

# MEANING AND INTERPRETATION



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## Conceptual structure

*John Campbell*

In *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy* Dummett characterizes the 'basic tenet' of analytical philosophy as '(i) an account of language does not presuppose an account of thought, (ii) an account of language yields an account of thought, and (iii) there is no other adequate means by which an account of thought may be given.'<sup>1</sup> I want to consider the account which an analytical philosopher gives of a fundamental problem: namely, to explain why a grasp of the truth condition of a thought requires a grasp of its conceptual structure.

Why do we have such difficulty with the idea of, as it were, a *blank* apprehension of the truth condition of a thought; one which does not involve a grasp of the way its structure fixes its truth value? One may grasp a thought by, for example, knowing which thing is in question and which property it is conceived to have. Why could one not, *without* this grasp of structure, know the condition for it to be true? I want to begin by briefly commenting on the way in which an analytical philosopher might approach this question.

The notions of *truth* and *structure* play key roles in Davidson's communication-theoretic approach to thought; let us consider how they are connected. We may remark first that possession of a concept in general requires one to grasp a range of related ideas

<sup>1</sup> M.A.E. Dummett, *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy* (London, 1981), p. 39.

What makes it intelligible that *a* is *F*, even though one cannot perceive that *a* is *F*, is one's knowledge that *a*'s being *F* is not sufficient for one to perceive that *a* is *F*. There are further, enabling conditions, both spatial and temporal, which must be met.

One's view of the enabling conditions of perception is *corrigible*. This is illustrated by the discovery of time lags in perception. The point should not lead one to conclude that there is a 'state of nature' in which one operates with *no* conception of the enabling conditions of perception; one's view of the enabling conditions is something which can only be developed from within.

To say that one conceives of one's perceptions as explained jointly by the objective temporal order and one's own position in it, is to say that one can make sense of the idea that the objective order of events is not uniquely determined by the order of one's perceptions. Thus one must be able to distinguish between perception of successive states of affairs and successive perceptions of coexistent states of affairs. So for example, suppose that one is observing a fairground. One has to be able to distinguish two cases. In the first, one observes a big wheel which stops rotating just as one ceases to observe it, and then observes another big wheel which starts rotating just as one begins watching it. In the second case, one successively observes two big wheels which are rotating simultaneously. One cannot apply this distinction by reference simply to the order and content of one's perceptions of the events in question; for they may be the same in both cases. What one must appeal to is one's sense of the *causal* order – one's grasp of the processes involved in starting and stopping. One's grasp of the temporal order in which things are happening rests upon one's grasp of causal regularities.

The intuitive physics which we first bring to bear on the objective time order is not true *a priori*. Indeed it is plausible to see medieval 'impetus' mechanics as a formulation of a fragment of our intuitive physics. The commitment of this mechanics to the idea of preservation of circular motion, and to the idea that motion is sustained by impetual force, for example, well match the expectations of untutored common sense. And in these respects, 'impetus' mechanics is not true. The intuitive physics which we use in operating with the notion of the objective time order is not

conceived by us to be incorrigible; it can be, and it has been, corrected. What the subject of thought requires in the first instance, however, is just a sufficiency of background theory to enable the process of correction to begin; his conception of the world can be developed only from within.

It would surely be wrong, incidentally, to suppose that the intuitive physics we use is entirely composed of a mechanics of motion. Other factors which we would naturally take into account in operating with the conception of the objective time order include the time it takes for fire to heat and for wounds to heal, and the persistence of enduring objects.

For us, the intuitive physics relates to the behaviour of objects in a three-dimensional space, as opposed, for example, to a world with only one dimension other than time, or a world of purely qualitative features. We can use the idea of the intuitive physics to illuminate a certain widely recognized structural feature of our spatial thinking: that is, the distinction between thought of objects at the level of a cognitive map of one's environment, and demonstrative thoughts of spatial objects.

