

Michael Dummett

The Nature and Future of Philosophy.

New York: Columbia University Press 2010.

158 pages

US\$69.50 (cloth ISBN 978-0-231-15052-1);

US\$19.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-231-15053-8)

This essay, first published in 2001 in Italian, is more a personal statement than an essay on the nature and future of philosophy. Dummett says how he thinks philosophy should be done and how he would like to see it develop. In particular, he summarizes his views regarding language, thought and the world with sidelong glances at other philosophers' ideas and wrong turns.

In Chapter 1 common apologies for philosophy are discounted in favor of defending the discipline on the grounds that 'thought, without any specialized input from experience, can advance knowledge in unexpected directions' (5). Next, in Chapter 2 ('What is a Philosophical Question?') and Chapter 3 ('Philosophy as the Grammar of Thought'), Dummett nails his flag to the mast. We learn that philosophy 'concerns our view of reality by seeking to clarify the concepts in terms of which we conceive of it, and hence the linguistic expressions by means of which we formulate our conception' (11).

So philosophy is not, as Quine would have it, continuous with 'the most abstract part of science', nor, as Wittgenstein insists, devoted to 'cast[ing] light on what we already know from other sources, enabling us to see it with eyes unclouded by intellectual confusion' (7). Indeed, when we consider how philosophers debate a philosophical question—Dummett discusses 'Does time really pass?' (8-10)—we see that philosophy is from beginning to end a conceptual endeavor.

Philosophical theories are not to be despised. They are to be debated, evaluated and improved, an excellent example being Davidson's theory of adverbs (15). In Dummett's view '[t]he structure of thought is the primary concern of philosophy, since it is in thought that we apprehend reality' (17) and '[p]hilosophers of the analytic school accept without cavil that theses about the logical form of sentences or other linguistic expressions are among the proper concerns of philosophy' (16). (So much for Wittgenstein.)

No doubt science has contributed most to our theory of the world (Chapters 4 and 5). But even budgeting for the 'exceedingly slow' pace of philosophical progress, philosophers are not out of business (22). For one thing, science gives rise to philosophical problems, 'the direction, or arrow, of time' for instance (25). And for another, ethics, political philosophy and questions about 'intention, motive and emotion...can at present still be pursued...without any great need to pay attention to

scientific data' (32). In fact philosophy and science are 'complementary', both being 'engaged in mankind's long quest for the truth' (30). The big danger is that philosophers will 'aim at being, towards science, *plus catholique que le Pape*' (34).

Dummett approaches religion as a believer (Chapter 6). He deprecates the 'fashionable' view that religious faith is not fact-stating (39) and allows that such a conception of religion commits the Christian to recognizing 'apparent incompatibles in tension' (41). This is not fatal, however, quantum mechanics being likewise beset by inner contradictions (28, 41, 45). Since the problem of God's existence is central for 'any philosopher who aims at a comprehensive conception of the nature of reality' (43), Dummett avers, 'the price of denying that God exists is to relinquish the idea that there is such a thing as how reality is in itself' (44). (So much for Quine.)

Unsurprisingly given the level at which Dummett pitches his remarks, he does not go into detail. I would, however, have liked to see more on why 'there is no intrinsic conflict between religion and philosophy as a discipline' (44) and how philosophy, after incorporating God, can discern 'reality...in itself'. It would have been helpful too to have more on what precludes an out-and-out atheistic metaphysics, and on why the seemingly huge differences between the incompatibilities in Christianity and the incompatibilities in quantum mechanics can be safely ignored.

In Chapter 7, 'Morality and Religion', Dummett observes that when it comes to 'advanced religions', there is a 'tight connection between religion and morality' and 'what [such religions] take to be the correct principles of morality...may be challenged by philosophers and others' (47-8). One apparent snag with this is that religion has given and continues to give what for all the world looks like very bad advice -- Dummett cites slavery, torture and capital punishment (46). The saving consideration is that 'a delicate line' can be drawn between actions of the institution and actions that 'flow from its divine founder or come under the protection of the Spirit' (49). This in turn permits Dummett the liberty to upbraid his own Church for its teaching on contraception (48-53).

