

## Theories of Meaning, Part II: Philosophical Logic.

Lecture IV, McDowell on Dummett on Davidson on Theories of Meaning, 9th February.

Christopher J. Masterman (cm789@cam.ac.uk, christophermasterman.com)

Let's first get clear on what we have covered so far. In Lecture I, we looked at classical semantics theories—theories which posit the meaning of expressions as a particular kind of entity, e.g., referent, intension, propositions, and so on. We then discussed Davidson's objection to such theories, i.e., they are fundamentally uninformative, as well as being out of step with how we plausibly *know* our language.

Davidson's alternative is a theory of truth, Tarski-style, as a theory of meaning. In Lecture II, we looked at a variety of internal problems one faces in articulating such a theory of meaning—finding the right constraints so such a theory is interpretive and interpretive for enough natural language. Then, in Lecture III, we looked at Dummett's rejection of Davidsonian theories of meaning, and, more broadly, *modest* theories of meaning.

For Dummett, theories of meaning should be *full-blooded*—they should not 'take as already given any notions a grasp of which is possible only for a language-speaker' (Dummett, 1991: 13). Theories of meaning are supposed to tell us the (implicit) knowledge which constitutes linguistic understanding. We cannot presuppose such knowledge. This week, we'll look at John McDowell's influential response to Dummett.

### 1. McDowell on Modesty vs. Full-bloodedness

1.1. McDowell begins in (McDowell, 1997) by cautioning against the 'merely pedagogical' reading of Dummett's objection. Dummett's objection to a modest theory of meaning is not that it cannot be *used* to impart an understanding of the language to someone without trading on a prior understanding of another language. Rather Dummett's objection stems from a condition he imposes on any proper theory of meaning: any such theory should detail the practice of using words in that language—what is mastered by someone who understands the language—and crucially it should do so without a presupposing significant semantic notions.

1.2. To be concrete, think back to what Davidson expected an appropriately constrained truth theory to tell us. The thought there was, given truth theory *T*, we could, under suitable constraints, arrive at verdicts like:

(M) 'Snow is white' *means that* snow is white

As McDowell phrases it, *T* achieves a set of 'entitlements' which are 'stronger than what the theory actually says' (1997: 107). That is, a series of statements like (M), delineating what the significant parts of the relevant language mean. Dummett's objection is that any proper theory of meaning should not presuppose notions represented by '*...means that...*' or '*...expresses the thought that...*', and so on. That is:

Dummett's conviction is that a properly illuminating account of language must describe what is in fact a practice of thought-expression, but in other terms; then we can say that the description spells out what it is in virtue of which the practice is the practice of thought-expression that it is (1997: 108)

A proper theory of meaning must account of meaning *from outside* of language—without access to notions like *means that*, or *expresses the thought that*: 'from outside of the very idea of expressing thoughts'.

### 2. McDowell's Initial Doubts

2.1. Of course, a modest theory of meaning is only insufficient if the alternative, a full-blooded theory, is at all possible. McDowell raises two doubts about the feasibility of full-blooded theories of meaning.

2.2. Dummett holds—as is plausible—that an adequate theory of meaning should be assessed on whether it ‘gives an intelligible description of a practice engaged in by rational agents’. It is not merely a theory with strong predictive power, but one which *makes sense* of rational activity. However, McDowell doubts that such an aim can be carried out if we also insist that any proper theory of meaning should refrain from employing semantic concepts *at all*:

Now on the face of it, our capacity for rational understanding gets its grip on linguistic behaviour precisely under descriptions of the sort Dummett disallows. We make rational sense of ourselves and others as saying that ... asking whether ... and so forth. (1997: 110)

Making activity rationally intelligible without semantic notions? McDowell is sceptical: if rational understanding is required, eschewing semantic notions entirely does not point the way ‘to deeper understanding’, but merely ensures that this requirement on an adequate theory of meaning cannot be met (1997: 110). One might push back, focusing instead on some non-semantic patterns which rational activity displays. Here, McDowell is just raising a *doubt*. But there’s more that McDowell has to say against Dummett’s constraint on a theory of meaning, this time stemming from Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following.

2.3. A general upshot from Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following is that, given any pattern to which some stretch of linguistic action appears to conform, there are always other distinct patterns to which that the same linguistic action equally well conforms, e.g., Wittgenstein’s example of writing out the number series 2, 4, 6, ..., 998, 1000 and continuing after 1000 with 1004, 1008, ..., rather than 1002, 1004, ..., and so on.

2.4. What Dummett requires is some account—a description—of a linguistic act that does not presuppose semantic notions which can be taken to say what that linguistic act consists in. This account must fit the linguistic act into some pattern—such linguistic action must conform to that pattern. Just as with numbers, so too with the patterns of how words are used. The general point: there are equally adequate, yet competing ways of making linguistic action rationally intelligible by subsuming it into a pattern.

2.5. McDowell thinks that this general Wittgensteinian point rules out the kind of description Dummett requires—a description of a linguistic act which appeals to no semantic notions and which can be taken to say what that linguistic act consists in, all the while making such an act rationally intelligible. Any such description will not ensure that the meaning understood by competent speakers of the language lies ‘open to view in the use they make of it’, rather such a description will be only hypothetised. Crucially, McDowell does think that there are *other* patterns, or descriptions, to which linguistic acts can be said to conform and those descriptions should not be treated as mere hypotheses—but those will be given *using semantic notions*. In the case of the number series, something like ‘obeying the instruction to go on adding 2’ (1997: 112).

