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Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy by Michael Dummett

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## BOOK REVIEWS

tions. He is also inconsistent in informing the reader whether the passage quoted comes from a *Zusatz* in the *Encyclopedia*, although little hangs upon this.

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*The Philosophical Review*, XCIII, No. 3 (July 1984)

*THE INTERPRETATION OF FREGE'S PHILOSOPHY*. By MICHAEL DUMMETT. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981. Pp. vii, 621.

Professor Dummett began this book as an introduction to the second edition of his *Frege: Philosophy of Language (FPL)*. He ends it after 621 pages. The bulk of the work consists of either replies to critics or articulations of views advanced in *FPL*. Thus the book is not self-contained. In its present form, it will be of interest primarily to readers of *FPL* who have a serious historical interest in Frege. Several parts can, however, be read as independent essays or as reviews of others' work.

As its title suggests, the volume concentrates on interpretation and engages less than *FPL* in argument with living philosophers over the truth of views raised or caused by Frege's writings. The reviewer believes that this change strengthens the enterprise. The historical questions are more clearly posed. Although there are numerous places where citation of texts is needed to support unobvious interpretations, the volume contains fairly full documentation and a good index—quite in contrast to the first edition of *FPL*. Partly for these reasons the book evinces a detailed and penetrating construal of Frege's writings that is more impressive, to this reviewer at least, than that of *FPL*.

The book is not attractively written. It is much too long. There is considerable repetition. Its organization is often that of thinking out loud—following out *culs de sac* as fully as main roads. The style of the book is unrelievedly ponderous. There are serious lapses in clarity. Minutiae of disputes with opponents are treated in great detail, and in the main text. This mode of presentation is unfortunate since the book has historical merits that may thereby be the less appreciated.

Before mentioning some of the book's successes, I will briefly discuss one large topic on which I think Dummett's interpretation of Frege is doubtful. Although there have been various salutary qualifications since *FPL*, Dummett still holds that a primary function of sense in Frege's theory is to represent conventional linguistic significance (pp. 86, 103 and *passim*).

The interpretation assimilates Frege's views on language and thought much too much to post-Fregean interests.

The issues here are subtle, however. Dummett is surely right in maintaining, against certain critics, that Frege was a serious philosopher of language (Chapter 3). He is right to point out that Frege emphasized that thoughts (senses of declarative sentences) were communicated through natural language and attributable on objective grounds to others (pp. 53–54), and right to note that Frege held that we think only by means of symbols (p. 50). He is also right to hold that the notion of sense is “related” (pp. 69–70) to those of meaning and understanding, and even to conventional significance.

But relations are cheap, and these are not straightforward. Frege explicitly gives sense three primary roles: mode of presentation in thought, determiner of *Bedeutung*, and *Bedeutung* in oblique contexts. The first-mentioned role was fundamental (cf. ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’). As I have argued in detail elsewhere, none of these roles is logically equivalent to, or even extensionally coincident with, conventional significance (or with linguistic meaning, unless the relevant language were, unlike actual natural languages, ideal for expressing thought)<sup>1</sup>. Frege connects sense with understanding when he writes (*ibid.*) that the sense of an expression is what everyone sufficiently familiar with “the language” understands. But he immediately qualifies that statement by excepting expressions in natural language that are in relevant respects not ideal for the expression of thought. Senses are thought components that are expressed only more or less well by natural language. With these remarks as background, I will criticize some of Dummett's points that derive from his construal of sense as conventional significance.

It does not, as Dummett assumes, follow from Frege's view that we think in, or by means of, some language, that to grasp a thought is to understand a sentence (p. 80). A sentence is, for Frege, a psychologically necessary means of grasping a thought. But if a sentence imperfectly expresses a thought, understanding the (conventional significance of the) sentence will not be the same as thinking a thought, even if a thought is thought by means of the sentence. There is evidence, both early and late, that Frege made use of this distinction.<sup>2</sup> Thus there arises a problem, which Frege

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<sup>1</sup>Cf., my “Belief De Re,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977), Section IV; “Sinning Against Frege,” *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), pp. 398–432; and “Frege on Extensions of Concepts, from 1884 to 1903,” *The Philosophical Review* 93 No. 1 (1984), pp. 3–12, 30–34.

<sup>2</sup>*Begriffsschrift (B)*, in *Frege and Gödel*, Van Heijenoort, ed. (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 70; *Posthumous Writings (PW)*, Hermes, Kam-

never deals with in detail, about how one thinks by means of a language imperfectly suited to thought. What is clear, I think, is that Frege regarded sense as what would be expressed by a perfect language, not necessarily what is conventionally expressed in natural language. (Dummett makes this very point (p. 32), but does not, I think, follow out its implications.) Features of natural language that exhibit what Frege considered imperfections, such as vagueness and token-reflexivity, will be cases where sense is not even co-extensive with conventional significance, and where Frege has no primary interest in conventional significance.

It is at least misleading to claim (pp. 39, 54) that Frege's views on thought and language "almost inexorably" lead to the view that an account of language does not presuppose an account of thought. "Accounts" of thought and language proceed in tandem for Frege, as Dummett emphasizes. Consideration of actual language use was, for Frege, essential to analyzing thought structures. But Frege's notion of thought (where thoughts purportedly are nonlinguistic entities) provided a norm by reference to which he judged and accounted for actual uses of language (cf. e.g., *PW*, pp. 33–35, 259, 266). Indeed, Frege writes, rather vaguely, that thinking is not derived from speaking but has "priority" (*ibid.*, pp. 269–270; compare *ibid.*, p. 259; *B*, p. 70).

