

FREGEAN REFLECTION ON THOUGHT *

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The concept of thought is an umbrella term comprising feelings, emotions, sentiments, descriptions, assertions, facts and what not. According to Frege, philosophy, thought and language are intertwined with each other. It is supposed to

be the hallmark of any philosophical development-conceptual or non-conceptual. It holds the centrality of any philosophical development in general and Frege's philosophy in particular. In fact, Frege's semantic position actually hinges on his very perception of the concept of thought. According to Frege, we do not have sense without thought and the meaning of a sentence cannot be determined without the perception of thought. Early Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 4 says, "A thought is a proposition with a sense." Philosophers since antiquity have deeply been involved in exploring the philosophical implication of the concept of thought. Of course, there underlies a philosophical debate whether Frege's concept of thought is very similar to the concept of ideas of Locke. Frege himself was concerned about this issue. However, closer examination would reveal that Frege's concept of thought is distinct from Lockean concept of ideas. My point of contention is that the concept of thought is central to Frege's philosophy. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to explain and examine with critical outlook the concept of thought as comprehended by Gottlob Frege.

It should be kept in mind that in this paper we examine Frege's concept of thought with regard to his semantic theory. Frege's semantic theory is known as *sense-reference theory*. We think that Frege's semantic theory is primarily associated with the concept of thought. His semantic theory is based on the identification of sense and reference of formalised language. As a referential semanticist, he attempted to ensure the meaning of language with regard to the concept of truth. Now, the concept of truth cannot be determined without the concept of thought. According to Frege, the meaning of an expression is determined on the basis of the sense which the expression conveys. He at the same time contended that what language is meant to communicate is thought. In this regard, Frege brings the concept of thought. He conceived sense in terms of *mode of presentation*. Unlike him, the other referential semanticists, namely Bertrand Russell, Saul Kripke, etc. were non-committal about the functional aspect of thought. They developed no-sense theory of reference. For them, reference plays the all important role in determining the relationship between language and reality. Every name has two aspects, namely, denotation and connotation (*De re and de dicto*). A name denotes an object. According to this theory, the name (language) and what it denotes or refers to (object) are altogether different

entities. The relationship between language and reality is made possible because language adequately refers to what exists independently of language. Thus, in a sense they developed *linguistic realism* in the sense that every name either denotes or connotes a real object or entity. This is the hallmark of referential theory of meaning. A sophisticated version of referential theory holds that a sentence is *to be meaningful* if it refers something other than the sentence itself and there must be a referential connection between the sentence and what it refers to. Thus, it makes sense to say that the *referential connection* constitutes the meaning of the sentence. Many referential semanticists established the relationship between language and reality in accordance with the theory of reference. Importantly, many of them forfeited or overlooked the mode of presentation, that is, the sense of an object. The sense of an object or the mode of presentation of an object is in some sense or other is linked with the connotational aspect of language.

Interestingly, unlike the aforesaid semanticists, Frege offered us a different interpretation of semantic approach of language which eventually opened up a new dimension of semantics. He suggested that the problem of meaning is not associated primarily with the referential aspect of language; rather it is associated with the mode of presentation of language what he termed *assense*. Thus, unlike the other semanticists, he developed sense-theory of reference. The debate between no-sense theory of reference and sense theory of reference is philosophically revolutionary because on the basis of this division subsequent developments in referential semantics took a radical turn. We cannot delve into the developments considering the scope of this paper. Our primary objective is to examine the philosophical implications of Fregean thought.

