

THE UNIMPORTANCE OF BEING MODEST
A FOOTNOTE TO MCDOWELL'S NOTE

PASCAL ENGEL

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“Tatsachen! Tatsachen!

Tatsachen!”

Frege, *Der Gedanke*

I thank John McDowell for his penetrating and very useful remarks about my “adminadversions” – which I would rather, in order to dispell the feeling of animosity that he may have felt, call “dubitations” - on the identity theory of truth..

It is important to learn that John McDowell suscribes, if not to an identity *theory* of truth, at least to an identity *conception* of truth, since the now famous passage of *Mind and World* (1994: 27) where he hints at such a view involved no direct commitment to it. But to which identity conception of truth does he suscribe?

In its bare form, we can formulate an identity conception of truth as encapsulated in the following :

(IC) A proposition is true if and only if there is a fact which is is identical to it

I agree with McDowell that, formulated in this way, IC is a truism, which ill deserves the name of a “theory”. But the fact that a version of this view has been held by philosophers as different from each other as Bradley, Russell, and Moore (Cartwright 1987, Candlish 1989, Baldwin 1991) makes us suspect that more metaphysical flesh has been put on these bare bones, depending on how one reads the equivalence IC: if one identifies true propositions with facts in the world one is lead to an extreme realist reading of IC, and if one identifies facts in the world to true thoughts or judgements one is lead to an extreme idealist reading¹. Now, as Jennifer Hornsby (1997) as shown, to my mind convincingly, we can also attribute the IC to Frege under the following formulation (which is Frege’s in *Der Gedanke*):

ICF A fact is a thought that is true

McDowell considers that it is nothing but a formulation of the truism IC. But he denies that either IC or ICF can be read, as I suggested in my article, from left to right or for right to left, i.e in a realist or in idealist sense. He suspects me of suscribing to a psychologist reading of Frege when I suppose that the idea that the world (the totality of facts) is made up of Fregean thoughts can be read in an idealist sense (left to right), or in a realist sense (right to left). My mistake, according to him, is to forget that ICF can be read in both senses, and that neither one is privileged: if facts are true thoughts, true thoughts (“thinkables”, as he prefers to call them) are facts, and reality is neither mind nor world.

I certainly did not mean to interpret Frege’s notion of sense as something mental. I just wanted to point out that, once we formulate IC in terms of ICF, there is still room for an idealist reading, and that the identification of facts with true thoughts

¹ According to Künne (2003):

is not at all innocent. If, as McDowell says “true thinkables already belong just as much to minds as to the world”, Frege’s reaction of bewilderment when Russell told him that the proposition (the thought) that Mont Blanc is more than 4000 meters high contains Mont Blanc *itself* with all its rocks and snows, would be difficult to explain. Instead of denying that Mont Blanc itself belongs to the proposition or thought, Frege should have accepted this claim, and should have said to Russell: “*Gut!* if you want it that way, you are free to say that the mountain is part of the thought”. On McDowell’s view, Moore must have been wrong when he said :

[Suppose I have the true belief]that a given tree, which I see, is an oak...The proposition that the tree is an oak is something which is and equally is whether the belief is true or false...But..the fact that the tree is an oak is something which *is*, only if the belief be true, and hence it is quite plain that...the fact that the tree is an oak is quite a different thing...from what I believe, when I believe that it is one..” (Moore 1953: 308)²

There is, however, a third version of IC, which elaborates on the truism, and which I called, perhaps wrongly given the great variety of conceptions defended under that name, “minimalist”. Jennifer Hornsby (1997) has shown that one could extract from Frege’s remarks in *De Gedanke* a version of the identity theory : a fact is a true thought, where “thought” is taken as a Fregean sense. Let us call it the On this minimalist, or perhaps neutralist reading, IC is neutral or indifferent upon whether the equivalence is read from left to right. Hence there is no McDowell

² Quoted by Künne 2003 : 9-10.