The view of sense as conventional significance distorts the discussion of token reflexives. In *FPL* (pp. 384–400), Dummett interpreted Frege's remarks on token reflexives in 'The Thought' as indicating that Frege was "at least toying with" abandoning the application of the sense-reference distinction to occurrences of indexical expressions: sentences express the same thought if and only if counterpart indexicals in the sentences have the same referents and counterpart nonindexical expressions in the sentences have the same senses. Dummett still regards these interpretations as defensible (pp. 106–107). They seem thoroughly implausible. Frege announces no restriction on his sense-reference distinction, and writes in the same essay that thoughts are truth-bearers that are the senses of sentences. (cf. also *PW* pp. 129–135).

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bartel, Kaulbach, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 34–35, 208–211, 222; *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, Austin trans., (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. vii; *Philosophical and Mathematic Correspondence*, Gabriel, Hermes, Kambartel, Thiel, Veraart, eds.; Kaal trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 36, 68; *On the Foundations of Geometry and Formal Theories of Arithmetic*, Kluge trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 59–61, 107–108. Dummett cites the second passage from *Posthumous Writings*, but suggests that it represents a clarification late in Frege's career (1914) of a conflation (p. 367). I think that this criticism of Frege is not well grounded. The 1914 viewpoint on explication is implicit in numerous passages that I have not cited.

The problem stems from construing sense as conventional significance. Dummett goes as far as to criticize Frege for running together the conception of sense as mode of presentation and the conception of sense as conventional significance (pp. 103, 86, 126–128, 142–144). I think that there is no firm basis for this criticism. The construal of sense as conventional significance also mars discussions of Frege's views on embedded oblique contexts (pp. 91–99) and on explicatory definition (pp. 366–367). But I shall have to pass over these.

By way of contrast, there is one respect in which Dummett seems to overplay Frege's distinction between natural language and ideal language. He claims that Frege did not intend his own observations concerning those features of natural language, such as vagueness, that he regarded as defects to be fully coherent: "if they were, Frege would have shown such features not to be defects, but, at worst, inconveniences" (pp. 32–33, 34–35, 134, 316). Dummett provides no textual support for this claim, and it certainly appears to be an overschematization of Frege's views.

There are other issues, nearly comparable in magnitude to the one regarding the function of sense, on which I find Dummett's interpretations unpersuasive. But I will turn now to a catalog, with minimal discussion, of what I regard as some of the book's successes. Much of the book's value stems from Dummett's careful defense of fairly common interpretations from a spate of recent, peculiar misreadings. Although, in my view, Dummett concedes far too much to his opponents, he is surely correct to hold that Frege's realism is consistent with his recognition that names may lack a referent (pp. 128–144). The defense of the orthodox view that the notion of *Bedeutung* includes the name/bearer relation is decisive (p. 152 ff.). There is a well-put criticism of attempts to interpret Frege's ontology in terms of the traditional notions of facts, properties, particulars and universals (pp. 169–181). Dummett's negative assessment of recent claims that Frege's uses of the term '*wirklich*' reveal a nonrealist attitude toward abstract objects is thorough and sound (pp. 354–359, 387–397, 516–523, 601–602). The evidence adduced by others to support the claim that Frege was, in his mature work, a Kantian transcendental idealist is considered in detail and shown to be thin.

Dummett's defense of the view that Frege was not clearly or strictly speaking a descriptive theorist about the reference of names is surely correct (p. 188ff.). I think, however, that he does not acknowledge the significance of Frege's insistence, in 'The Thought', that a sentence must be "complete in every respect" to express a thought, a point that I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> There is a fine explication (Chapter 8) of Frege's

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<sup>3</sup>"Sinning Against Frege," op. cit., pp. 423–432.

insight into the functional character of concepts. As Dummett admits, the insight is underplayed in *FPL*. I think that pursuing the insight suggests that in *FPL* Dummett overestimated the significance of Frege's taking truth values to be objects. Dummett's discussion (Chapter 14) of Frege's view of definition is very worthwhile, despite what I consider insufficient emphasis on Frege's rationalism (cf. note 1).<sup>4</sup> The use of the distinction between analysis and decomposition (Chapters 15–16) to sort out Frege's remarks on the multi-analyzability of sentences and the structure of thoughts is a genuine historical advance. There are some thought-provoking reflections on the notorious Section 10 of *Basic Laws* (pp. 402–424). Dummett's discussion (Chapter 19) of the exquisitely difficult question regarding the role of the context principles in Frege's work after 1884, a question Dummett first made interesting in *FPL*, contains many insights. I do not find the account satisfying, partly because of the great weight, noted earlier, that Dummett rests on Frege's view that truth values are objects. But perhaps there is no satisfying account.

As this brief survey may indicate, the book contains a wealth of valuable discussion of important issues in the interpretation of Frege. In spite of its serious stylistic weaknesses and its rather anachronistic treatment of the notion of sense, the book presents a detailed, broad, sane, and deeply considered reading.

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*REMARKS ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY*. By LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN. Volume I. Edited by G. E. M. ANSCOMBE and G. H. VON WRIGHT. Translated by G. E. M. ANSCOMBE. Volume II. Edited by G. H. VON WRIGHT and HEIKKI NYMAN. Translated by C. G. LUCKHARDT and M. A. E. AUE. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Volume I, pp. vi + 218 + 198<sup>e</sup>. Volume II, pp. iv + 143 + 121<sup>e</sup>.

What was published as part I of *Philosophical Investigations* had been completed in 1945, and from mid-1946 to mid-1949 Wittgenstein wrote

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<sup>4</sup>Dummett says that he knows of but one passage in Frege that suggests the Russell-Wittgenstein view that definition is incomplete until it arrives at simples (pp. 256–257). There is at least one other—*Kleine Schriften*, Angelelli, ed., (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), p. 104. Still, I think that Dummett is right to represent this view as having less prominence in Frege than in his successors.