The concept of thought

What then is thought according to Frege? How did the concept of thought play a significant role in developing his referential semantics? Whether thought was conditioned to his development of sense-theory of reference? These are some of the important questions that need to be taken care of. Frege had elaborated his concept of thought in his article ‘The Thought: A Logical Inquiry’ (‘Der Gedanke’ is the

untranslated name of the same work). His distinction of sense and reference (Über Sinn and Bedeutung, 1892) is deeply rooted on his concept of thought. He, in spite of being a referential semanticist and anti- psychologist, incorporated the relevance of *empty proper names* in his philosophy of language. In this sense, he perhaps may not be treated as an absolute semantic realist like Russell, Kripke. He contended that proper names must have connotation without exception besides having denotation. His sense theory of reference is grounded on his concept of thought as he repeatedly said that the sense or mode of presentation of an expression cannot be comprehended without thought. Thus, his philosophy of language had become comprehensive which played a significant role in the analytic tradition. What would then be the ontological status of thought? Of course, Frege in his aforesaid article involved in a discussion regarding the *ontological status of thoughts*. In this article he explored what we actually know when we take something to be true. His central claim was that to take something as true is to enter into a relation with an abstract entity called a 'thought', which to him is a specific sort of meaning expressible through sentences. For Frege, the word 'true' indicates the aim of logic. Unlike other sciences which take truth as their goal, logic tends to determine the laws of truth. He held that truth is indefinable. In this regard, he rejected the claim that truth may be predicated of pictures and ideas because in such cases it requires a correspondence between a picture or an idea and their representations in the external world. He presented three arguments against all such theories: First, Frege held that such theories go against the use of the word 'true' as they require a relation between two things, which the word actually does not assert. Secondly, if two items correspond perfectly, they would be identical, but this is not what a person using the word 'true' wishes to say. Thirdly, correspondence is also qualified to certain respects and admits of degree, whereas truth does not.

Sentence, sense of a sentence and thought

In any meaningful expression, the word 'true' appears as an adjective. When we ascribe true to something, we do not actually add something to already existing phenomena. Frege opined that it is the same thing to say that 'I smell the scent of violets' and 'It is true that I smell the scent of violets'. Truth is not like a material property like 'bitter', 'lilac-smelling' etc. The question of truth and falsity always

arises in a sentence through thought process. What then is a sentence? By a sentence Frege meant 'a series of sounds; but only when it has a sense'². He also made it clear that every series of sounds with a sense is not a sentence. Thus, it is clear that it is for the sense of a sentence that the question of truth and falsity arises. Now what does the sense of a sentence mean? Is the sense of a sentence an idea?

Frege opined that it is the *thought* for which the question of truth and falsity arises. The concept of truth, i.e., the meaning of a sentence cannot be comprehended without the concept of thought. However, while talking about the concept of truth within the realm of his semantic approach, Frege conceived different levels of thought. This actually helps Frege to deviate from Locke's ideas. Now the question arises: What did he mean by thought? Dummett opined that "A thought is the sense expressed by a complete sentence—a sentence which is capable of being used to make an assertion or to ask a sentential question (a question requiring an answer 'Yes' or 'No')"³. For Frege, thought is something immaterial and everything material and perceptible is excluded from the sphere of thought. Again, it is not a mental content. Thought, for Frege, is objective and independent of humans. He believed that the concept of truth is closely linked with every concept of thought. Until and unless we do not know a thing to have a property truly we will not be able to recognise the property of that thing. So the concept of truth is something very unique.

Now a question may arise: Do all types of grammatical sentences have sense or thought? For Frege, the sense of imperative sentence is not such that for which the question of truth may arise. Exclamatory sentences express one's feelings, wishes, etc. So here also the concept of thought, according to him, seems to be lacking.

What about interrogative sentences? Here he distinguished between two kinds of interrogative sentences. Word-questions do not have sense, for the sense completes after receiving the answer which is expected. But this is not the case with sentence-questions. We expect either 'yes' or 'no' from a sentence-question. The

² Frege, Gottlob, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry", *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 259 (Jul., 1956), p. 292.

³ Dummett, Michael, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, London: Duckworth, 1981, Chap- 11, p. 364.

answer 'yes' means that the thought which was already contained in the interrogative sentence is laid down as true. In this way an interrogative sentence can be deduced to an indicative sentence. But direct indicative sentence contains something more i.e., the assertion. Thus, an indicative sentence contains two things –the content, i.e., the thought and the assertion. Both remains so closely joined in an indicative sentence that they very often seem inseparable.

