The identity theory of truth and the realm of reference: where Dodd goes wrong

WILLIAM FISH AND CYNTHIA MACDONALD

In 'On McDowell's identity conception of truth' (Fish and Macdonald 2007), we suggested that McDowell's Identity Theory, according to which a proposition is true if and only if it is identical with a fact, is only fully understood when we realize that there are two identity claims involved. The first is that, when one thinks truly, the content of a whole thought is identical with a Tractarian *Tatsachen* – a complex fact constituted by simple *Sachverhalte* – and the second is that these simple *Sachverhalte* are in turn identical with simple Fregean senses.¹

As an example, we suggested that the complex content/proposition/Fregean sense <that tiger is undernourished> is identical with the Tractarian *Tatsachen* constituted by the two *Sachverhalte*: the object's being a tiger and the object's being undernourished, both of which can be seen, as the second identity with simple Fregean senses requires, to present an object in a certain way – as being, in turn, a tiger and undernourished.

In his response to our article, Julian Dodd (2008) raises three internal criticisms concerning the coherence of the view as a whole, as well as the interpretative criticism that, regardless of the internal coherence of the view, it is not McDowell's. We think that Dodd fails to appreciate the view we have developed in our article, so much so that he believes that his own proffered view of McDowell, articulated in the final section of his response, is an alternative to our own position when in fact it is simply a restatement of that position. Because this point is so fundamental, we begin below by spelling out exactly where Dodd's understanding of our view goes wrong and so why his interpretative criticism misses its target before addressing the internal criticisms concerning the coherence of the view as a whole.

1. Dodd claims that we are happy to accept most of the interpretative framework assumed by him in his initial charge of incoherence against McDowell's position; specifically, that we use the term 'Tractarian' in a way that does not differ in any important respect from the way he uses it. But this is decidedly not the case. As he acknowledges, his use of the adjective is to identify the view that facts are constituted by objects and properties. But as we point out, McDowell's use of the adjective is to identify a view

1 Since its initial publication, we have realised that a typo – 'Sachverhalte' instead of 'Sachverhalte' – infected our earlier paper. Our apologies. It might also be thought that we mistranslate 'sachverhalte' as 'fact' when it should rather be rendered 'state of affairs'. Even so, this does not alter the substance of our argument since it is easily remedied by substituting for 'sachverhalte', 'obtaining sachverhalte'.

according to which facts are not so constituted; whereas objects figure in such facts, they do not constitute them. The interpretative question is partly one of how to make this notion of a Tractarian fact consistent with the claim that when we think truly, what we think is identical with a fact.

Dodd thinks that this is an inessential point of difference between us, and he does so because he thinks it does not alter a commitment that he takes us to share with him: that Tractarian facts are in the realm of reference. But although he attributes this view to us, we nowhere claim that such facts are in the domain of reference, and our interpretative suggestion depends on this, since we do not take McDowell to make any such claim. What we claim is that ‘McDowell is indeed committed to a conception of facts according to which facts are *both* senses *and* constituents of the world’ (Fish and Macdonald 2007: 38).

Our claim is that there are two ways of conceiving the world – as the realm of facts/sense, and as the realm of objects/reference – but that these are not two distinct realms but rather two alternative conceptions of the world.

In short, taking the constituents of propositions to be Fregean senses, of the following four claims:

- (1) In thinking truly we grasp facts.
- (2) Facts are propositional in structure.
- (3) Propositions are what we think.
- (4) Facts are what we think about.

We accept only (1)–(3) and *reject* (4). So our view departs from Dodd’s in two crucial respects: whereas his Tractarian facts are in the realm of reference (and so are what we think *about*) and have as constituents objects and properties, our interpretative view of McDowell has it that Tractarian facts are in the realm of sense, not the realm of reference, and have as constituents senses, not objects (though objects do figure in them). Since, as McDowell (1999: 94–95) tells us, ‘for an object to figure in a thought, a thinkable, is for it to be the *Bedeutung* associated with a *Sinn* that is a constituent of the thinkable’, the Identity Theory licenses the claim that for an object to figure in a true thinkable, or fact, is for it to be the *Bedeutung* associated with a *Sinn* that is a constituent of that fact. When we think truly, facts are what we think. Objects, not facts, are what we think about.

