics he talks about our daily linguistic practice, and the job of analytic philosophy, in the following terms:
Just as the... modern grammarian labours to produce a systematic account of the structure of rules which we effortlessly observe in speaking grammatically, so the philosopher labours to produce a systematic account of the general conceptual structure of which our daily practice shows us to have a tacit and unconscious mastery (2).

As David Cooper observes, "the 'linguistic turns' taken on the continent do not permit this vision of philosophical inquiry consisting in, and finding its justification in, systematically rendering explicit rules or principles deemed to be implicitly or unconsciously understood or grasped by speakers" [David Copper, "Analytic and Continental Philosophy", Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society, Vol. 94, 1994, p13.]. Instead, as Cooper notes, there is rather a concern with attending to the background that is presupposed by the operation of any particular rules, the background conditions of inquiry. Apart from Habermas, there are not really any exemplars of such approaches to meaning in continental philosophy; rather, continental work on meaning is hermeneutic, or pragmatic in a fairly non-cognitivist sense. (Unsurprisingly, Chomsky has next to no presence in continental philosophy of language, but a significant role in analytic philosophy, and the situation is close to reversed in regard to the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. It is for related reasons that J. J. Lecercle was moved to comment, in a comparative essay on philosophy of language, that: "All I think I have achieved is to remind you of the existence of the Channel: 'meaning' on one coast, 'sens' on the other are rather different concepts..." J. J. Lecercle, "The Misprision of Pragmatics: Conceptions of Language in Contemporary French Philosophy", Contemporary French Philosophy, ed. A. P. Griffiths, Cambridge: CUP 1987, p.38. In this respect, also see V. Descombes, Objects of All Sorts: A Philosophical Grammar, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1982.)

The question, of course, is which of these approaches is more philosophically useful or insightful, and in this respect Dummett's allegiances are clear. Dummett notes that Gadamer's view, in which language is broadly understood as the expression of meaning (and in which understanding and interpretation are central concepts), means that he must be prepared to apply the concept of truth to art, something that Dummett finds untenable (16): "to concentrate on understanding in this broader sense [instead of linguistic understanding as a kind of knowledge of meaning] is a mistake". Dummett concedes that art may alter our attitudes, enrich our emotional life, even bring us to recognize something as true that we had previously dismissed, "but it does not of itself convey knowledge. Knowledge consists in the apprehension of the truth of propositions... It is therefore only through the analysis of linguistic meaning that we can gain insight into the structure of thought. The structure of thought is the primary concern of philosophy, since it is in thought that we apprehend reality" (17). Such claims of course
reveal still further divisions between the traditions. What does Dummett give to justify this claim? He contends that interpretation and understanding in the Gadamerian sense depends on the fact that sentences have meaning, and it needs to be explained how this is so: "If philosophy is concerned with analyzing the concepts in terms of which we think, it needs as a basis a conspectus of how our words combine to yield meaningful sentences, and thus how our concepts hang together to form fully-fledged thoughts" (17). Of course, for most continental philosophers this is an intellectualist dogma, and the meaning mystery as it is sometimes called -- how do words have meaning -- is not such a puzzle. Are they sticking their heads in the sand, ignoring the semantic core of our language, or is the Dumettian analytic philosopher preoccupied with a philosophical puzzle of little relevance to the world?

Curiously, Dummett also sums up the differences here in terms of philosophical temperament: "From Frege we get sharp, detailed, innovative analysis; from Gadamer, ruminations at a high level of generality. Which approach is found more illuminating is a matter of temperament" (98). This somewhat relativizing remark is perhaps not a settled concession, as Dummett goes on to suggest "[t]here is a space, indeed a need, for philosophical discussion of high-level questions about language; but answers to such questions will be solidly based only if there is, or at least it is possible to construct, a credibly analytic account of how language works" (99).