In my article (Engel 2001) I did not mean to ascribe to McDowell a any direct commitment to an idealist version of IC,

Ever since as the identity theory of truth made its reappearance on the philosophical scene it has been clear that there are at least three versions of it, depending : (a) “Realist”: the world consists of true propositions (Russell, Moore), (b) “idealist”(Bradley) : the world consists of true judgements, and (c) a version which I would now call “neutralist”: a true thought is a fact (Frege). On (c) there is no point

³.When John McDowell seemed to subscribe to it in a now famous page of *Mind and World* (1994: 27),

It is important to learn that John McDowell subscribes to an identity conception of truth, since his now famous remark on p.27 of the first edition of *Mind and World*, to the effect that “there is no gap between thought as such and the world”,

As soon as the identity theory of truth made its reappearance on the philosophical scene (Cartwright 1987, Baldwin 1991, Candlish 1989) it has been clear that there are at least two of it, idealist (Bradley) and realist (Russell, Moore)⁴.When John McDowell seemed to subscribe to it in a now famous page of *Mind and World* (1994: 27),

³ See also the interesting discussion in Künne 2003: 6-12

⁴ See also the interesting discussion in Künne 2003: 6-12

One of the reasons why I expressed scepticism about an identity theory of truth was that it seemed to me to oscillate between a substantive thesis affirming the identity of thought and reality and a modest or minimalist thesis which I found quite close to other, more well-known, versions of minimalism. Now I was well aware that McDowell's endorsement of an identity theory – or rather conception - of truth was meant to be of the modest or minimalist kind and not of the substantive kind which has been attributed to Bradley (on the idealist version of the substantive theory) or to Russell and Moore (on the realist version). My reason, however, for suspecting that this claimed modesty was less than modest, i.e involved more substantive commitments than the mere “truism” that he thought *that spring has begun* is true if it is a fact that spring has begun, is that

- 1) the identity theory : trivial or not ? Mc Do says it is., but not in
- 2) my alleged mistake about sense and reference
- 3) the bipolarity of facts
- 4) McDowell's coherentism

(I am not simply repeating Michael Friedman's point: it follows from my difficulties with the identity theory) the problem has nothing to do with our cognitive activity

- 5) Hornsby

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I have recorded my disagreement with Hornsby and McDowell about the identity theory of truth, but I do not at all disagree with her – him – that

found your answer very illuminating, although it still seems to be that if the content of perception is bipolar, then this this clashes with the identity theory of truth, for it cannot be a truism that the content of a perception that such and such is the case is identical to a fact: the content might be false. The facts themselves are not bipolar, but, so to say, unipolar.

If one speaks or thinks truly, for instance saying or thinking that Pascal Engel is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth, what one says or thinks is (is nothing but, is no other than) something that is the case — to stay with the same instance, that Pascal Engel is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth. That Pascal Engel is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth is both something I (for one) think and

something that is the case. On perfectly natural ways of using talk of what one says or thinks and of what is the case, such a remark — which gives expression to the core of the so-called identity theory — is beyond the bounds of possible dispute. It is, as I said in my (1994), a truism.

The label ‘theory’ seems a poor fit for something that is beyond dispute, and that is why I have said ‘so-called identity theory’ and left the word ‘theory’ out of my title.

Engel suggests that my modesty, in claiming to be endorsing no more than a truism, must be false, if I want the idea of something that is the case to be the idea of an element in the world — if I want the identity conception to invoke identity as a relation between thought and reality. He suggests that this either requires locating what is the case in Frege’s realm of reference, which of course makes it impossible to identify something that is the case with a thought (in Frege’s sense) that is true, or else merges the world into the realm of sense, which, according to Engel, looks like a kind of idealism.

He here repats that true thoughts are facts.

I am not mistaken about Frege’s conception of sense, and I do not take it in a psychologist sense

But this depends on failing to take the measure of Frege’s conception of sense and reference. A thought, in Frege’s sense, is *what* one thinks (or says) if one thinks (or says) something, as opposed to the thinking of it. That Engel is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth is something any reader of his paper is bound to think. It is a Fregean sense, a thinkable. But it, that very same thing, is also something that is the case, and hence an element in the world, on the perfectly natural conception of the world according to which the world is everything that is the case. Its being a thinkable does not imply that it is somehow primarily ‘mental’, and so able to be conceived as an

element in the world only on some idealistic construal of the world. Engel introduces the two ‘versions’ of the identity theory that he considers, the identity theory of facts and the identity theory of thoughts, by distinguishing two directions in which the identity thesis ‘A true thought is a fact’ could be read. But the question of a direction should not arise. **Neither side of the identity thesis should be supposed to be intelligible in advance of understanding the other, as if it could be used to explain the other. True thinkables already belong just as much to the world as to minds, and things that are the case already belong just as much to minds as to the world. It should not even seem that we need to choose a direction in which to read the claim of identity.**

What I have said implies that the world, on the natural conception according to which the world is everything that is the case, is in Frege’s realm of sense. Engel says about Frege (p. 443): **‘thoughts are senses, and presumably facts, if they belonged to the world, would be located within the realm of references.’ But that is simply wrong.** Facts, particular things that are the case, belong to the world conceived as everything that is the case. But something that is the case is (is nothing other than) something that can be truly thought, and as such it is located in the realm of sense. If this placing of things that are the case in the realm of sense is read against the background of the prejudice that real facts, facts that genuinely belong to the world, would need to be located within the realm of reference, it will seem to bear out Engel’s talk of a temptation to ‘nudge the world into the mind’. I will seem to have succumbed to that temptation, and to be leaning towards an idealism. But what I have been urging is that if one understands how Frege’s idea of sense works, one can see that there is nothing idealistic — no ‘mentalizing’ of the world — in the idea that the world, conceived as everything that is the case, is in the realm of sense. Affirming the idea is merely elaborating a truism.