Frege thus admitted three layers of thought- The apprehension of thought-thinking. The recognition of the truth of a thought – judgement. The manifestation of a thought –assertion. Generally, in science we advance in this way. First, a thought is apprehended which is expressed in a sentence –question and after appropriate investigation, the thought is finally recognised to be true. After that we declare the recognition of truth in the form of an indicative sentence. Frege contended that the use of the word 'true' does not add any extra content to it and even if we use it the real assertive force lies not in it, but it is contained within the form of the indicative sentence. Again, a form of an indicative sentence may lose its assertive force, if not speak seriously, as in poetry or in the case of actor- because it is only acting, the actor asserts nothing in his part. Thus, question about the assertive force of an indicative sentence must be answered negatively if required seriousness lacks.

He opined that thoughts may be expressed without being asserted the same thing. He contended that the *assertion of a thought* is a separate thing and the *recognition of its truth-value* is another, that is, one can say something true and yet not assert it. This difference can be explained by sentence-forms and the conventions surrounding their use. Thoughts and their associated truth-values exist independently of use. Frege in his article described several properties of thought. He argued that thoughts are imperceptible and it cannot be interacted with our senses. Here he used the example of Sun rise. The Sun rising may be sensed, but the Sun is rising is a thought with a truth-value and it can never be sensed. It has rather to be grasped by some other means.

Other properties of thought that he discussed are the under and over-determination of thoughts by sentential contents. Thoughts may be expressed in a sentence containing more content than that is needed to express the thought. He, for

example, cited expressive and poetic words in a sentence which are not required for the expression of thought because if we observe logically, such words are extraneous in spite of their use in our everyday language. Again, thoughts may not be expressed clearly due to certain features lacking in a sentence. Frege in his article used the word 'there' to explain under-determination of thoughts. Suppose, a sentence uses the word 'there' along with an accompanying demonstration, for example, a pointed finger. Here, we cannot grasp the thought by looking at the sentence only. Rather we have to know some extra-linguistic fact, that is, the pointed finger to know the thought genuinely.

He then engaged in a discussion regarding the nature of thoughts of sentences containing 'I'. Because he felt that the occurrence of the word 'I' in a sentence gives rise to some issues. For him, knowledge of language is a different thing when it contains proper names. For example, two people may not associate the same thought to the expression 'Dr. Gustav Lauben' if they do not know that they refer to the same individual. Thus, the sense of a sentence containing a proper name depends on how whatever it refers to is presented. For 'this can happen in different ways and every such way corresponds with a particular sense of a sentence containing a proper name'.³

For Frege, 'everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way in which he is presented to no-one else'⁴. So if someone thinks that he is in pain, he will understand it in the primitive way and only he can grasp the thought determined in this way. After that if the individual wants to communicate with others about his pain and thereby use the expression 'I am in pain', he will use the word 'I' in a sense which can be grasped by others, by doing which he actually uses the associated conditions of his utterance to express the thought.

Thoughts and ideas

³ Frege, Gottlob, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry", *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 259 (Jul., 1956), p. 292.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.298.

Frege maintained that *thoughts are not ideas*. Ideas belong to the inner world. Ideas cannot be seen or touched. It belongs to the content of whose consciousness to belong. Thus, an idea always needs a bearer. Again, one bearer has only one idea. No two bearers can have the same idea. For that there needs to be a consciousness which will know that the idea which belongs to the content of one consciousness is the same to the idea which belongs to the content of another consciousness. But this is not possible. If thoughts remain mere items of one's consciousness, they and their truth-value will become relative because it is impossible to share the content of one's consciousness with other. Again, thoughts are not the objects of the outer world. Objects of the outer world can be smelled, touched, seen or perceived with the help of sense-impressions. Thoughts cannot be so. For Frege, truth-value is attached to thought, but not to sensed objects. Thus thoughts are not external objects.