That our interpretation is both in the spirit and the letter of McDowell’s expressed views is clear from what McDowell himself says about Dodd’s attempt to characterize his view and which we quote in our paper:

[Dodd] thinks that for facts to seem capable of being constituents of the world ... they would need to have as their constituents objects and their properties, ... [but] I see no justification for this. (McDowell 1999: 93–94)

It can also be brought out by the importance he attaches to the notion of a *de re* sense. For McDowell, there could be no thought contents were there not *de re* – object-dependent – senses. Such senses present objects to subjects in certain ways and are such that, were there no such objects to present in these ways, there would be no such ways of presenting them. McDowell rejects the view that senses – *de re* or any other – act as mental intermediaries between objects presented and thinking subjects; they are not ‘in’ the mind, in contrast with being ‘in’ the world. We do not grasp objects and properties by first grasping senses – entities in the mental domain – and then trying to connect them to objects and properties. That is to say, senses, and in particular *de re* senses, are not themselves objects, the grasping of which enables us to somehow reach beyond them to grasp things in the world.² They are ways *through* which, in thought, we are brought into direct contact with things in the world. So the notion of ‘association’ that McDowell has in mind when he says that ‘for an object to figure in a thought is for it to be the *Bedeutung* associated with a *Sinn*’ is no mere contingent connection, and this comes out clearly when considering the case of a *de re* sense.

We insist that ‘Tractarian’ for McDowell involves ‘figuring’ and not ‘constituting’ and that this is a departure in two significant ways from Dodd’s use of that term. In failing to appreciate this, Dodd does not see that his ‘alternative’ conception of McDowell outlined in the final section of his paper is no real alternative to our position, but rather an elaboration of it. In particular, we agree with his claim that:

To McDowell’s mind, if the world is to be a genuine rational constrainer of acts of thinking, it cannot be a heap of objects; it must comprise things that have the same (propositional) structure as the thought-episodes it constrains. . . . To say that the world is the totality of facts is just to say that the external, rational constraint on our thinking is provided by everything that is the case: the facts. And this leaves it open that these facts are nothing but true Fregean thinkables: thoroughgoing denizens of the realm of sense. (Dodd 2008: 82)

When we think truly, what we think (a proposition) is the case (a fact). *What* we grasp when we think truly are facts. Does this show that ‘McDowell’s position [is that] facts are Fregean *rather than* Tractarian’ (Dodd 2008: 82), as Dodd claims? Not at all: it can only seem to do so if one refuses to see that McDowell’s use of the adjective ‘Tractarian’ is one according to which the constituents of facts are, when one thinks truly, Fregean senses, *not* objects, and that facts are in the realm of sense, *not* reference.

2 ‘To construe knowledge of the sense of an expression...as, at some different level, knowledge of (perhaps acquaintance with) an entity (the sense of the expression) seems...gratuitous’ (McDowell 1977/1998: 175).

2. Once we have grasped the importance of this distinction – between the world conceived of as the realm of sense/domain of facts and the world conceived of as the realm of reference/domain of objects and properties – we can see how Dodd’s internal objections also fall with the interpretative objection. To take the first of these objections, Dodd represents our analysis of the complex sense <that tiger is undernourished> as being constituted by two simple senses, which he represents as <tiger><that1> & <undernourished> <that1>. He then argues that this account of the logical form of the complex sense is flawed by asking us to consider an argument due to Emma Borg (2000: 232–33), which concerns the truth values of modal statements such as:

(5) $\Box(\text{that saxophonist exists} \rightarrow \text{he is a saxophonist})^3$

Dodd suggests that, following our analysis and in accordance with Borg’s proposal, (5) ought to be represented as follows:

(6) $\Box((\langle \text{saxophonist} \rangle \langle \text{that1} \rangle \ \& \ \langle \text{exists} \rangle \ \langle \text{that1} \rangle) \rightarrow \langle \text{saxophonist} \rangle \langle \text{that1} \rangle)$

Which would make true a proposition that intuition tells us is false because, even if the relevant object in this world is in fact a saxophonist and hence the antecedent of (5) is true, the object is not necessarily a saxophonist, so (5) itself is false.

There are a number of puzzling features of Dodd’s objection in the present context. First, it is questionable whether his treatment of ‘he’ in the consequent of (5) as a demonstrative is adequate, given that it clearly seems to be functioning anaphorically. Second, although Dodd assumes that (5) is false, one can question whether there is not some sense in which it could be true. Suppose, for example, that ‘that saxophonist’ is construed as picking out the object, whatever it may be, that plays the saxophonist role (as our use of ‘pain’ is often claimed to pick out the neural object, whatever it may be, that plays the pain role). Then (5) is arguably true, so long as the kind of necessity in question is understood as being *de dicto* rather than *de re*.

Finally and most importantly, however (as Borg herself notes (2000: 232)), problems of this kind only arise when we treat a complex demonstrative such as ‘that tiger’ as *attributing* the property of tigerness to the object picked out by the, now bare, demonstrative ‘that’. In the present context, the difficulty arises only if we treat the complex demonstrative ‘that tiger’ as *semantically* complex; in other words, as expressing a complex sense constituted by two simple senses the first of which simply presents the salient object and the second of which presents the property of tigerness. It is only if ‘that tiger’ functions in this way that it could serve to attribute the property of tigerness to the object as Dodd’s analysis requires.