Of course there is also the realm of reference, and anyone is at liberty to stipulate that we should use the phrase ‘the world’ to apply to it. We had better note, though, that the world so conceived is not made up of things that are the case, at least as Frege teaches us to use the notion of things that are the case. Engel is right (p. 457, n. 21) that for Frege ‘the relation of thought to reality ... cannot be secured only at the level of sense’. Of course we also need to connect what can be said at the level of sense to what can be said at the level of reference. But there is no problem about doing that. There is no problem about what the world conceived as everything that is the case, and so as belonging to the realm of sense, has to do with the world on that other possible conception, the realm of reference. Engel, for instance, is thought about by anyone who thinks that Engel is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth. In Fregean terms, we cannot separate the fact that that thought (that thinkable) has a certain sense as a constituent from the fact that that actual person, the *Bedeutung* of the name ‘Engel’ as I am using it here, is, as we might say, one of the topics of the thought — specifically, that whether the thought is true or false depends on whether or not that actual person is unimpressed by the identity theory of truth. Conceiving the world as everything that is the case, and so as located in the realm of sense, in no way slights the reality of the inhabitants of the realm of reference.

Engel looks in the second lecture of my (1994) for an argument, in one direction or the other, between the identity theory of truth and my claim that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual. He cannot find a workable argument in either direction. But this makes no contact with any point of mine. The identity theory of truth figures in my book only in its truistic core, and it would be silly to mount an argument for a truism. As for the other direction, the claim that the content of perception is conceptual is supposed to have been recommended already, in my first lecture, by the way it enables us to avoid the apparent need to choose between the Myth of the Given and an unconstrained coherentism. The point of my remarks

about the identity of true judgeables with facts, in their context, is to help bring out how if we conceive experience as I have already recommended, as actualization of conceptual capacities in sensory receptivity, we can understand how in perception the world itself has a rational impact on our thinking. In this context, the identity with facts of thinkables that constitute the content of experiences in which one perceives that things are thus and so is just an application of the identity with facts of true thinkables in general.

In connection with the thesis that a true perceptual thinkable is a fact, Engel remarks (p. 456, n. 18): ‘It has to be added “when we are not misled”, i.e. when perception is veridical. This may seem to beg many questions, but I shall not enter into this.’ I find this mysterious. If we are misled by perceptual experience, what perception purports to reveal to us as something that is the case is not something that is the case, and so is not a fact. How can it beg any questions to acknowledge that?

Engel thinks the bipolarity of propositional content is a problem for me. This comes to a head when, following Jérôme Dokic, he purports to exploit the bipolarity of content so as to undermine the application of the identity theory to the content of perception in particular. But if one sees, say, that there is still coffee in one’s cup, the content of one’s perception — that there is still coffee in one’s cup — is something that is the case. That follows from the fact that the example is *ex hypothesi* one of seeing that something is the case, as opposed to, say, merely having a visual experience as of its being the case. And something that is the case is a fact. So in the situation I am envisaging, the content of one’s perception is a fact. How could this possibly be wrong? If the argument Engel takes from Dokic worked, we could use an argument of the same form to ‘show’ that when one knows that things are thus and so, what one knows cannot be a fact. Surely that indicates that the argument form must be flawed. And it is easy to see what the flaw is. It is propositional content as such, not *qua* what is, say, seen or otherwise known to be the case, that is bipolar. It is absurd to suggest

that the bipolarity of content as such could somehow deprive us of the truism that if a content is correctly characterizable as what one sees or knows to be the case, it follows that it is something that is the case, and so that it is a fact. It is its being seen or known to be the case, not its being to the effect that things are one way rather than another, that excludes the false pole, and this exclusion cannot be in any genuine tension with the fact that things might have been otherwise.

