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The Concrete–Abstract Distinction

5.1 David Lewis’ four ‘ways’

Dummett’s early critique of nominalism is seriously compromised by his renunciation of the thesis that the context principle is sufficient to guarantee reference for abstract singular terms. Once he has abandoned a strong reading of the context principle, in fact, Dummett’s strategy to derive answers to traditional epistemological and metaphysical problems through the theory of meaning appears to be placed in question. By acknowledging that the identification of an extra-linguistic referent is an essential component of the determination of the truth-conditions of a sentence containing a singular term, Dummett is led to ascribe a privileged status to the model of meaning for concrete singular terms and to place a greater emphasis on the problem of our epistemological access to concrete particulars. The question of the extent to which it is possible to provide an account of identifying knowledge of abstract objects modelled on the case of concrete objects, moreover, raises difficult questions concerning the metaphysical problem of the distinction between concrete and abstract entities. In this section I will explore these themes in the context of David Lewis’ account of the four ‘ways’ in which we can maintain the concrete–abstract distinction.

Dummett’s concession that the context principle cannot give a ‘knockdown’ demonstration of a suspicious attitude towards abstract objects is, as we saw in the previous chapter, a consequence of his increased emphasis upon the name/bearer prototype as an essential component of the notion of reference. This increased emphasis is concomitant with a significantly revised account of our knowledge of objects. Although Dummett maintains the rhetoric of his critique of epistemological atomism, his commitment to the centrality of the name/bearer
prototype leads him to propound an account in which the role played by singular terms in sentences is no longer sufficient to explain their sense and reference, but must be supplemented by the notion of ‘identifying knowledge’ as it relates to constituents of mind-independent extra-linguistic reality. Consistent with this shift, Dummett’s work of the early 1970s tends towards a privileging of the model of meaning for concrete singular terms over their abstract counterparts insofar as these can more straightforwardly be accounted for in a standard epistemological framework involving reference to the extra-linguistic mind-independent realm.

Dummett’s account of concrete singular terms in Frege: Philosophy of Language asserts that the privileged way that concrete objects can be identified is by means of an ostensive gesture accompanied by the use of a demonstrative. As Dummett retrospectively describes his own project, the strategy is now to assess the extent to which we are justified in extending the notion of identifying the bearer of a name to abstract objects, so at least ‘some content can be given to it’ (1976, p. 84). The revised account of the model of meaning for abstract objects given by Dummett in Frege: Philosophy of Language accordingly involves a shift in emphasis away from the context principle towards the question of the possibility of upholding a clear distinction between concrete and abstract objects through an investigation of the transferability to abstract singular terms of a model for the meaning of proper names ‘in the more usual sense’ (1973a, p. 671), where this means names denoting concrete objects. While Dummett himself ultimately rejects the possibility of maintaining a clear distinction, one might legitimately wonder whether this problem can be adequately approached from a perspective in which metaphysical notions, of which the distinction itself would seem to be an example, are based on considerations derived from the philosophy of language. At this point, then, Dummett’s whole methodological approach, of which the case of abstract objects could be considered an important case study, is placed into question.

David Lewis, in his On the Plurality of Worlds (1986), describes Dummett’s approach to the concrete–abstract distinction as ‘the way of naming’. What ‘the way of naming’ attempts, Lewis suggests, is to give an account ‘in which the distinction between abstract and concrete entities is drawn in terms of how we could understand their names’ (1986, p. 82). From the point of view of Lewis, who questions the assumption that we can derive answers to metaphysical problems through meaning-theoretic considerations, such an approach is singularly unexplanatory. According to Lewis, even if it is the case that the