3 We retain the numbering from Dodd’s paper.

Yet there are good reasons to be sceptical of the claim that this is how McDowell sees a demonstrative expression of this kind functioning. The first ground for suspicion turns on the fact that, for ‘that tiger’ to express a complex sense, the bare ‘that’ must itself express a simple sense – must itself express a mode of presentation of an object – but it is notable that for all McDowell discusses demonstratives, he never talks about a bare ‘that’.⁴ Moreover, in one of the appendices he wrote for Evans’s *Varieties of Reference*, McDowell describes ‘the thesis that, if someone has a thought about a particular object, then there must be some specific way in which he identifies the object of his thought’ as ‘extremely plausible’ (Evans 1982: 84). This provides reason to think that, on McDowell’s understanding of demonstratives, an unsupplemented ‘that’ is not itself a semantically complete expression – ‘that’, on its own, does not suffice to express a mode of presentation because it does not present an object in any particular way. Thus, he says, “‘that man’... expresses a way in which *a man* can be presented in a Fregean thought’ (McDowell 1991/1998: 266, our emphasis). Likewise, we suggest, ‘that tiger’ is a way in which a *tiger* can be presented in a Fregean thought, ‘that’ by itself failing to express a simple sense.

So, as we understand McDowell, when we are not misled, ‘that tiger’ functions to introduce a tiger into the domain of discourse in such a way that *undernourishedness* can be attributed to it. At no point is tigerness attributed to the object. Rather, ‘tiger’ appears in ‘that tiger’ in order to mark the fact that, for that *de re* sense to exist – for that way of thinking about the object to be available to be thought – the object must indeed be a tiger.

What should we then say about the cases in which we are misled and the object is *not* a tiger? Well, in ‘*De re* senses’, McDowell explicitly contrasts his position with that of Kaplan, who holds that even in the absence of a suitable object, a ‘character’ is still available to be expressed. In the case of *de re* senses, however, he insists that, while there is a distinction to be made between token *de re* senses and *de re* sense types, this does not mean that, when we are misled, there is still a thought available to be had. He says that:

Particular *de re* senses, each specific to its *res*, can be grouped into sorts. Different *de re* senses (modes of presentation) can present their different *res* in the same sort of way: for instance, by exploiting their perceptual presence. And the univocity of a context-sensitive expression can be registered by associating with it a single sort of *de re* sense.... Given a context, a sort of *de re* sense may determine a *de re* sense (if one cares to put it like that), or else it... may determine nothing. And in the latter sort of case, according to this way of thinking, there can only be a gap – an absence – at, so to speak, the relevant place in the mind – the place

4 At least, not in so far as we are aware.

where, given that the sort of *de re* sense in question appears to be instantiated, there appears to be a specific *de re* sense. (McDowell 1984/1998: 220–21)

This suggests that, in cases in which we are misled, our ‘mistake deprives the attempted thought of content’ (McDowell in Evans 1982: 196). Yet even in such a case, the mere fact that there is no suitably situated tiger present in my visual field is not sufficient on its own to rob me of the ability to think a thought with a *tiger* content. So long as there are tigers in my world, and I am able to demonstrate them in singular thoughts in contexts other than the one that I am currently in, the absence of a suitably situated tiger in this particular situation will make it impossible for me to think any particular token *tiger* thought on this occasion, but it will not prevent my thinking such token thoughts on other occasions. Further, in order for it to seem to me that I am thinking <that tiger looks undernourished> in a situation such as this – in order for me to *think that* I am thinking that <that tiger looks undernourished> – it suffices that there be a *sort* or *type* of *tiger* content that I can employ in other contentful token thoughts. One might say that what gives the appearance to a subject that she is thinking a particular singular *tiger* thought is precisely that there is available to her a *sort of de re* sense, the *tiger* sort, which she wrongly thinks in this situation is instantiated in, so to speak, the relevant place in her mind.

If a subject were to attempt to *say* that the tiger looks undernourished in such a context,

the belief that makes [this] behaviour intelligible is a (false) second-order belief to the effect that the subject has, and is expressing, a first-order belief... This second-order belief is manifested by the subject’s action, not expressed by his words. No belief is expressed by his words; they purport to express a belief... but since no appropriate belief could be thus described, there is no such belief as the belief that they purport to express. (McDowell 1977/1998: 186)

Yet it is entirely compatible with this that, although the subject fails to express a belief, s/he nonetheless manages to *convey* something true. This allows us to go some way towards capturing the ‘(admittedly tentative) intuition’ expressed by Larson and Segal (1995: 213) that an utterance containing a failed complex demonstrative can nevertheless be true. Although we, and we believe McDowell, would not allow that the utterance itself could be true – as the utterance *says* nothing at all – we can nevertheless convey something true by the act of making the utterance. What marks this case out as distinctive is that, in such a case, the truth is not conveyed by the words uttered *meaning* something.