The contrast is ordinarily drawn in terms of connections with *action*. One uses mental maps in finding one's way around. The utility of one's mental map of, say, the centre of a town with which one is familiar, depends upon the fact that there is no unique viewpoint which one must occupy in order to think of the landmarks in the town centre at the level of the mental map. Wherever one is, the map is available to help one find one's way around. Contrast demonstrative ways of thinking. Such a way of thinking of an object is made available by one's current perception of it; the availability of this way of thinking of the thing does depend upon one's current viewpoint. Such ways of thinking of objects are not used directly at the level of one's mental map; but they are needed if one is to bring the map to bear upon the objects one perceives. One can act with respect to an object only if one can demonstrate it. That is how the contrast between mental maps and demonstratives is ordinarily drawn, in terms of connections with action. From our standpoint, however, the more fundamental contrast has to be drawn in terms of *cognition*. For in operating with the conception of the objective time order, one must use an

intuitive physics; and for us, the intuitive physics applies in the first instance to spatial objects thought of at the level of the mental map. One has to be able to think in terms of a network of law-governed processes going on around one whether one perceives them or not – quite independently of whether one is in a position to demonstrate the objects involved or not. That is how one must think of objects in using the conception of the objective time order; it is how one must think of the big wheels at the fairground, for example, in finding whether their rotations were successive or simultaneous. Though the physics applies in the first instance at the level of the cognitive map, however, one must ultimately be able to bring it to bear upon demonstrated objects if its bearing upon the time orders of the things one perceives is to be recognizable. And it must ultimately be brought to bear upon perceptually demonstrated objects if it is to be possible to *correct* the physics in the light of experience.

This account provides, in barest outline, a statement of what is involved in possession of the idea of a shared world about which we can communicate. What the communicator has is a conception of his own perceptions as explained by the objective temporal order, together with a sense of the general enabling conditions of perception and his own route through that order. What provides him with his conception of other points of view on that same objective order is just his grasp of the possibility of the last component being filled out in different ways, yielding different courses of perception of the same world – a world about which communication is therefore possible.

The account I have given surely provides *enough* to make intelligible the idea of objective truth. Yet it has been possible to give the account without any overt appeal to communication-theoretic notions. What role could there be for concepts of communication in explaining what makes available the notion of objective truth?

#### GRASP OF STRUCTURE

What may be maintained is that only an approach in terms of communication-theoretic notions can explain why it is intrinsic to

a grasp of the objective truth condition of a thought that one grasp the conceptual articulation of the thought. I shall begin by setting out the datum, then provide an explanation of it in terms of the account so far, and finally return to the approach in terms of language.

We are concerned here with the idea of conceptual structure which one must grasp in grasping a thought. This idea imposes global constraints on the ascription of thought – constraints which may be summed up by saying that subjects of thought are possessors of concepts.

We have already touched on one of these constraints. To have any concepts at all, one must have a repertoire of concepts, a range of concepts providing the surround within which each is intelligible. To grasp any concept at all, however elementary, one must already grasp a *system* of concepts.

It is to some such constraint as this that Wittgenstein was pointing when he wrote: ‘When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.)’<sup>4</sup>

This ‘intelligibility’ constraint is not the only one imposed by the thought that subjects of thought are possessors of concepts. It requires also that a subject ascribed one set of propositional attitudes must be capable of grasping a wider range of thoughts – namely, those obtained by permutating the concepts ascribed to him in the initial ascription (perhaps within categorial limits). So, for example, if we ascribe to a man a grasp of the natural numbers, and the belief that his car is travelling at 50 m.p.h., but then find that there is no state into which he can go which would constitute his having the thought of his car travelling at any other speed, then on the face of it the initial ascription was wrong.

