

Class 4 - Frege's Intensionalism

I. "The Thought," history, and idealism

Frege asks a lot of important questions in both "The Thought" and "On Sense and Nominatum." Some of his answers and some of his exposition, in retrospect, are confused.

For example, I mentioned in the introduction to the course that when analyzing language, philosophers seek both theories of meaning (semantic theories) and theories of truth.

Later philosophers are clearer about the distinction between semantic theories and truth theories, where Frege confuses them.

Frege was the first person to look at the form and structure of language in the kind of detail, and with the kinds of philosophical questions in mind, that he does.

We will have to try to separate the semantic questions from the questions about truth, if only to keep them clear.

Much of the later part of "The Thought" is not especially relevant to our concerns.

We have to remember that he was working in response to nineteenth-century idealism.

We can see Frege's objections to idealism clearly on pp 43-6, where he takes on the enormous question of how we know that anything exists beyond my own consciousness.

If we call what happens in our consciousness idea, then we really experience only ideas but not their causes (44).

It is inconceivable that I should be boxed into myself in this way to infinity (45).

If man could not think and could not take something of which he was not the bearer as the object of his thought, he would have an inner world but no outer world. But may this not be based on a mistake? (45)

Not everything that can be the object of my understanding is an idea (46).

Frege also presents an argument against idealism, p 47.

If idealism were true, then psychology would be the most fundamental science.

But, psychology is subordinate to mathematics.

So, idealism is false.

I do not intend to spend time on idealism, especially given my substantial argument against idealism. Our concern is with Frege's positive proposal about the object of language.

II. What is a meaning?

We'll start with meanings, or senses.

One option for meanings is to identify them with something psychological: ideas.

We saw in the introduction to the *Grundlagen* that Frege wants to distinguish the psychological from the objective.

We see this goal here, too, when he identifies his inquiry into meaning with a logical inquiry.

One might come to believe that logic deals with the mental process of thinking and the psychological laws in accordance with which it takes place. This would be a misunderstanding of the task of logic... In order to avoid this misunderstanding and to prevent the blurring of the boundary between psychology and logic, I assign to logic the task of discovering the laws of truth, not of assertion or thought (36).

In "The Thought," Frege uses the unfortunate term 'thought' to refer to meanings. For Frege, thoughts are not psychological, not mental objects, at all. He calls them senses (or meanings) of sentences, and alleges that sentences express thoughts. "When we call a sentence true, we really mean its sense is" (37). Thus, meanings are closer to what I called concepts. The contemporary term for them, which I will use, is 'propositions'. That is, in what follows, I will use 'proposition' where Frege used 'thought'. The question is whether propositions are objective or psychological.

Frege claims that propositions are neither physical objects nor psychological ones, but more like the former.

He describes four characteristics of ideas (psychological) as opposed to external objects, pp 41-2.

1. Ideas are not available to the senses.
2. Ideas are available to consciousness.
3. Ideas are mind-dependent.
4. Ideas are private.

Looking through this list, it is clear that propositions, though they share the first characteristic with ideas, are not mainly psychological.

We can be aware of a proposition, but it is the idea, not the proposition, that is available to consciousness.

People have different ideas, concerning the same propositions.

Consider the case of the Pythagorean theorem, p 42.

This assertion is also the conclusion we should draw from the Lauben/Peter/Lingens case that Frege badly mangles, p 40.

Lauben and Peter do express the same proposition, that Lauben has been wounded.

The claims have the same truth conditions: they are true in the same cases.

Thus, propositions are not private, since different people can think about and express the same proposition.

Therefore the propositions should not be identified with our ideas.

There is a problem with claiming that the same propositions are expressed by 'I have been wounded', as stated by Dr. Lauben, and 'Dr. Lauben has been wounded', as stated by Leo Peter.

It may not be the case that everyone sees immediately that they are the same proposition.

For example, if Rudolph Lingens does not know that he is talking to Dr. Lauben, he will not know that 'I have been wounded' and 'Dr. Lauben has been wounded' are the same proposition.