The second internal problem Dodd raises for our analysis of McDowell’s position is that it will only work in carefully selected cases and will not work

for other true Fregean thinkables, even when restricted to contingent empirical propositions. As examples of cases in which our analysis is supposed to collapse, Dodd offers the following statements:

- (7) That is undernourished.
- (8) Tiddles is undernourished.

As far as (7) is concerned, we have already given reason to think that, for McDowell, the bare 'that' is not a semantically complete expression and therefore fails to express a mode of presentation that could present any thing in any particular way. If this is correct, then a putative thought such as (7), in which a bare 'that' is combined with a predicate, could not express a genuine singular thought – the kind of thought that identifies an object and which might satisfy the 'know which' requirement that Evans specifies as a condition on thinking a singular thought. That is why, for McDowell, 'that' needs to be combined with a linguistic item that does express something that could present an object in some way or other.⁵

In cases such as (8), which contain proper names instead of complex demonstratives, our proposal can be straightforwardly extended. We suggest that what (8) expresses is identical to the Tractarian *Tatsachen* constituted by the two *Sachverhalte*: the object's being Tiddles and the object is being undernourished. As in previous cases, the fact of the object's being Tiddles seems to be both a fact and a sense in good standing – it presents the object as being Tiddles. Such an extension of the proposal is clearly in the spirit of McDowell's claims, from 'On the sense and reference of a proper name', that 'the ontology of a theory of sense... need not exceed the names and their bearers' (McDowell 1977/1998: 175) and that, 'names that... have no bearers... can have no sense' (p. 184–85).⁶

Dodd's final internal criticism of our proposal is that the identity of atomic facts/*Sachverhalte* with Fregean senses cannot be made good as it will always be possible to grasp a particular fact/*Sachverhalt* in more than one way. If this were correct, it would indeed damage our claim that facts are entities from the realm of sense, not the realm of reference. Since, however, Dodd gives no examples of the putative distinct senses that attach to one and the same atomic fact, it is difficult to assess the merits of this objection. For the record, then, let us simply note that we deny the claim that it is possible to grasp a distinct fact in more than one way. As we claim that facts are entities from the realm of sense, not the realm of reference, each fact will correspond

- 5 It is true that a bare demonstrative might exploit a perceptual way in which an object can be presented, but no object could be singled out just by this.
- 6 Perhaps the concern is more that, for us to be able to offer this reading of the case, our analysis will have to have the consequence that acts of naming objects can bring facts into existence. But we cannot see the problem with such a claim – many human acts both bring facts into existence and remove facts from existence: why suppose naming should be any different?

to a particular way of thinking about something from the realm of reference. So if, in a particular case, the cognitive grasp of the subject appears different, then we hold that is because the subject grasps distinct facts, not because the subject grasps the same facts differently. For example, if the subject thinks, not <that tiger is undernourished> but rather <that feline is hungry>, this is not a different way of grasping the same *Tatsache* as before, but rather a grasping of a different *Tatsache* – one that is composed of the following *Sachverhalte*: the object's being a feline and the object's being hungry. As before, these *Sachverhalte* present the object, in turn, as being a feline and as being hungry. In this way, we suggest, any difference in cognitive grasp will correspond to a difference in factual constituents. Thus the claim that *Sachverhalte* are identical to simple Fregean senses can be maintained.

Massey University
Palmerston North, New Zealand
w.j.fish@massey.ac.nz

Queen's University Belfast
Belfast BT7 1PA, Northern Ireland, UK
c.macdonald@qub.ac.uk

References

- Borg, E. 2000. Complex demonstratives. *Philosophical Studies* 97: 229–49.
- Dodd, J. 2008. McDowell's identity conception of truth: a reply to Fish and Macdonald. *Analysis* 68: 76–85.
- Evans, G. 1982. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fish, W. and C. Macdonald. 2007. On McDowell's identity conception of truth. *Analysis* 67: 36–41.
- Larson, R. and G. Segal. 1995. *Knowledge of Meaning: An Introduction to Semantic Theory*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McDowell, J. 1977. On the sense and reference of a proper name. Reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, 1998. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 171–98.
- McDowell, J. 1984. *De re* senses. Reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, 1998. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 214–27.
- McDowell, J. 1991. *Intentionality De Re*. Reprinted in his *Meaning, Knowledge and Reality*, 1998. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. pp. 260–74.
- McDowell, J. 1999. Responses. In *John McDowell: Reason and Nature*, ed. M. Willaschek. Münster: LIT Verlag. pp. 91–114.