

DUMMETT AND THE PROBLEM OF THE VANISHING PAST

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ABSTRACT. Dummett has recently presented his most mature and sophisticated version of justificationism, i.e. the view that meaning and truth are to be analysed in terms of justifiability. In this paper, I argue that this conception does not resolve a difficulty that also affected Dummett's earlier version of justificationism: the problem that large tracts of the past continuously vanish as their traces in the present dissipate. Since Dummett's justificationism is essentially based on the assumption that the speaker has limited (i.e. non-idealized) cognitive powers, no further refinement of this position is likely to settle the problem of the vanishing past.

1. Introduction

Justificationism analyses the notions of truth and meaning in terms of justifiability or verifiability. The justificationist takes a statement to be true if and only if there is something that would justify or verify¹ its assertion.² The justificationist is an *alethic* antirealist, as he does not accept the principle of bivalence as generally valid. For “there does not need to be anything that would justify either the assertion or the denial of a given statement; in this case the statement will not be either true or false, although we shall not be able to know that this is so”.³

Dummett has presented his most mature version of justificationism in *Truth and the Past* (2004) and in “The Justificationist Response to a Realist” (2005). Dummett is inclined to regard this view as an experiment “to see if a plausible case could be made, on a justificationist basis, for repudiating antirealism about the past”.⁴ The latter position – reluctantly endorsed by Dummett in *The Reality of the Past* (1969)⁵ as a consequence of his early justificationist conception of truth⁶ – says that “statements about the past, if true at all, must be true in virtue of the traces past events have left in the present”,⁷ such as “present memories and present evidence”.⁸ Dummett finds this position repugnant because – above all – it involves the weird consequence that the past continually vanishes:

It [involves], in language unacceptable to a proponent of that doctrine, that past events, the memory of and evidence for which [has] dissipated, [are] expunged, not merely from our knowledge, but from reality itself: they [are] no more; they [have] not happened.⁹

Precisely, the problem affecting Dummett's early version of justificationism stems from the fact that true past-tense statements may become subsequently undecidable. A statement *S* is undecidable if and only if *S* is not known to be determinately true or determinately false, and there is no effective method to know whether *S* is determinately true or determinately false. If *S* is undecidable, the justificationist – as characterized in *The Reality of the Past* – cannot assume that *S* has a determined (but unknown) truth-value. Nor can the justificationist assume that either the event described by *S* or the event described by not-*S* is (an unknown) part of reality.

Let *S* be “A dinosaur was here millions of years ago”. There is no effective method to establish whether *S* is true or false. Suppose however that someone came across evidence for *S* – for instance, a dinosaur fossil found in this area. The justificationist who accepts that past-tense statements are true in virtue of the traces that past events have left in the present could take this evidence to make *S* true. In that case, he will consider the event that a dinosaur was here millions of years ago as part of reality. Imagine however that the fossil gets subsequently lost or destroyed and that – for some reason – every one forgets about it. As a result, *S* becomes undecidable. The justificationist can no longer take the event described by *S* (or the event described by its negation) to be part of reality – for him, it did not happen. In some sense, that event is expunged from reality itself.

In this paper, I argue that Dummett's recent position does not resolve the problem of the vanishing past. More precisely, in Sect 2, I give an overview of Dummett's novel version of justificationism. In Sect 3, I argue that Dummett's position still involves that the past can vanish. In the conclusion of the paper, I suggest that no further refinement of Dummett's justificationism is likely to settle this difficulty.

2. Dummett's novel version of justificationism

One innovative trait of Dummett's recent view about truth is its way of characterizing the notion of justifiability or verifiability that defines truth. Dummett contends that, as “truth is what is transmitted from the premises of a valid [deductive] argument to its conclusion”,¹⁰ “the justificationist cannot make it a criterion for the truth of a statement that we possess the means of verifying it”.¹¹ For there are cases in which we do have the means of verifying empirical statements, but we do not have the means of verifying their logical consequences, though we *could* have had it. Dummett provide the following example:¹² Euler's solution of the Königsberg bridges problem shows how to find, in any possible itinerary involving the

crossing of every bridge of Königsberg, a bridge crossed twice. It is thus impossible to cross all Königsberg's bridges without crossing a bridge twice. If we see a walker cross every bridge or accept the testimony of others saying so – for Dummett, justification has a *collective* character¹³ – we verify the statement that a walker has crossed every bridge. Given Euler's proof, the latter statement entails the statement that a walker has crossed a bridge twice. As the first statement is true, the conclusion is true too. But 'is true' cannot mean, in the second case, that we have the means of justifying it. For we can think of observers stationed at each bridge, each of whom leaves as soon as he sees the walker cross that bridge and reports later without giving the time of crossing. In this situation, we have no means to justify that a bridge was crossed twice, though we could have had it at that time.