2.6. There’s a lot going on here. At this point, is perhaps easiest to understand McDowell’s criticism of Dummett’s rejection of modesty as the claim that the following three ideas are jointly unsatisfiable:

- (1) **Full-bloodedness**: any adequate theory of meaning should not employ semantic notions.
- (2) **Anti-Psychologism**: denying that ‘the significance of others’ utterances is a subject for guesswork ... as to how things are in a private sphere concealed behind their behaviour’ (McDowell, 1981: 225)
- (3) **Intelligibility**: at least one aim of a theory of meaning is to make intelligible linguistic action, i.e., make clear, or conceptualise, what it is that users of the language are doing with their language.

Dummett accepts (1)–(3). However, McDowell understands the general upshot from Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following to be that if a theory of meaning issues descriptions to satisfy (3), whilst also satisfying

(1), then such a theory of meaning offers only a hypothesis about the description or pattern to which linguistic action conforms. However, the significance of others' utterances is *not* subject to hypotheses: it should be considered 'open to view', i.e., (2). To think otherwise is to revert to psychologism.

2.7. The lesson McDowell draws from this discussion is that we should reject (1). But why not deny (2) or (3)? We won't discuss this here at length, but it is worth asking what's so bad about psychologism? One core motivation for anti-psychologism is precisely the kind of Wittgensteinian rule-following considerations applied to linguistic norms which we discussed above. Generally, McDowell takes these to warrant a rejection of a faulty view of language in which content is hidden away and accessed only by inference, see (Thornton, 2019: Chp. 1). Alternatively, one may reject (3). For instance, according to Quine we can secure a notion of meaning—stimulus meaning—but this is a far cry from the rich notion of meaning required to make intelligible linguistic action, see (Quine, 1960). Of course, if one were persuaded by Quinean worries about the alternative rich notion, then it would be open to dismiss (3). We won't discuss that in detail here.

### 3. Perception and Meaning

3.1. McDowell makes a key distinctive move in his rejection of psychologism which makes the difference between him and Dummett stark. For McDowell, meaning is not hidden in some private sphere requiring hypothesising because meaning is not hidden *at all*. Initially, this is stated rather cryptically:

In real life, at least in some cases, it can be much better than a mere hypothesis for me that someone is not engaged on a pattern that goes on '..., 1000, 1004, 1008, ...'. I can know that she will not go on like that .... because in such cases I know that what she is doing warrants a description at the level of 'obeying the instruction to add 2'. I have the knowledge I do of the pattern to which the behaviour conforms ... as described in terms that function below the level of that description, only derivatively from my knowledge that that description applies.

More concretely, McDowell is claiming here that one knows that some linguistic action fits into a *semantic* description *S* and that one also may know that such linguistic action fits into a *non-semantic* description, 'below the level of that description', e.g., in terms of behaviour *B*. Crucially, however, my knowing that the linguistic action fits *B* is secondary—it is derivative from my knowledge of *S*.

3.2. This distinctive move from McDowell is often summarised as the idea that we have a special kind of *perceptual access* to meaning, provided it is presented to us in a familiar language. Crucially, this should not be understood to be merely a *phenomenological* claim. That is, the claim is not only that there is a distinctive phenomenology associated with experiencing linguistic performances in a familiar language. (*This* claim alone is rather uninteresting.) Importantly, the idea here has an epistemic dimension: understanding of a language affords us an ability to directly comprehend language as it is presented to us.

3.3. This learned capacity is not just the development of cognitive shortcuts which bypass more laboured and explicit reasoning which may be employed by those less familiar with the language. Of course,

Someone *could* arrive at judgements as to how a letter-string is to be pronounced by arguing explicitly from which letters occur in which order, against the background of an orthography [set of conventions] for the script in which the string is written (1997: 115)

Rather, in understanding a language, on McDowell's picture, one:

...acquires cognitive machinery that directly induces propensities to make judgements that could be reached in that way: 'directly' in the sense that one does not need to judge on the basis of those ... [explicit considerations] ... although for someone else they might figure in explicit groundings for those judgements.

3.4. For McDowell, what is fundamentally wrong about a full-blooded theory—and the requirement that any adequate theory of meaning be full-blooded—is that it fails to do justice to the phenomenological and epistemological leap involved in learning a language. This insight all stems from Wittgensteinian considerations and aims to do full justice to a rejection of psychologism.

We ought not to conclude that, for all we know, other people's behaviour may suddenly cease to conform to patterns we can comprehend, in such a way that their previous apparent intelligibility would come to seem an illusion. We do know that that will not happen. But our right to the conviction that it will not happen is anchored upwards, so to speak, in our right to take one another at face value; it is not something we have independently, on which our right to take one another at face value can be founded (1981: 242–243)

That is: comprehending action as linguistic and contentful is *given to us directly*—it is part and parcel of linguistic understanding. Comprehending others is not the reverse, grounded in our recognition of non-semantic facts which fit some non-semantic description. The requirement of full-bloodedness is ultimately rooted in a faulty upside down conception of language.

## References

- Dummett, Michael (1991). *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- McDowell, John (1981). Anti-Realism and the Epistemology of Understanding. In: *Meaning and Understanding*. Ed. by Herman Parret and Jacques Bouveresse. W. De Gruyter, 225–248.
- McDowell, John (1997). Another Plea for Modesty. In: *Language, Thought, and Logic: Essays in Honour of Michael Dummett*. Ed. by Richard G. Heck. Oxford University Press.
- Quine, W. V. O. (1960). *Word and Object*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.
- Thornton, Tim (2019). *John McDowell (2nd edition)*. Routledge.