WHAT IS WRONG WITH CLASSICAL NEGATION?

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Für die Negation liegen die Verhältnisse nicht so einfach.¹

Gentzen

Abstract
The focus of this paper are Dummett’s meaning-theoretical arguments against classical logic based on considerations about the meaning of negation. Using Dummettian principles, I shall outline three such arguments, of increasing strength, and show that they are unsuccessful by giving responses to each argument on behalf of the classical logician. What is crucial is that in responding to these arguments a classicist need not challenge any of the basic assumptions of Dummett’s outlook on the theory of meaning. In particular, I shall grant Dummett his general bias towards verificationism, encapsulated in the slogan ‘meaning is use’. The second general assumption I see no need to question is Dummett’s particular breed of molecularism. Some of Dummett’s assumptions will have to be given up, if classical logic is to be vindicated in his meaning-theoretical framework. A major result of this paper will be that the meaning of negation cannot be defined by rules of inference in the Dummettian framework.²

Keywords: Proof-theoretic semantics, harmony, negation, ex falso quodlibet, compositionality, molecular theories of meaning

¹. ‘The situation is not so easy for negation.’ (Gentzen 1936, 511)
². This paper has been with me for a while. Many people have read or heard versions of it and contributed with their comments. Instead of trying to list them all, which would undoubtedly lead to unintended omissions, I’d like to single out two philosophers to whom I am particularly indebted. Bernhard Weiss, to whom everything I know about Dummett can be traced, and Keith Hossack, my Doktorvater, for his robust philosophical challenges. This paper would not have been written without their advice and encouragement. I would also like to thank the referees for Grazer Philosophische Studien, whose constructive criticism resulted in a substantial improvement of this paper.
1. *Introduction*

Dummett’s meaning-theoretical arguments against classical logic are divided into two kinds. One kind comprises arguments based on the nature of knowing and understanding a language: here belong the manifestability and the acquisition arguments. These arguments aim to establish that the nature of speakers’ understanding of a language does not warrant the assumption that every sentence is determinately either true or false. It is widely agreed that they are either unsuccessful\(^3\) or too underdeveloped to carry the force they are intended to carry—the latter point being attested to by Dummett himself, who admits that it is far from a settled issue what full manifestability amounts to.\(^4\)

The other kind comprises arguments based on how the meanings of the logical constants are to be determined in the theory of meaning. They are the focus of the present paper. Using Dummettian principles, I shall outline three such arguments, of increasing strength, and show that they are unsuccessful by giving responses to each argument on behalf of the classicist\(^5\).

It is crucial that in responding to these arguments a classicist need not challenge any of the basic assumptions of Dummett’s outlook on the theory of meaning. In particular, I shall grant Dummett his general bias towards verificationism, encapsulated in the slogan ‘meaning is use’. The second general assumption I see no need to question is Dummett’s particular breed of molecularism. The point of the present paper is to investigate how, accepting these Dummettian assumptions, the classicist can counter Dummett’s arguments.

Some of Dummett’s assumptions will have to be given up, if classical logic is to be vindicated in his meaning-theoretical framework. I will argue that the meaning of negation cannot be defined by rules of inference in the Dummettian framework.

As Dummett’s project is well known, the discussion of his views on the theory of meaning remains deliberately concise.

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3. Transposing Alexander Miller’s arguments from the semantic realist to the adherent of classical logic (Miller 2002, 2003).
5. In defiance of the OED, where ‘classicist’ is reserved for persons who study Classics or followers of Classicism, I shall use this term to refer to adherents of classical logic.