The fact that we don't all see the identity of the two propositions makes Frege worry about their identity. Frege will deal directly with this problem (the problem of reference within opaque contexts) in the next article we will read.

This problem has been the source of a lot of spilled ink.

We will put it aside, for now, and return to it on Tuesday.

We have established that propositions are not like psychological ideas since they can be shared by different minds.

“What is a content of my consciousness, my idea, should be sharply distinguished from what is an object of my thought” (45).

Furthermore, sentences of different languages can express the same proposition. ‘Snow is white’ has the same meaning (whatever meanings are) as ‘la nieve es blanca’. So, propositions, meanings of sentences, aren’t essentially part of any given language. They are thus both mind-independent and language-independent entities.

Despite the fact that propositions are independent of language, we can express them in language. I mentioned that the meaning theory I barely sketched contained a series of meaning clauses (one for each sentence) like:

‘snow is white’ means-in-English Φ

Now, the question we are after is what the Φ is.
We can express that same theorem as

‘snow is white’ means-in-English that snow is white

Propositions are thus expressible by what we now call that-clauses.
Notice that a that-clause is not a complete sentence:

that snow is white
that $2+2=4$
that the door is closed
that I am in Puerto Rico

That-clauses, rather, are names of propositions.
Such propositions can be used as subordinate clauses in a variety of other complex sentences.
So, we can use a proposition in a question, a command, or in an expression of belief or desire.

Is it the case that snow is white? (Or ‘Is snow white?’)
Make it the case that the door is closed. (Or, ‘Close the door’.)
I believe that $2+2=4$.
I wish that I were in Puerto Rico.

In some cases, writing these complex sentences out as involving that-clauses makes them more awkward. But, it reveals their logical structure.
Questions, commands, exclamations, beliefs, desires, and other complex forms contain references to that-clauses as their basic components.
Even assertions of fact are analyzable into parts.

Two things must be distinguished in an indicative sentence: the content, which it has in common with the corresponding sentence-question, and the assertion. The former is the thought, or at least contains the thought (38).

So, we are considering two things: the content of an utterance or sentence and its use.
The content is the sense, or the proposition.
The use we make of it contains other, pragmatic factors.

III. Intensionalism

Frege's proposal, then, for the objects of language is, like all his work, traceable to his views about mathematics.

Mathematical objects are traditionally taken to be immaterial but non-mental objects.

Frege says: "The thought, in itself immaterial, clothes itself in the material garment of a sentence and thereby becomes comprehensible to us" (38).

And, "A third realm must be recognized. What belongs to this corresponds with ideas, in that it cannot be perceived by the senses, but with things, in that it needs no bearer to the contents of whose consciousness to belong" (43).

And, "Outside one's inner world one would have to distinguish the proper outer world of sensible, perceptible things from the realm of the non-sensibly perceptible" (47).

Thus, propositions, like circles or sets or numbers, are abstract objects.

'Intension' is another word for 'meaning'.

Intensions are to be distinguished from extensions.

'Creature with a heart' has the same extension as 'creature with a kidney', but the two phrases have different intensions.

Thus, Frege is called an intensionalist for his belief in the existence of intensions.

The standard objection to the traditional conception of mathematics has to do with access.

If mathematical objects are neither mental objects nor accessible to our senses, then it seems that we could never get to know them.

Thus, we might, with Hume, commit them to the flames, or, with the positivists, decry them as nonsense.

For the case at hand, the question is how my idea can be of an abstract proposition.

Frege says that the relation between persons and propositions is one of apprehension.

One sees a thing, one has an idea, one apprehends or thinks a thought. When one apprehends or thinks a thought, one does not create it but only comes to stand in a certain relation...to what already existed beforehand (48-9).

That snow is white is not something we create, by thinking of it.

It is much more like the whiteness of snow, which we can see.

But, it is not to be identified with the whiteness of snow.

It is closer to the fact that snow is white.