In consequence of this, thought meets what Evans called the *generality constraint*.<sup>5</sup> If someone has the thought that *a* is *F*, then he must know what it is for something to be *a*; so he must be capable of grasping the thoughts that *a* is *G*, that *a* is *H*, and so on, for each conception of a property he has. Similarly, if someone has the thought that *a* is *F*, then he must know what it is for something

4 L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford, 1974), Section 141.

5 G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford, 1982), p. 100.

to be *F*; so he must be capable of grasping the thoughts that *b* is *F*, that *c* is *F*, and so on, for each way of thinking of an object available to him. It is not, of course, that he must be capable of grasping all such thoughts simultaneously; only that for each one, he must be capable of grasping it.

To say that one grasps the truth condition of a thought by grasping its conceptual structure is, then, to say that a grasp of the truth condition of a thought requires that one bring to bear a repertoire of concepts constituting a framework within which the concepts used in the thought are *intelligible*; and it requires that one conform to the 'permutation' constraint just indicated. Yet though we naturally feel very strongly that one grasps the truth condition of a thought by grasping its conceptual structure, there is a question about why this is so.

The alternative view would be that one's grasp of the conceptual structure of a thought is, as it were, *external* to one's grasp of its truth condition; that a grasp of the conceptual structure of a thought is at best *derivative* upon one's grasp of its truth condition. On this view, one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought does not at all *exploit* one's grasp of its conceptual structure.

We can see how this alternative view might be developed by considering first how one might defend the view that it is intrinsic to a grasp of the truth condition of a thought that one grasp its conceptual articulation. When we eschew appeal to the communication-theoretic approach, the natural defence begins with the idea that a grasp of the truth condition of a thought requires that one grasp its inferential relations to other thoughts. And one's grasp of the inferential role of a thought exploits precisely the structure in one's propositional states forced by the 'conceptual' constraints indicated above.

One's capacity to engage in inference to the best explanation may be held to require that one operate with a *range* of concepts which one uses in framing one's background conception of the world. And deductive inference generally exploits the fact that one's thought meets the 'permutation' constraint. For example, it is exploited when one infers that *a* is *F* from the thoughts that *b* is *F* and that *a* is identical to *b*. What the 'permutation' constraint secures is precisely that anyone who grasps the premises must be capable of grasping the conclusion.

Were it not for the availability of some such account as this, the point of the 'conceptual' constraints would be hard to fathom without recourse to the communication-theoretic view. For when we ascribe propositional attitudes to someone, the work of explanation and prediction which this enables us to perform is directed entirely at *propositional* states. Why then in ascribing propositional attitudes should we not ascribe sets of thoughts *en bloc*, without regard to the 'conceptual' constraints? Were the appeal to the notion of *inference* not available, it would be hard to see why those constraints are essential to explanation or prediction. Yet this appeal to the notion of inference does not of itself settle whether one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought exploits one's grasp of its conceptual structure.

We can characterize the position of one who returns a negative answer to this question by first noting a qualification needed in the account proposed so far. Notice to begin with that we ought not to maintain that in grasping a thought one must grasp all the concepts which can be, as it were, *extracted* from it. So, for example, consider the thought 'If Roscoe shot Roscoe, then Roscoe did it with a silencer.' We do not want to have to say that, in grasping what it is for this thought to be true, one must grasp the concept 'if *x* shot Roscoe, then *x* did it with a silencer.' At most, we want to say that grasping the truth condition of the thought will involve grasping the way in which the thought is constructed out of simple concepts, which may involve one in grasping such notions as '*x* shot *y*' and '*x* did *y* with *z*.' There is an element of *conceptual creativity* in recognizing that the thought can be viewed as containing the complex concept 'if *x* shot Roscoe, then *x* did it with a silencer.' This conceptual creativity is exploited in one's grasp of the thought 'If anyone shot Roscoe, he did it with a silencer.' Grasping this thought really does require that one grasp it as constructed using the complex concept 'if *x* shot Roscoe, then *x* did it with a silencer.' And there is a conceptually creative element, involving one's capacity to spot a new pattern in a familiar thought, in grasping that concept by extracting it from 'If Roscoe shot Roscoe, then Roscoe did it with a silencer.'