Then what is the locus of thought? Frege prescribed that a third realm must be recognised. A thought corresponds with ideas in that it cannot be perceived with senses but with things to which it is connected. However, it differs from the latter in that the ideas need a bearer to the content of whose consciousness to belong, Thoughts exist independently of any bearer. A thought is not true for the first time when it is discovered. It is true forever. It is timelessly true independent of whether anyone takes it to be true. Thoughts exist independent of human beings and it is for the humans to grasp the thoughts. Here, he took the example of the Pythagorean Theorem which is a mutually grasped formula and the truth of which has nothing to do with any person's consciousness. The thought one expresses in the Pythagorean Theorem can be recognised by others just as much as by him. That means, an individual is not its bearer. Otherwise, it would have been 'her Pythagorean Theorem', 'his Pythagorean theorem' instead of 'the Pythagorean Theorem'.

If it were the case, the truth and falsity of the Pythagorean Theorem could not also be recognised universally. For in such a case truth and falsity would characterise only the content of one's consciousness, it would be applicable only in the sphere of one's consciousness. But this is not the case. Identical things have the same properties and since Frege found that thoughts and ideas have divergent properties, so it follows that thoughts are not ideas. Frege then challenged the sceptical claim that ideas are all that exist. He argued that if thoughts and ideas were the same thing then there would

have been no common science in which we might engage in the discussion of truth and falsity regarding their various contradictions. If it were the case, we could not even assert publicly that a thought is not an idea and all these discussions would have been futile because all these may be one's ideas and belong to the content of one's consciousness only, that is, there is nothing to be public and everything belongs to one's inner world-the world of sense-impressions.

This point may be emphasised in another way. Suppose, I may have an idea of myself but I am not identical with this idea. That means the content of one's consciousness should be sharply distinguished from the object of his thought. For example, if I state something about my brother, I do not confuse it with the idea that I have of my brother. Frege contended that not only an object but an idea can also be the common object of thought for more than one people. Here he took the example of an invalid's pain and two doctors diagnosing the patient. Both the doctors have their own idea regarding the particular disease by which the patient is suffering. However, their ideas are not the object of their reflection. They actually reflect and try to find out the cause of the pain so that they may treat the patient well.

Frege then asserted that ideas cannot be all that exists. If it were, psychology would have contained all sciences within it. It would have been the judge over all the sciences. It would have subordinate logic and mathematics. Everything is not idea. One can grasp the thought which other people can grasp. Many people remain engaged in a particular research. We are not bearers of thoughts. We are bearers of ideas. Thoughts exist independent of us. Thoughts are things of the outer world. We do not have a thought as we have sense-impressions. We do not see a thought as we see a star. Thus, he used the special expression 'apprehend' with thought. Facts are true thoughts. Thoughts are timelessly true or false. The realm of thoughts exists outside of time and space, although their constituents are graspable.

Influence of Fregean thought on the external world

Finally, the question may be raised: How does a thought act? Frege answered 'by being apprehended and taken to be true. This is the process of the inner world of a thinker which can have further consequences in this inner world and which,

encroaching on the sphere of the will, can also make noticeable in the outer world'⁵. The grasping of thoughts leads us to action. In this way, thoughts have an indirect causal impact on the world. Our actions are usually prepared by thinking and judgement. So thoughts possess an indirect influence on the motion of masses in the human world.

In spite of these entire, one may regard thoughts as unreal because they do not seem to have direct influence on the events of the world compared to that of other external objects. But thoughts are not really unreal. Frege opined that their reality is of a different nature from that of other perceptible and sensible objects. Regarding the nature of thoughts Frege in his paper concluded: "They can be true without being apprehended by a thinker and are not wholly unreal even then, at least if they could be apprehended and by this means be brought into operation"⁶.

