

Handout 3

Thought: Frege

TRUTH. Frege begins by delineating the domain of logic. Logic discovers the laws of thought. But these laws are laws of ‘thinking’ understood as a psychological process. Instead, these laws are concerned with truth. But what is truth? Pontius Pilates did not believe you could define it, nor does Frege. Truth is not a correspondence between something and something else: its use does not indicate any relation. And any definition of truth is futile: in order to advance a definition, you already must have the concept of truth. E.g., in creating a definition you presumably insist that it is a true one. The meaning of ‘true’, he says, is *sui generis*.

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In the way which should not occupy us at the moment, Frege proceeds from the truth of pictures to the truth of sentences. But if sentences are merely noises and shapes, then truth cannot be predicated of them. It must be predicated of what sentences express, of their *thoughts*. And moreover, these thoughts are pretty much defined as bearers of truth. So we could now say that thoughts are senses of sentences.

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Labouring the familiar theme, Frege further insists that thoughts should be sharply distinguished from sense-impressions. Indeed, thoughts are imperceptible.

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RESTRICTIONS ON SEMANTIC SIGNIFICANCE. In a number of influential, and controversial, remarks, and ones that will be of primary importance to us later, Frege identifies sentences and parts of sentences that do not have semantic significance—i.e. those that have no truth value or do not contribute to the truth value of the larger whole.

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IMPERATIVES. In one group fall the sentences expressing commands, requests, wishes. They *are* meaningful, only they are not truth-apt—i.e. they are neither true, nor false. They have no associated content that can be evaluated for its truth or falsehood.

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This by itself is an interesting claim. Is it compelling? Suppose I say to you:

Run! (3-1)

Am I stating anything that is true or false? As Frege sees it, you cannot say:

I agree, ‘Run!’ is true. (3-2)

You cannot react to my utterance (3-1) either by affirming or denying its truth. That is why for such statement the question of truth ‘does not arise’. Is this really so? Cannot you respond to me by saying:

Yes, I should run. (3-3)

An observer may similarly say:

Yes, he should run. (3-4)

What, then, is the *thought* that I am stating with the utterance (3-1)? Perhaps this:

You should run. (3-5)

Of course the two statements (3-1) and (3-5) are not in every respect equivalent. One is an exclamation, the other is not. One is a command, the other a statement of fact (of your duty). But the issue is: Does every command express, next to other contents, a propositional content (a statement of duty) that is either true or false?

Similarly, consider this:

- 1) If he has a gun, run!
- 2) But he has a gun.
- 3) Therefore, run!

(3-6)

Or this maybe:

- 1) Either fight or run!
- 2) But you can’t fight.
- 3) Therefore, run!

(3-7)

Here we have imperatives embedded in a logical inference that seems valid. And if they are so embedded, then they should have truth values assigned to them.

Question 1. Reflect on the arguments just given. What can you say in Frege’s defence?

INTERROGATIVES. Questions, like commands, are also denied truth values. Again, this initially seems plausible:

What is the capital of Japan? (3-8)

does not invite a response:

Yes, what you said is true. (3-9)

But Frege suggests that questions are to be paraphrased as requests, so that (3-8) becomes:

Please tell me what the capital of Japan is. (3-10)

Then they can be assigned truth-conditional content per above.

Question 2. Explain the last claim.

Remark 3. Note that the exchange:

Is it true that Tokyo is the capital of Japan?
Yes, it is true. (3-11)

offers no proof that interrogatives are truth-apt.

Question 4. Explain Remark 3.

ANDS AND BUTS. Within the sentences that are truth-apt there may be components that do not contribute toward their truth value. On the subject of poetic language see Handout 4. Consider here Frege's other example of 'and' and 'but'. Compare:

Lenin kissed Stalin, but Stalin did not kiss Lenin.
Lenin kissed Stalin, and Stalin did not kiss Lenin. (3-12)
Lenin kissed Stalin, Stalin did not kiss Lenin.

Here it seems that all of these sentences record the same fact (or observation). They have the same truth conditions, they express the same thought. But there is *another* aspect of meaning not shared them. That aspect, so called 'tone', is different in these sentences. There is a contrast between Lenin-kissing and Stalin-not-kissing in the first sentence. There is (possibly) a temporal relation indicated in the second sentence, as in an epic poem. There is none of that in the third sentence. As Frege sees it, the third sentence is the least misleading representation of the thought shared by all of these sentences. Ands and buts, while changing the tone, do not change the thought.

Remark 5. We will return this subject in much greater detail in our discussion of Gricean implicatures.