Metaphysics // Fall 2024

Handout 14

Common sense and physics: Dummett

The problem stated. Dummett follows Ayer in asking: how can we reconcile the common-sense view of the world with the scientific conception of it? The question is, in other words, about the relation between physical objects and common-sense (perceptible) objects. Ayer himself favours the idea physical objects—namely, particles—are small parts of perceptible objects. Further, this entails a distinction between physical properties and perceptible properties. The latter are, strictly speaking, illusory. Physics falsifies naive realism, so that coloured tables are not really coloured, as they are composed of colourless particles, and physical surfaces are not really continuous. Though the original question was about the science/common-sense relation, we now see that at bottom there is a question about how objects are in themselves, independent of our perception of them.

Realism and reductionism. Ayer's view is a 'realism' about physical objects, but what is realism? There are in fact two different issues to distinguish between. Faced with a class $\mathfrak{S}$ of statements, one may ask, first, whether they are true in virtue of the statements of some other class $\mathfrak{S}'$. This is the question of reductionism (but Dummett will later define reductionism a bit differently). The question of realism, properly understood, is when one asks whether bivalence holds for $\mathfrak{S}$-statements.

Question 1. How does Dummett show that this second question is the right way to characterise realism?

In particular, one may be a sophisticated realist about $\mathfrak{S}$-statements and claim that bivalence holds for them, though they also have a reductive class $\mathfrak{S}'$. One may also be a naive realist about $\mathfrak{S}$ whereby one claims bivalence and rejects the existence of a reductive class. Correspondingly, there are positions of reductive anti-realism and 'outright' anti-realism.

Question 2. Give examples from philosophical debates illustrating the four possibilities.

Reductive anti-realism is not reductionism, since on the latter position, as Dummett understands it, there must actually be a procedure for translating $\mathfrak{S}$-statements into $\mathfrak{S}'$-statements. Ayer, for example, accepts the reductive thesis about material objects, but rejects reductionism. This makes him a sophisticated realist.

Things in themselves. Dummett makes this arresting statement:

> For there to be a world—that is, an external environment—that we all inhabit, there must be a distinction between how things appear to one person and how they actually are.

It is interesting to reconstruct precisely the general philosophical reasons for making it. In any case, the distinction may rest on two very different grounds. One is illusion: our perceptual abilities get us in touch with observable qualities, but not necessarily with observational qualities. Such mistakes may be corrected.

Question 3. Spell out the example of twinkling stars.

Question 4. What is the purpose of the example of etiquette?

But even after all the mistakes have been corrected, another distinction remains, and it is between the absolute and the relative descriptions of the world. A relative description might not contain any mistake. Nevertheless for 'practical purposes' and in 'reflective moods' we may prefer an absolute description, and that is what science is supposed to deliver.

Importantly, absolute descriptions need not contradict relative descriptions, if by that we understand that an absolute description entails a claim about a mistake contained in a relative description. Thus there need be no contradiction between scientific theories and commonsensical claims, specifically claims about colour. When Ayer worries about the disappearance of colour in scientific theories, he is confused. The question should be about the existence of a reductive class $\mathfrak{S}'$ and the explanatory ground of the truth values of $\mathfrak{S}$-statements, and not about the bivalence of $\mathfrak{S}$-statements. Modern physics is not committed to denying that material objects are coloured.

The nature of common sense. Unproblematically, common sense may be a body of views dominant 17
in the particular culture. Moreover, this domination does not mean that people in that culture hold
commonsensical beliefs true. They only need to think and act *as if* these beliefs are true. 18

Dummett cites approvingly the remark that ‘ common sense always lags behind scientific theory ’. 18
This entails that common sense is not static, that it changes following a scientific change, though with a lag. Then it is unclear what authority we can claim for common sense.

… …

YSB