We cannot, therefore, maintain that it is *intrinsic* to one's grasp of the truth condition of 'If Roscoe shot Roscoe, then Roscoe did it with a silencer', that one grasp that it can be deduced from 'If

anyone shot Roscoe, then he did it with a silencer.' For there is a conceptually creative element involved in discerning the complex concept in the former thought which is used in constructing the latter. It was by appeal to this conceptually creative aspect of inference that Frege in the *Grundlagen* explained the fruitfulness of deduction.<sup>6</sup>

In explaining one's grasp of certain of the inferential relations of a thought, therefore, one will have to appeal to *both* one's grasp of the truth condition of the thought *and* one's capacity for conceptual creativity. It cannot plausibly be maintained that one's grasp of *all* the inferential relations of a thought is internal to one's grasp of its truth condition. We need, therefore, to make more judicious use of the notion of inference if we are to appeal to it in explaining why one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought exploits one's grasp of its conceptual structure.

What I have been pressing here is what Dummett calls the distinction between the *analysis* and the *decomposition* of thoughts.<sup>7</sup> Conceptual creativity enters in grasping the various ways in which the thought may be decomposed, in discerning new patterns within it. It may be pointed out, however, that one's capacity to discern new patterns in a thought depends upon a prior grasp of structure. It depends upon a prior grasp of what we may call its *original* structure – the structure which Dummett describes as revealed by analysis. This shows the stages in which the thought is constructed from constituent concepts. And the thesis now must be that one grasps the truth condition of a thought by grasping its original structure.

So, for example, it may be pointed out that one's discernment of the complex concept 'if  $x$  shot Roscoe, then  $x$  did it with a silencer' in the thought 'If Roscoe shot Roscoe, then Roscoe did it with a silencer' depends upon one's grasp of the thought as constructed using such concepts as ' $x$  shot  $y$ ' and ' $x$  did  $y$  with  $z$ .' And the thesis is that one grasps the truth condition of the thought by grasping the latter structure.

6 G. Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Oxford, 1978), Section 88.

7 Dummett, *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*, pp. 271ff.

The proponent of the view that one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought does *not* exploit one's grasp of its conceptual structure need not deny the distinction between decomposition and analysis, or the thesis that one's grasp of the structure revealed by decomposition rests upon one's grasp of the structure revealed by analysis. What he maintains is that grasp of the latter structure is extrinsic to one's grasp of the truth condition of the thought. He may acknowledge that the capacity to spot the original structures of the thoughts whose truth conditions we grasp is fundamental to our cognitive lives – something that is even more fundamental than the elementary capacity for conceptual creativity already remarked. His contention is only that this capacity is extrinsic to one's grasp of truth conditions, that grasp of structure is *derivative* upon one's grasp of truth conditions.

This is a view to which, I think, we naturally feel a strong resistance. The task is to explain why. I want to begin by showing that we need not accept the explanation offered by the communication-theoretic approach.

#### CONCEPTUAL CONTENT

In 'Objective truth' we remarked on certain forms of reasoning which seem constitutive of our possession of the very idea of objective truth. I want now to show that the capacity to engage in these forms of reasoning requires and exploits the fact that one's thought meets the 'conceptual' constraints. The suggestion is that this explains why it is that one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought exploits one's grasp of its conceptual structure; for one's grasp of its truth condition rests upon one's capacity to engage in these core patterns of inference.

As we have seen, we cannot maintain a grasp of all the inferential relations of a thought to be constitutive of a grasp of truth condition; what we have to do, therefore, is appeal to one's grasp of some subset of the inferential relations in which the thought stands as being constitutive of one's grasp of the condition for it to be true. And we have to show that this subset is sufficiently rich to demand that the 'conceptual' constraints be met.

These core patterns of inference concern the application of the idea of the objective temporal order as explaining the succession of one's perceptions. As we remarked, for us the explanatory scheme here is *spatial*. The subject operates with a mental map of his environment, together with some conception of his location and a grasp of the enabling conditions of perception. This requires him to grasp a *range* of ideas of spatial objects.