If the truth of a statement were identified with the condition that we do possess the means of justifying that statement, deductive arguments that are standardly accepted as valid should be rejected as invalid, which is hardly acceptable. This suggests that the justificationist had better characterize truth not in terms of what is verified or can currently be verified but, rather, "in terms of what is, can be, or could have been verified".¹⁴ Indeed, Dummett argues that this characterization of truth can be vindicated by analysing how we actually learn the meanings and the conditions of verification of statements about the past.¹⁵ In conclusion, for the justificationist, "truth is to be identified with the possibility of being or having been verified".¹⁶

Since Dummett's novel view characterizes accurately the conditions of truth of only the statements that can be used as observation reports, I will specifically focus on statements of this type. Consider a statement saying that an observable event has obtained at a given point in space and time. The justificationist settles on, as a criterion for the truth of it, "its being the case that an observer suitably located in space and time would have observed that state of affairs as obtaining there and then"¹⁷ – where an observer can be "any creature with whom we might be able to communicate".¹⁸ An observer is permitted to use instruments "when [the relevant events] cannot be observed without them".¹⁹ This criterion can be expressed by the following schema in form of a subjunctive-conditional, in which S is a placeholder for observation statements:

(T) It is true that S if and only if, if there were an observer suitably located in space and time, he would observe that S.

The right hand-side of S should not necessarily be interpreted as a *counterfactual*, for it is possible that, for certain statements S, there is (or was or will be) an observer suitably located in space and time. In accordance with T, a statement about observable past events, if true at all, is true *not* "in virtue of the traces past events have left in the present" but in virtue of the relevant *past* events the statement speaks of (more on this below). Consequently, Dummett's recent formulation of justificationism does not entail antirealism about the past *as long as* the latter position just says that statements about the past, if true at all, are true "in virtue of the traces past events have left in the present". The problem is that Dummett's new formulation of justificationism still possesses the incredible consequence that large tracts of the past continuously vanish as their present traces dissipate. There is thus an important sense in which Dummett's position involves, even now, antirealism about the past. Before articulating this objection, let us go deeper into Dummett's view.

A worry might be that the justificationist who endorses T is *ipso facto* committed to alethic realism about past-tense observation statements. For, given T, each (non-vague) past-tense observation statement will be assigned a determined truth-value on the grounds of the evidence that an observer *would* have found at the relevant space and time. But Dummett hastens to explain that this is not the case:

[Believing] that is to appeal to realist assumptions, that there must be a determinate truth of the matter whether such state of affairs did obtain there. From a justificationist standpoint, there need be no such truth of the matter. As the criterion [T] was just stated above, we are here concerned with a counterfactual to the effect that if there had been an observer so located, he would have observed this or that. A counterfactual holds good only if there is a ground that would justify its the assertion; and there need not be a ground justifying either the assertion that such an observer would have observed the state of affairs in question as obtaining or the denial of that assertion. In such a case the statement that the state of affairs obtained at a given region of space-time will not be either true or false, as the justificationist views the matter.²⁰

Here is another clarifying passage:

Now we certainly are not in general entitled to assume that every conditional with unfulfilled antecedent either determinately holds good or determinately fails: the most resolute realist would not make such an assumption, because the consequent might depend upon some factors not mentioned in the antecedent. But the assumption is plausible for a conditional of the form, 'If the decision method were applied, it would yield an affirmative result'. It is plausible because the outcome of the decision procedure is unaffected, at each step, by external factors, but is internally determined. That is not so with the empirical procedure of moving to a place and observing what is taking place there: the outcome of this procedure is determined by factors external to it. To assume that there is a definite truth about what would be observed if there were an observer at a place where in fact there is not is to assume that the world is determinate independently; and this is a realist assumption, not readily defended from justificationist premises.²¹

Importantly, for the justificationist, if a *present* tense observation statement S is determinately true or determinately false because there exists an effective method to decide whether S is true or false, we cannot assume that for *past-tense* versions of S there is a definite truth about what would *have been* observed if there *had been* an observer. Present decidability does not entail past decidability. Dummett is clear on it:

If there is an effective means, by making the required observations, of deciding whether an event of some kind *K* is taking place *here* and *now*, then we may assert that either an event of the kind *K* is taking place or is not, whether we trouble ourselves to make the required observations or not. ... We do not need, [however,] and have not the right, to maintain that either the statement that an event of [the same] kind *K* *occurred* or *will* occur at the given place and time is determinately true or is determinately false.²²

Although, for the justificationist, we cannot assume that there is in general a definite truth about what would be observed if there were an observer at a place and time where in fact there is not, “there will be many cases in which we have *indirect* grounds for saying how things are [and were] at some place [and time] where there is no observer”.²³ Dummett tries to clarify the notion of indirect justification by elucidating what it means, in general, to give reasons for believing that an observation *was possible*. Briefly, the justificationist is not a phenomenalist because he postulates an external physical world that is independent of our will and detectable by us *via* suitable physical stimuli.²⁴ Consequently, for the justificationist:

Any ground we have for supposing such-and-such a physical state of affairs to have obtained will also be a ground for supposing there to have been possible observation in this sense, so that an observer located at a suitable space-time point could have observed that state of affairs obtained.²⁵

Dummett is not explicit about what can typically count as a ground for supposing that a physical state of affairs obtained. I believe that Dummett would acknowledge that a ground of this sort consists – typically or in many cases – in *present evidence* which, given *background knowledge*, enable us to suppose that the relevant state of affairs obtained.²⁶ Indirect justification for a statement S would seem to consist in – typically or in many cases – some piece of actual evidence which, given background knowledge, ensures that physical stimuli (e.g. light-waves) apt to produce the observation that S did exist at the relevant spatio-temporal location.

Dummett recognizes that “inductive arguments can serve as indirect justification of empirical statements”.²⁷ This permits us to individuate many examples of indirect justification in science and in everyday life. Consider this simple case: if S is “The cat has killed the parrot while I was out”, indirect evidence for S might consist in finding the parrot dead on the couch, its feathers all over the lounge and in the cat’s claws.²⁸ For these observations strongly justify, given background knowledge about the typical behaviour of cats and birds, the claim that if one had been at the relevant place and time, one would have seen the cat kill the parrot.

Dummett’s recent version of justificationism is crucially based on the distinction between direct and indirect justification for asserting an observation statement S. Dummett believes that such a distinction can be vindicated by analysing how the meanings and the conditions of verification of statements are typically learned by us.²⁹ Direct justification for asserting S is provided by any possible or actual observation of the specific events S *literally speaks of*.³⁰ So, if S is “The cat slept on this armchair”, direct justification for S can only be given by a possible or actual observation that cat slept on this armchair – and not, for instance, by an observation of a present *consequence* of the fact that the cat slept on this armchair. Possible or actual observation providing direct justification for S is often called by Dummett *direct evidence* for S.³¹ Direct evidence for S can only consist of the evidence in virtue of which S is true, if S is true at all,³² and “it is by what constitutes direct evidence for a statement that its meaning is given”.³³

On the other hand, observation provides *indirect* justification for asserting S if and only if it constitutes only a ground for supposing that a suitably located observer would obtain or would have obtained *direct* justification for S.³⁴ Observation providing indirect justification for S is often called by Dummett *indirect evidence* for S.³⁵ “Indirect justification does not provide us with the means of obtaining direct justification, but, when it is sound, we take it as guaranteeing that a direct justification exists [or did exist]”.³⁶

3. How the past can still vanish

Dummett’s recent justificationist view – only sketched here – is profound and insightful, and any philosopher could learn something from it; but this conception can also be criticized. Peacocke has recently made a number of interesting objections to it,³⁷ many of which have forcefully been answered by Dummett.³⁸ Yet Peacocke seems not to have noticed the problem I am going to outline now.

It is intuitive that much of what counted as ephemeral *direct* evidence (or, simply, *evidence*) for an observation statement S about past events on Dummett’s earlier version of justificationism – i.e. “the traces [that those] past events have left in the present” – will count as ephemeral *indirect* evidence for S on Dummett’s recent version of justificationism. But then, an objection that Dummett himself has raised against

his earlier justificationist position can be re-directed, with only a slight modification, against Dummett's recent version. This new view is problematic because:

It involves, in language unacceptable to a proponent of that doctrine, that past events, the memory of and *indirect* evidence for which has dissipated, are expunged, not merely from our knowledge, but from reality itself: they are no more; they have not happened.

