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Philosophical Doubts and Religious Certainties

An Interview with Michael Dummett

Michael Dummett, Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford University, is one of the leading British philosophers of language, mathematics and logic. Apart from two major studies of the German thinker Gottlob Frege (1848-1925), Frege: the Philosophy of Language (1973) and The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy (1980), he has published a range of books and articles, including numerous papers on the central problems of philosophical logic. Some of these are collected in his Truth and Other Enigmas (1978). He is also well-known for his campaigning work outside philosophy, especially for his association with groups opposed to racial discrimination.

Cogito: Professor Dummett, it might seem strange to begin by asking you about the work of another philosopher, but since you have devoted so much time and attention to the work of Frege, perhaps you could tell us whether you have seen your role primarily as explaining Frege's views or as using them as a vehicle for the communication of your own philosophical doctrines?

Professor Dummett: Well, it turned out to be both really. My original intention was to explore Frege's views because they seemed highly relevant to the current discussions within analytical philosophy. He was, of course, the grandfather of analytical philosophy, and it is striking how many of his concerns are still live ones. He speaks to modern philosophers in a way that's quite unusual, so that exposition seemed, in the first instance, precisely what was needed. But some of the issues he raised were not fully dealt with by him, and I suppose that in considering them further I put forward views of my own. That was not my original purpose. When I started writing about Frege he was still rather neglected. People knew him as a source for Wittgenstein, and in connection with Russell, but he wasn't then — as I think he is now — essential reading for anybody studying analytical philosophy. It was part of my purpose to make him so.

Cogito: Could you enumerate for our readers some of Frege's most important

concerns.

Professor Dummett: The fundamental idea for Frege was that the contents of what are now called "propositional attitudes" — that is, things that are believed or known — which he called 'thoughts', are not *mental* contents. They are not ingredients of the stream of consciousness. Such ingredients are things that are purely subjective: mental images, sensations, feelings, and so forth. By 'thoughts', Frege means not particular acts of thinking but the contents of those acts; and these contents are objective, that is, common to all. One person can think, or consider, or deny just that very same thought which somebody else asserts. Frege made a sharp division between the subjective, which cannot be fully communicated, and the objective, which being independent of any particular mind must, Frege believed, exist independently of being grasped or thought about.

Cogito: This would seem to mark a sharp contrast between Frege and the school of Hegelian Idealism.

Professor Dummett: Yes of course, enormously sharp. But the doctrine as I have just explained it remains a purely negative one. It just tells you that a thought should not be characterised in terms of mental operations. The question which then arises is 'In what terms *should* a thought be characterised?' There is an

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