He has to think of the objective temporal order, conceived of at the level of the mental map, as being what explains the course of his perceptions. We saw that this requires him to be able to think of the states of affairs he successively perceives as having obtained either simultaneously or successively. Notice, however, that if such distinctions are to be intelligible to him at all, he must be capable of varying the temporal indicators while holding constant the remainder of the conceptual content of a thought. He has to be able, for example, to think of each state of affairs he observes as he moves around a village both as obtaining at the time of his perception – the time he then thinks of as *now* – and as having obtained continuously and simultaneously over some past period. And he must be able to think of states of affairs he successively perceives both as obtaining *now* and as having obtained *successively*. He requires, that is, a repertoire of temporal indicators, and the capacity to deploy them in a variety of permutations with his conceptions of particular states of affairs. In this local way, his thought must meet the 'conceptual' constraints.

As we saw, the range of ideas of spatial objects which the subject has must be within the scope of the intuitive physics he uses in finding the objective order of events. If the physics is to be brought appropriately to bear in finding the objective time order, then it must be intelligible that it be *repeatedly* applicable to each of the things he conceives of. The properties mentioned in the regularities constituting the physics must each be intelligibly applicable to the various things he encounters. So again, this minimal pattern of reasoning requires that the 'conceptual' constraints be locally met.

The physics must also be *controlled* by experience; it is not *a priori* true. And this again requires that in developing his physics in response to experience, the subject be able to bring it to bear

repeatedly on the objects he perceives. So again, the subject must be able to combine his conceptions of the properties employed by the physics in a variety of permutations with his ideas of the objects perceived.

Evidently, furthermore, to grasp the physics at all requires that one grasp the repertoire of concepts which it employs. For us, basic mechanical concepts, for example, form a system in which each concept is made intelligible by its relations to the rest.

Finally, as we saw, it is not enough that one be able to think of the range of objects around one at the level of the mental map. At the level of the mental map, one must indeed be capable of combining each of one's ideas of a spatial object with each of one's conceptions of the properties invoked by the intuitive physics, and this in combination with any of a variety of temporal indicators. But if the physics is to be appropriately brought to bear upon and controlled by experience, this apparatus must also be related to one's *demonstrative* ideas of spatial objects. So one must be capable of combining one's concepts of the properties invoked by the physics with demonstrative ideas. The 'conceptual' constraints must again be locally met.

This suggests, then, that the *Verstehen*, the sense of how the world seems to the subject, which propositional attitude ascription provides, depends upon the 'conceptual' constraints being met; for they are required and exploited by his capacity for the peculiarly central, peculiarly simple forms of reasoning which constitute his having the conception of himself as in an objective world. That is why we can say that one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought exploits one's grasp of its conceptual structure. For it is constitutive of one's grasp of what it is for this thought to be true that one be able to use it in these forms of reasoning; and that involves a grasp of its structure.

Cognitive science has made us familiar with the ascription of content to input systems, with the view of our perceptual systems as information processors. There is a question whether the ascription of content here is governed by the 'conceptual' constraints. The account I have given so far has been concerned with the thought of a subject, rather than with representational content in



general. It leaves it open that input systems are *not* governed by the 'conceptual' constraints, and that in *that* sense their content is non-conceptual.

There are two central differences between this type of content and thought. There is in general, first, no such thing as the world view of an informational subsystem. In ascribing thoughts, we are ascribing a world view and aiming to show the apparent reasonableness, in that context, of the agent's propositional states and doings. In the case of an informational subsystem, what takes the place of this global rationality constraint is, in the simplest cases, some conception of the *point* of the subsystem, of what the subsystem is *for*. This conception of the point of the subsystem will be controlled by our grasp of how it has *evolved*; and in ascribing content, what we are aiming to do is to show *how* the subsystem subserves that point. This global constraint is exactly on a par with the global constraint of rationality; it is not somehow a version of it, as if we were in dealing with an informational subsystem merely dealing with a subject whose world view was severely restricted. There is certainly illumination to be had through the ascription of content to input systems; but that illumination is manifestly not the illumination of *Verstehen*.