Consider a past-tense observation statement *S*. For the justificationist, we cannot take for granted that there is a definite truth about what would have been observed if an observer had been at the place and time relevant for *S*. Thus, we cannot take for granted that the events described by *S* or the events described by not-*S* are part of reality. Suppose however that we come across a piece of evidence that provides reliable *indirect* justification for *S*. For the justificationist, this guarantees that direct justification for *S* did exist. Through *T*, this in turn guarantees that *S* is true, and thus that the events described by *S* are part of reality. Yet, if the indirect evidence for *S* subsequently dissipates and any memory of it fades into oblivion, we can no longer accept that there is a definite truth about what would have been observed if there had been an observer at the relevant place and time. Consequently, we can no longer accept that the events described by *S* (or those described by not-*S*) are part of reality. These events "are expunged... from reality itself".

For example, suppose again that *S* is "The cat has killed the parrot while I was out". Given the observations I described before, it is natural to conclude that the cat killed the parrot, and thus that this event is part of reality. Yet, in the hypothesized situation, I will certainly remove the body of the unfortunate bird from the couch and clean up the mess in the lounge, and the cat will take care of his own claws. Eventually, when this episode will have faded into oblivion, there will be no indirect ground to guarantee the assertion that the cat killed the parrot (or its negation). For the justificationist, the event that the cat killed the parrot will in some sense be expunged from reality itself.

What one might be tempted to reply is that, in the envisaged situations, while we have lost indirect justification to *say* that *S* is true, the truth-value of *S* is still determined. For an observer suitably located in space and time would have seen either the cat kill a robin or the cat not do so. The consequence would be that the events that make *S* true or false are not expunged from reality, but are still part of it. It is however hard to make sense of these claims *from the justificationist's standpoint*. Presumably, if indirect evidence for *S* and even the memory of it are lost, one can only *assume* that an observer suitably located in space and time would have seen something determined. The problem is that, as Dummett himself has stressed, "to assume that there is a definite truth about what would be observed if there were an observer at a place [and time] where in fact there is not is to assume that the world is determinate independently; and this is a realist assumption, not readily defended from justificationist premises".³⁹

4. Concluding considerations

Dummett's justificationism analyses the notion of truth in terms of justifiability. The justificationist takes an observational statement *S* to be true if and only if an observer provided with *limited* cognitive powers like ours would be able to justify, directly or indirectly, the assertion of *S* on the grounds of the empirical evidence available to him. It is no surprise, then, that the problem of the vanishing past arises, since the empirical evidence available to us is generally ephemeral and our memories typically fade away.

The very same problem will affect other forms of alethic antirealism that, like Dummett's, do not idealize significantly the cognitive faculties of the observer or epistemic agent. On the other hand, a form of alethic antirealism that characterized true statements as those justifiable by – for instance – an *omniscient* epistemic agent would not face this difficulty. Interestingly, Dummett has argued that omniscience is compatible with alethic antirealism, as omniscience does not entail bivalence.⁴⁰ I do not think, however, that Dummett would like to pursue the suggestion of idealizing the epistemic faculties of the putative observer to settle the problem of the vanishing past. To begin with, the forms of alethic antirealism that greatly idealize the epistemic agent's cognitive faculties may appear implausible in themselves.⁴¹ More importantly, Dummett's justificationist conception of truth is a consequence of the conception of meaning that Dummett finds appropriate to *us* (or to beings with limited cognitive powers like us). Roughly, according to Dummett, the conditions under which *we* can justify the assertion of a statement constitute both that statement's meaning (or content) and its conditions of truth.⁴² Dummett's justificationist is thus not interested in analysing a notion of truth proper to an omniscient being or one with cognitive faculties highly idealized. It is hard to understand how Dummett could settle the problem of the vanishing past.⁴³

REFERENCES

¹ In a loose and comprehensive sense of "verify". Cf. Dummett, M., *Truth and the Past*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, p. 45.

² Cf. Dummett, M., “The Justificationist’s Response to a Realist”, *Mind*, 114, 2005, p. 673.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 672. Cf. also Dummett, M. [1], p. ix.

⁵ *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society*, 69, pp. 239-58.