In fact, Wittgenstein will correlate propositions and facts, in the *Tractatus*.

Wittgenstein says that propositions are pictures of facts.

We can see the Frege's influence on the early Wittgenstein, in the discussion of pictures in the early portion of the article.

IV. Frege on truth theories

I mentioned that later philosophers were better able to separate questions about meanings from questions

about truth.

In "The Thought," Frege motivates the discussion of meanings in part by a discussion of truth, though that route is eliminable.

What he does say about truth is interesting, if not always accurate or well-defended.

Frege calls truth a unique and undefinable property, p 37.

Here, his conclusion is too strong, and his argument is poor.

His Berkeleyan worries about correspondence (nothing like an idea but another idea) are not unfounded, but besides the point.

Frege is right to worry about correspondence, about words-worlds connections.

But these worries do not undermine the definability of truth.

They might undermine whether we could know the truth of a given sentence or proposition.

As I mentioned earlier, one option for the person who abandons correspondence theories of truth is to adopt a deflationary perspective.

Deflationism was developed much later than Frege, but we can see hints of it in the article.

It is also worthy of notice that the sentence 'I smell the scent of violets' has just the same content as the sentence 'it is true that I smell the scent of violets'. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth (38).

The following sentence, though, makes it pretty clear that Frege was still a correspondence theorist.

And yet is it not a great result when the scientist after much hesitation and careful inquiry, can finally say, "What I supposed is true"?

Again, our interest in Frege, at this point, has much more to do with his work on meaning than on truth. We will explore truth in greater depth later.

V. Frege on pragmatics

In addition to semantic theories and truth theories, I mentioned in the introduction to the course that philosophers are also interested in the pragmatics of language use.

Pragmatics is what is left over after semantic and truth theories are settled.

The pragmatics of language have to do with how we use language, and what we communicate with it.

Frege's discussion of semantic questions in 'The Thought' involves pragmatic ones as well.

He is strikingly prescient about the irrelevance of certain pragmatic issues.

It makes no difference to the thought whether I use the word 'horse', or 'steed' or 'carthorse' or 'mare'. The assertive force does not extend over that in which these words differ. What is called mood, fragrance, illumination in a poem, what is portrayed by cadence and rhythm, does not belong to the thought (p 39).

Frege is also prescient about the debate over temporal stamps, though again not as clear as we are, in retrospect.

Consider the sentence, "I am typing."

To determine whether it is true or false, we have to specify to whom the 'I' refers.

Let's say that it refers to me, Russell Marcus.

Still, we can not determine the truth-value of the sentence.

For, we have to specify a time.

Sometimes I am typing; sometimes I am not typing.

There is no explicit reference to time in the sentence, but it does seem that there is an implicit reference.

The question is whether the time-stamp is part of the proposition itself, or whether it is part of the pragmatics.

Frege seems to relegate questions about time to pragmatics.

The time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought. If someone wants to say the same today as he expressed yesterday using the word 'today', he must replace this word with 'yesterday'. Although the thought is the same, its verbal expression must be different so that the sense, which would otherwise be affected by the differing times of utterance, is readjusted (40).

But later, he says that the time-stamp is essential for the expression of a complete thought.

The words 'this tree is covered with green leaves' are not sufficient by themselves for the utterance, the time of the utterance is involved as well. Without the time-indication this gives, we have no complete thought, i.e. no thought at all. Only a sentence supplemented by a time-indication and complete in every respect expresses a thought (47).

We will return to questions about demonstratives and indexicals, a bit, though these would be good topics for a term paper.

The line between semantics and pragmatics may look a little fuzzy.

Frege also discusses the hints that terms like 'still' and 'but' add to a sentence, without altering meaning. Compare

I am going to the movie and you are going to the concert

with

I am going to the movie but you are going to the concert.

Is the difference one of meaning or of pragmatics?

How could we decide?

Note that the problem for 'I am typing' arises when we consider the truth value.

For Frege, the factors which determine meaning will be only those that affect truth value.

This is the topic for our next article.