With Chapters 8-10 we come to what is nearest and dearest to Dummett: Frege's philosophy. In these chapters, in my opinion the best in the book, he presents his interpretation of Frege in short order. He introduces major Fregean themes, and it is especially clear what he finds important in Frege and why, the discussion being unencumbered by qualification. My sole complaint is that there is no recognition of the existence of other interpretations of Frege.

In Chapter 11 Dummett tells the story, familiar from his other work, of Frege's thinking being initially close to Husserl's and of Frege being 'the grandfather of analytical philosophy' (58). In his view Frege was a 'revolutionary innovator' (62) who 'devised the first systematic theory of meaning, which could also be seen as the first systematic analysis of thought' (63). 'These are', Dummett writes, 'fundamental achievements that,

insofar as they are correct, must underlie the rest of philosophy'. While 'Frege's theory of the third realm [of objective thoughts] is, plainly, a piece of philosophical mythology' (83), he is to be honored for his analysis of sentences, for his construction of a theory of meaning, and for having provided a 'perfect example of the linguistic turn' (86).

Whereas in Chapters 8-10 Frege is treated as the fountainhead, in Chapter 11 analytic philosophy is portrayed as having 'a twofold heritage: British, from the work of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, ...and Austrian, from Wittgenstein' (87). This is a welcome counterbalance. The influence of Frege on Wittgenstein, to say nothing of Russell and Moore, has been disputed, and on Dummett's own account Frege became influential only in the 1970s (89). (Dummett modestly fails to mention his own part in securing Frege's place in the canon.) The chief theme of the chapter, however, is that the 'diffuse discussion' of language by the non-analytic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer compares poorly with the sophistication of Frege's 'systematic treatment' (99).

Frege also looms large in the next couple of chapters. In Chapter 12 on 'The Paradox of Analysis', after a longish discussion of Frege's view regarding analysis (102-110), Dummett concludes that the paradox of analysis—that if analysis works, it is trivial and useless—is nothing to worry about, analyses often being hard to come by. And in Chapter 13 on 'Thought and Language' he again comes down in favor of '[t]he classical strategy of analytic philosophy', the object of which is to account for human thought 'through a theory of meaning for language' (119).

In Chapter 14 ('Realism') Dummett suggests that Frege was wrong to insist that every proposition is determinately true or false. If we opt for intuitionism over 'bivalence', we can concede the implausibility of realism about possible objects, matter, scientific posits, numbers and other minds without embracing dubious anti-realist alternatives like phenomenalism and behaviorism (125-126). This is a position Dummett is justly famous for, and he has useful words about the possibility of generalizing 'the intuitionistic theory of meaning to all discourse' (135). He surely overdoes it, however, when he says 'truth conditional theory of meaning—by far the most popular among analytic philosophers—is incoherent' (133).

Next, in Chapter 15 ('Relativism'), Dummett disparages the idea, allegedly espoused by professors of linguistics in Britain, that '[w]ords don't have meanings in *themselves*' (138). He deems this mistaken since '[s]omeone who knows the meaning of a statement must be able to recognize evidence for its truth when he is presented with it' (143) and 'the thesis of relativity of truth is no more than a confusion engendered by a vivid awareness of the variations in the cultures of different times and places, and in the concepts then and there employed' (144). Finally, to round things off, Dummett expresses some views about the future of philosophy, a future he regards as pretty rosy (Chapter 16). If philosophers from different traditions work together, aim for the truth, and keep at it, they can, he declares, settle the great problems, even 'the most important

question of all, whether there are rational grounds for believing in the existence of God' (151).

There are echoes of Dummett's *Origins of Analytic Philosophy* in the present work (he already wavered in the earlier work over who begat analytic philosophy). Still the new book is worth reading. As well as including interesting asides, it is wider in scope than his previous books, less weighed down by scholarly niceties, easier to negotiate and, perhaps most valuable of all, reveals more clearly what lies behind his philosophy.

Andrew Lugg

University of Ottawa