⁶ Cf. Dummett, M. [1], pp. 45-6 and 51-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹ Dummett, M. [2], p. 672. Cf. also [1], p. 44.

¹⁰ Dummett, M. [2], p. 674.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² See Dummett, M. [1], pp. 43-4 and [2], pp. 673-4.

¹³ See for instance Dummett, M. [1], pp. 61 and 67.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 42-72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷ Dummett, M. [2], p. 676.

¹⁸ Dummett, M. [1], p. 61.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Dummett, M. [2], pp. 676-7.

²¹ Dummett, M. [1], pp. 62-3. Dummett is considering here a criterion analogous to T but narrower in scope, which characterizes the truth of statements about observable events that can be located in *spatial* regions where there is no observer. Yet Dummett’s considerations immediately generalize to T.

²² *Ibid.*, 63-4. My emphases.

²³ *Ibidem*. My emphasis.

²⁴ Cf. Dummett, M. [2], pp. 672 and 679.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 679.

²⁶ For instance, this appears presupposed by Dummett’s rhetorical question: “But can we attribute to the child a recognition that *present evidence* for the truth of a statement concerning another time is *indirect*?” (Dummett, M. [1], p. 65. My emphases).

²⁷ Dummett, M. [2], 683.

²⁸ One might perhaps worry that the presence of the putative observer requested by T could have disturbed the cat’s or the parrot’s behaviour. Interesting, Dummett’s very sophisticated view considers problems of this sort too. Dummett emphasizes that observations ‘might well be made... with a telescope or by means of camouflage’, Dummett, M. [1], p. 72.

²⁹ Cf. Dummett, M. [1], pp. 42-72. This distinction is also drawn in (partial) analogy with the distinction, in mathematics, between canonical or direct proof and demonstration or indirect proof of a statement. Cf. *ibid.*, 42-54 and Dummett, M. [2], pp. 677-8.

³⁰ Cf. Dummett, M. [1], pp. 52 and 65-8.

³¹ See for instance Dummett, M. [2], p. 671 and [1], p. 68.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, 70.

³³ Dummett, M. [2], p. 671.

³⁴ Cf. Dummett, M. [1], p. 68 and [2], pp. 671 and 678.

³⁵ See for instance Dummett, M. [1], p. 68 and [2], p. 671.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 688.

³⁷ See Peacocke, C. “Justification, Realism and the Past”, *Mind*, 114, 2005, pp. 639-70.

³⁸ See Dummett, M. [2].

³⁹ Dummett, M. [1], p. 63. Kristie Miller has suggested that we can think of cases where the truth-value of statements about past events just *change* because available indirect evidence justifies, at different times, a statement and then its logical negation. In such cases, it looks like the past is *changing* rather than just vanishing. Indeed, the odd result that the past vanishes or changes might obtain even though no evidence or memory has faded away. Suppose that indirect evidence E, obtained at t_0 , provides very strong *inductive* justification for S. It is not guaranteed that the logical conjunction of E and E*, where evidence E* is attained at t_{0+n} , will still strongly support S. In accordance with a probabilistic analysis of inductive support, it is possible that E & E* supports S only feebly, or that it instead supports not-S, strongly or weakly, or that it supports neither S nor not-S. If we take indirect evidence E as guaranteeing that a direct justification for S exists, and so that the event that S exists, we might have to revise our judgment later on, when evidence E* is in. The past might thus vanish or change though no evidence or memory has faded away.

⁴⁰ See Dummett, M. [1], pp. 94-6.

⁴¹ Ascribing just *infallible memory* to the putative observer would not suffice to solve all problems. For example, we should probably assume that some *indirect* evidence, described by a statement E, for asserting a statement about past events may presently exist though *de facto* unknown. This might be the case when we possessed an effective method to establish whether E or not-E that, for some reason, we do not apply. Indirect evidence can thus dissipate before being known. To settle the problem of the vanishing past, the putative observer should also be capable to know *all* unknown indirect evidence of this kind.

⁴² Cf. Dummett, M. [2], p. 673 and [1], pp. 29-39.

⁴³ I wish to thank Kristie Miller and Stefan Tolksdorf for valuable comments and criticism upon earlier versions of this paper. I also wish to thank David Braddon Mitchell who independently noticed that Dummett’s recent version of

justificationism is still afflicted by the problem of the vanishing past. David's observations confirmed and amplified my worries, and encouraged me to write this paper.

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