The second contrast between this type of content and thought is connected. It is that an informational subsystem need not be capable of the peculiarly central, peculiarly simple forms of reasoning constitutive of possession of the conception of oneself as in an objective world. The computation which input systems perform in general operates by successively bringing to bear stronger and stronger physical assumptions about the environment, to wring stronger and stronger conclusions from the initial data. This computation is often not satisfactorily characterizable as deduction, or as inference to the best explanation of the type in which subjects of thought engage; it is a separate category. Consequently, while there certainly are broadly structural constraints on the ascription of content to informational subsystems, there is no reason to suppose that they are identical to the structural constraints on the ascription of thought. In particular, there is no reason to suppose that input systems are subject to the 'conceptual' constraints we have isolated.

## STRUCTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Let us return to the analytical or communication-theoretic approach to a grasp of conceptual structure. We may begin by asking whether such an account can accommodate Dummett's point (made in a passage generally hospitable to the analytic approach) that there cannot be two differently structured sentences which express the very same thought. That is, the structure of language does not merely provide what Dummett calls a 'map-reference' system for the identification of thoughts. There is no room for a third feature of sentences, beyond the thought they express and their truth value, which is the *way* in which they identify thoughts. Rather, we have to say that grasping the structure of the sentence just is grasping the structure of the thought it expresses.<sup>8</sup>

In explaining why a grasp of a thought requires a grasp of structure, the proponent of the communication-theoretic approach has to go by way of an assurance that communication requires a grasp of structure. Yet now, suppose we ask why, on this account, communication requires a grasp of structure. Here a dilemma opens up for the communication theorist. He may, first, maintain that the demand for structure arises because of very general facts about the cognitive powers of human beings. Thus he may with Davidson point to ways in which humans are *finite*.<sup>9</sup> But there is a very general problem for this line of approach. All it provides is an explanation of why the system we use for identifying thoughts is of a certain type; why we require, for example, a finitely structured 'map-reference' system. It provides no explanation at all of how it is that one's grasp of the truth condition of a thought exploits one's grasp of its structure.

Alternatively, it may be maintained that the reason why communication requires a grasp of structure is just that one must grasp the structure of the thought expressed. This actually seems correct, as far as it goes. But it steers us against the analytical approach. For

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40ff.

<sup>9</sup> Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, pp. 8 – 9.

now we must ask why a grasp of the thought expressed requires a grasp of its structure; and this points us towards an account of the type which I have been outlining, in terms of one's grasp of the conception of oneself as in an objective world.

When we look to Davidson's work for an explanation of why a grasp of the truth condition of a thought requires a grasp of its structure, we may be struck by such comments as: 'A belief is identified by its location in a pattern of belief; it is this pattern that determines the subject-matter of the belief, what the belief is about.'<sup>10</sup> These comments may seem more in sympathy with the account I have outlined. They may, however, be read as ultimately based on appeal to the demand that the radical interpreter must discern structure.

To abandon the analytical approach here would not settle all questions of the relative priorities of language and thought in philosophical explanation. The point would be only that there is *one* axis of explanation, concerning the relation between a grasp of truth condition and a grasp of conceptual structure, along which language is posterior to thought.

This point is however of critical importance if we are interested in the project of finding an account of the various *ways* in which thoughts are structured. *De facto*, a great deal of illumination on this issue has come from work on the way in which language is structured. But if the point I have been pressing is correct, there is another, more fundamental approach.

This approach would take the fundamental structures in our thought to require classification in the light of the way they contribute to our conception of ourselves as in an objective world. And it draws its insights not from the study of language, but from the traditional concerns of metaphysics.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.