

Frege on sense and reference

1. Frege on the thesis that meanings are mental

Frege's argument against the thesis that the meanings of linguistic expressions (i.e., 'thoughts') are mental:

"If every thought requires an owner and belongs to the contents of his consciousness, then the thought has this owner alone; and there is no science common to many on which many could work, but perhaps I have my science, a totality of thoughts whose owner I am, and another person has his. Each of us is concerned with the contents of his own consciousness. No contradiction between the two sciences would then be possible, and it would really be idle to dispute about truth; as idle, indeed almost as ludicrous, as for two people to dispute whether a hundred-mark note were genuine, where each meant the one he had in his pocket and understood the word 'genuine' in his own particular sense. If someone takes thoughts to be ideas, what he then accepts as true is, on his own view, the content of his consciousness, and does not properly concern other people at all. If he heard from me the opinion that a thought is not an idea he could not dispute it, for, indeed, it would not now concern him." (336)

Four further arguments against the view that meanings are ideas, or mental images:

1. Mental images are not available for enough kinds of linguistic expressions. ('of', 'chiliagon')
2. Berkeley's point: mental images are too precise to be meanings.
3. Widespread variance in images associated with individuals. No one would ever mean the same thing by a word as anyone else.
4. Wittgenstein's point: mental images need interpretation as much as physical ones.

2. Frege's puzzle about identity statements

Frege's problem with the thesis that identity sentences state a relation between objects:

" $a = a$ holds a priori and, according to Kant, is to be labelled analytic, while statements of the form $a = b$ often contain very valuable extensions of our knowledge and cannot always be established a priori." (56)

Here is one way to reconstruct Frege's argument:

(1) Even if a and b are coreferential, $a = b$ might be knowable only a posteriori, while $a = a$ is trivial. (Example: "The teacher of PHI 415 is the teacher of PHI 415", vs. "The teacher of PHI 415 is Jeff Speaks." The former is trivial, whereas the latter might require some research, e.g. looking on Minerva, to find out.)

(2) So it might be true that someone who understands $a = a$ and understands $a = b$ knows that the former is true, but does not know that the latter is true.

(3) Understanding a sentence is knowing its meaning. So if two sentences mean the same thing, and someone understands both, then that person will know that they mean the same thing (and hence know that if one is true, both must be).

(4) So $a = a$ must mean something different from $a = b$.

(5) So the meanings of names must not be the objects for which they stand.

This might lead one to think that identity sentences state a relation, not about objects, but between names. About this, Frege wrote:

"What is intended to be said by $a = b$ seems to be that the signs of names ' a ' and ' b ' designate the same thing ... but this relation would hold between the names or signs only in so far as they named or designated something. ... But this is arbitrary. Nobody can be forbidden to use any arbitrarily producible event or object as a sign for something." (56-57)

So this leads to a dilemma.

3. Frege's resolution of the dilemma: the distinction between sense and reference

"It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign, ... besides that to which the sign refers, ... what I should like to call the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is concerned." (57)

The upshot: names do refer to objects in the world, so, in that sense, identity sentences are about objects in the world. But those objects are not the meanings of names. Meanings are modes of presentation of objects.

Frege's discussion of how sense relates to reference on the one hand, and mental items on the other:

"The reference of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by its means; the idea, which we have in that case, is wholly subjective; in between lies the sense, which is indeed no longer subjective like the idea, but is yet not the object itself. The following analogy will perhaps clarify these relationships. Somebody observes the Moon through a telescope. I compare the Moon itself to the reference; it is the object of the observation, mediated by the real image projected by the object glass in the interior of the telescope, and by the retinal image of the observer. The former I compare to the sense, the latter is like the idea or experience. The optical image in the telescope is indeed one-sided and dependent upon the standpoint of observation; but it is still objective, inasmuch as it can be used by several observers. At any rate it could be arranged for several to use it simultaneously. But each one would have his own retinal image." (60)