Engel repeats Michael Friedman's claim (1996) that according to my picture, our passive impressions become experiences with objective content by being taken as such by the active faculty of spontaneity. Friedman argues that this commits me to a coherentism of my own — even though I advertise the conception of experience that I recommend as a way to steer between coherentism and the Myth of the Given. But Friedman's claim misreads how I characterize experience. In my picture of experience, there is no need for cognitive activity ('taking') on our part to equip our passive impressions with objective content. They have it anyway, independently of any cognitive activity we are going in for when they occur. In my book I suggest that we can find their possession of content intelligible on the basis of their being actualizations of conceptual capacities. Conceptual capacities are also actualizable in cognitive activity, and that is essential to their being the kind of capacities they are. That is the point of saying that the capacities belong to spontaneity. But there is no need for any active 'taking' to make experience what it is. (See my response to Friedman in Smith (2002).)

Engel says 'a minimalist [identity theory] can hardly make sense of perception putting us in contact with an independent reality'. I shall comment on the way he uses the idea of minimalism in a moment. Meanwhile it will suffice to note that the claim he is making here could just as well be put by talking of an identity conception that aims to confine itself to truisms, as mine does. (That is, nearly enough, what 'minimalist' amounts to in this remark of Engel's.) The claim turns essentially on the

idea that in order to be genuinely trafficking in a conception of a reality independent of us, I would need to conceive facts otherwise than as things that can be truly thought to be the case. That is another way to formulate the idea that locating facts in the realm of sense involves ‘nudging the world into the mind’. And as I have argued, the idea is wrong. If ‘the fear of idealism is still there’ in connection with what I say about perception, as Engel says, it is a fear that depends on a philosophical mistake.

What is the point of conceiving truth in a way that turns on the identity of true thinkables with facts? As I said, in my book the point is that it helps me spell out the image of perceptual experience as openness to reality — as how reality itself is enabled to exercise rational control over our thinking. The difficulties Engel purports to find in that are illusory.

But there is a wider context for the so-called identity theory, a context that is not particularly relevant to my book: philosophical reflection about truth for its own sake. In this response I have so far focused on Engel’s animadversions on my own work, but I want to end by making a remark about his treatment of Jennifer Hornsby’s fine paper (1997), in which she recommends an identity conception of truth as a way to avoid both the correspondence theory and a certain sort of minimalism. I think Engel’s negative verdict on this is vitiated by insufficient care about the labels ‘minimalist’ and (even more) ‘deflationary’ or ‘deflationist’. If an approach to truth counts as minimalist if it holds that the only general statements we can acceptably make about truth are truistic, then there is surely no reason not to count the identity conception as a species of minimalism, as Engel suggests. Similarly, if all it takes to be deflationary is that one avoids the sort of metaphysics that is characteristic of a correspondence theory, the identity conception is indeed deflationary. But Hornsby’s point, as I understand it, is to separate the conception of truth she recommends from styles of thinking that are deflationary in a stronger sense than that — styles of thinking according to which the concept of truth is not interesting, not central to

philosophical reflection about the relation of mind and meaning to reality, not expressive of a norm for thought and language. Engel credits me with endorsing ‘a form of deflationist or minimalist conception of truth’, on the basis that I urge that we have nothing but platitudes to invoke when we set out to fix the content of the concept. As I have already argued, he is wrong to suggest it follows from the restriction to platitudes that the identity invoked by the identity conception is not an identity between thought and ‘a reality external to our thought’. What I want to urge now is that the point about platitudes does not imply the deflationary attitude that is Hornsby’s concern. I cannot see that Engel really addresses her claim that the identity conception affords a way between a correspondence theory and a deflationism that goes beyond restricting oneself to truisms, and takes the fact that truth about truth is restricted to truisms as a ground for playing down the centrality and significance of the concept of truth in reflection about thought and language.

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DOKIC

En ce qui concerne l'argument de la bipolarité, la réponse de McDo confirme en réalité nos soupçons. Bien sûr, c'est le *contenu* de la perception qui est bipolaire, et non pas le fait que je le *perçois*. C'est cette thèse qui, combinée à la thèse selon laquelle le contenu de la perception est *identique* au fait perçu, est désastreuse. La combinaison de ces deux thèses implique que les *faits* sont bipolaires, ce qui à mon avis n'est que de la mauvaise métaphysique (comme le dit Kit Fine, si quelque chose est un fait, c'est *essentiellement* un fait; ce n'est pas un état de choses "neutre" à qui il "arrive" d'être un fait).

McDo parle d'une "confusion" dont nous serions victimes. Si je comprends bien, il s'agit de la confusion entre le contenu et le mode de la perception. Dans ce cas, c'est plutôt lui qui n'a rien compris à la portée de l'argument de la bipolarité...