Frege used the idea of thought as an intermediary between a linguistic sentence and its referent. On the other hand, in order to deal with his puzzle of identity statements, he introduced his revolutionary distinction of sense and reference in his article 'On Sense and Meaning' ("Über Sinn and Bedeutung") in 1892. Frege realised that there must be some way in which two different linguistic expressions can refer to the same object. Then he solved his puzzle simply by a difference in the mode of presentation. Now, if two different presentations or two senses refer to the same object, it is logical to conclude that the connection between the linguistic sign and the sense is of pure convention. However, the connection between sense and referent is not only an arbitrary connection of this kind. The connection between sense and referent are determined uniquely because when we hear or read a linguistic expression we at once grasp its sense. Senses do not exist within any specific individual, but they are communal. If senses were to be determined by one person then there would be no shared understanding, no successful communication.

Frege's distinction between sense and thought

⁵ Frege, Gottlob, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry", *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 259 (Jul., 1956), p.310.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 311.

The questions now arise here are: Is thought and sense same? Are they different? What is the distinction between sense and thought according to Frege? If we understand sense as an abstract object by which we understand certain linguistic expressions then thoughts may simply be said to be the logical extension of this to complete sentences, i.e., thoughts are the senses of sentences. Thus, one understands a sentence by grasping its thought where the question of truth and falsity arises. Such an understanding of sentence, where the question of truth-value arises, leads us to say that Frege understood thoughts to be almost interchangeable with the notion of propositions. For Frege, thoughts exist only in the assertive form of a sentence. Thus, the thought of a sentence is its meaning. Now it may be asked: How can we move from the sense of individual linguistic expressions to the thought of the whole sentence? Here, Frege introduced his another principle known as the principle of *Compositionality of Meaning*. According to this principle, ‘there is no more to the meaning of a sentence than what is determined by the meanings of the words of which it is composed and the way in which they are arranged’⁷. That means, a sentence’s meaning is constructed from the meaning of its individual parts and the syntactic structure of those parts.

According to Frege, *sense refers to some physical objects in the world but a thought refers to a truth-value*. Thus, when one utters a sentence containing a thought, it refers to either *the true* or *the false*. Now, let us finally illustrate the distinction between sense and thought with the help of a classic example that Frege had used: ‘The present king of France is wise’. In this example, we see that the individual terms all have a sense; but the subject of the sentence has no reference. Thus, it follows that we can grasp the meaning of the sentence because we can understand the senses associated with the expressions. But the sentence can neither be true nor false because there is no thought associated with the sentence which can refer to a truth-value.

Language and thought

⁷ Morris, Michael, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, Chap. 2, p. 25.

After having discussed all these the question may be raised: Why, after all, Frege felt the need of introducing his concept of thought while analysing his philosophy of language? Long before Frege, it was considered that language is a necessary vehicle for human thought. Frege asserted that ‘what language is meant to communicate is thought’. For him, it was the very insight that human thought depends in certain ways on language or on symbols in general, that compelled him to analyse the logical structure of thought in order to investigate the workings of language. Indeed it seems that language itself was never the primary object of his philosophical interest. Rather, most of the general philosophical issues upon which Frege reflected, aside from his more specialised projects in the philosophy of mathematics, had to do with the nature of thought in general and its relation to logic, to truth, to language, and to the objects it can be about. That is why, in 1918, Frege published the article entitled “The Thought: A Logical Enquiry”, in which he described his motives for investigating the nature of language:

“I am not in the happy position here of a mineralogist who shows his hearers a mountain crystal. I cannot put a thought in the hands of my readers with the request that they should minutely examine it from all sides. I have to content myself with presenting the reader with a thought, in itself immaterial, dressed in sensible linguistic form. The metaphorical aspect of language presents difficulties. The sensible always breaks in and makes expression metaphorical and so improper. So a battle with language takes place and I am compelled to occupy myself with language although it is not my proper concern here. I hope I have succeeded in making clear to my readers what I want to call a thought.”⁸

⁸ Frege, Gottlob, “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry”, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 259 (Jul., 1956), p. 292.

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