Dummett patrols other boundaries of the analytic as well; for instance, that between philosophy and the sciences:

Philosophy aims to explore the structure of human thought... The scientifically inclined spurn philosophical reflection so conceived... They replace philosophical explanations with 'naturalised' versions. Such 'naturalised' theories may explain notions to do with meaning in terms that wholly prescind from human use of language in communication; they therefore deny that a theory of meaning need yield an account of a speaker's understanding of linguistic utterances. Or they may explain our having the concepts that we do in terms of their supposed evolutionary advantages. This is not philosophy; but it is not science either. It is the result of the bedazzlement of those who have undertaken one manner of intellectual enquiry by the successes of another. That so many philosophers of the analytic school have suffered this bedazzlement will be an obstacle to a reconciliation between that school and its rivals. (36)

In his conclusion on the future of philosophy, however, Dummett takes a different line on the consequences of scientism for rapprochement between the analytic and the continental: "If the scientism so prevalent within present-day American philosophy is intensified, a breach may open up between present analytic philosophy as practiced in
the US and as practiced in Britain and continental Europe. This in itself may help to bring about rapprochement between European philosophers of different traditions" (150). We might be inclined to ask Dummett which is it?

Dummett's conception of philosophy of course goes beyond mere exploration of the structure of human thought; indeed, his conception of the relationship between metaphysics and the philosophy of language entails that substantive philosophical questions can be settled once linguistic matters are sorted out. Indeed, Dummett expresses a remarkable optimism that philosophical progress will lead to the settling (in the affirmative) of the question of the existence of God:

Can philosophy settle what is surely the most important question of all, whether there are rational grounds for believing in the existence of God? There seems to me every reason to think that it can, and will even do so in the lifetimes of our great grand-children. My own belief is that it can be positively resolved (151).

In this book Dummett does not outline the reasons he has in mind (they would presumably be similar to those he gives in his Gifford Lectures, published as Thought and Reality, and so dependent on Dummett's own general anti-realism). The progressivist attitude here to philosophy would no doubt be found remarkable by many continental philosophers, and indeed many analytic philosophers would also be disinclined to adopt Dummett's optimism.

On the whole, the aspect of this book that seems most puzzling to us is the impression of a man reaching out to the continental tradition without in any way moving his feet. Commenting on the divide, Dummett says, "plainly, the gravest obstacle to communal progress in philosophy is the gulf that has opened up between different traditions" (149). This is a theme that is familiar from other work by Dummett, and there is no reason at all to doubt his sincerity. But why, exactly, is this the gravest obstacle? Why can't analytic philosophy make communal progress without a sustained engagement with its continental (and presumably Asian) other(s)? This is not clear from Dummett's book. And of course, if this is the goal of philosophy for Dummett then there is something problematic about the appeal: most continental philosophers (but also Wittgenstein, Rorty, and many others) simply don't believe in philosophy as communal progress.

Dummett feels that the prospects for reconciliation between analytic philosophy and phenomenology and hermeneutics are better than they were forty years ago (149), and he cites the philosophy of mind as a particularly propitious meeting place (150). To some extent we agree with this sentiment, but the divide Dummett traces in the philosophy of language recurs in the philosophy of mind. In both fields, much of the
analytic tradition is generally committed to a kind of representationalism that coheres well with decompositional analytic projects. In general this is not the case in phenomenology and continental philosophy of mind. Indeed, it is no coincidence that most of those theorists who are broadly anti-representational in their account of our perception and understanding of others (and are wary of folk-psychology) are significantly inspired by at least one of three key phenomenologists: Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. By contrast, in the end of analytic philosophy of mind most closely associated with the cognitive sciences, until recently the idea that one should explain intelligent behavior -- that is informational sensitivity -- by appeal to internal representations had the status of received truth. On this view, the well-springs of intelligence are fundamentally inner mechanisms of inference and discrimination in the brain (Wheeler 2001). Can each take the criticisms of the other seriously, such that this might constitute a mature dialogue between opposing views? Perhaps, but there are many metaphilosophical and methodological differences at stake here, and hence Dummett's hope for communal progress seems to us as far from fruition as ever.