

THE CLOSING PASSAGE OF FREGE'S
 "ÜBER SINN UND BEDEUTUNG"

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Suppose that the relation between name and reference is always arbitrary. How does this relate to Frege's distinction between sense and reference? David Coder has claimed¹ that

"we must, I think, take Frege to be trying to enforce the distinction between sense and reference by reducing to absurdity the proposition that the relation between name and reference is always arbitrary," because this proposition "directly contradicts the view that names have, besides reference, sense." (pp. 339-340)

Coder argues that if the name/reference relation is always arbitrary, then the sense/reference distinction is vitiated because this leads to the result that "' $a = b$ ' is no more informative than ' $a = a$ '." (p. 341) Frege's justification for attributing both sense and reference to singular terms is then undermined, for the notion of sense could not then be functioning to explain ' $a = b$ ' as being more informative than ' $a = a$ '. Coder's argument is as follows.

- (1) Suppose that the relation between name and reference is always arbitrary.
- (2) To know what ' $a = b$ ' is about, one must know what ' a ' and ' b ' refer to.
- (3) Given (1), the only way to find out what the reference of a singular term is, is to have it stipulated.
- (4) To know that ' $a = b$ ' is true, the stipulation chains for ' a ' and ' b ' must be ended at some point where some object x is stipulated as the reference of both ' a ' and ' b '.
- (5) "'But then ' $a = b$ ' is no more informative than ' $a = a$ '." (p. 341)

Coder seems to base this result (i.e., (5)) on the fact that, in order to know that ' $a = a$ ' is true, we must reach the same end point as is described

1. In "The opening passage of Frege's 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung'," *Philosophia*, vol. 4 (1974), pp. 339-343.

in (4). His explanation of this result is that, if the relations between '*a*' and '*b*' and their reference are arbitrary, then '*a* = *b*' is, "if true, trivially true." (p. 341) I will dispute this result with the aid of the closing passage of Frege's "Über Sinn und Bedeutung." We will see that the informativeness of an identity sentence is *not* limited by either the arbitrary nature of the relation between its terms and their reference, or the fact that any identity sentence is, if true, then trivially true.

For Frege, an arbitrary relation seems to be one which is fixed as a matter of convention. Opposed to this are, e.g., those relations (both necessary and contingent) which involve objects and the concepts which they fall under. A sentence which is true in virtue of expressing something about an arbitrary relation does not express any "proper knowledge," this being, presumably, knowledge about objects.² If identity is interpreted as a relation between signs, then a true identity sentence would express the "knowledge" that both of its terms have the same reference. This knowledge would be arbitrary not merely because the relation between a name and its reference is arbitrary, but because the relation *between the signs* of having-the-same-reference is arbitrary.

If identity is interpreted as a relation "of a thing to itself, and indeed one in which each thing stands to itself but to no other thing," ("On Sense and Reference," p. 56) then a true identity sentence would express the proper knowledge that the reference of its terms is self-identical. Given the triviality of self-identity, then *any* identity sentence is, if true, trivially true. In terms of proper knowledge, '*a* = *b*' is no more informative than '*a* = *a*'. Hence, if we are to explain '*a* = *b*' as being more informative than '*a* = *a*', we must do so in terms of something other than that information which they express.

Frege's idea, as stated in the closing passage of "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," was to say that "the sense of '*b*' may differ from that of '*a*', and thereby the thought expressed in '*a* = *b*' differs from that of '*a* = *a*'." In that case the two sentences do not have the same cognitive value." ("On Sense and Reference," p. 78) Whatever a sense is taken to be, as long as '*a*' and '*b*' are different sign-types, then someone might associate different senses with them. This is irrespective of whether or not '*a*' and '*b*' do in fact express different senses. Once someone knows that '*a* = *b*' is true, *then* it is no longer any more informative *for him* than is '*a* = *a*'. However, what he would know is that, as the reference for '*a*' and '*b*' is the same object, then to talk about *a* is the same as to talk about *b*, i.e., any characterization which fits the one will fit the other. Whether or not '*a*' and '*b*' do express different senses, this information is something more than that information which follows from the knowledge that '*a* = *a*' is true.

Even though the end point of coming to know that '*a* = *a*' and '*a* = *b*' are

2. See "On sense and reference," in Geach and Black, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford (1952), p. 57.

true is the same, the ways in which we get there are different. Frege points this out in the remainder of his closing passage: "If we understand by 'judgment' the advance from the thought to its truth value, as in the above paper, we can also say that the judgments are different." ("On Sense and Reference," p. 78) With ' $a = b$ ', we must start out from two different points, i.e., from ' a ' and from ' b '. For ' $a = a$ ', we only need to know that ' a ' has reference. In conjunction with our knowledge of the convention that the reference of a sign-type, though arbitrarily determined, does not vary, this can give us the knowledge that ' $a = a$ ' is true.

Where any of Coder's chains of stipulations ends, is where we find some replacement for a name for which we do know which object it is arbitrarily related to. In other words, what is required to identify the reference of any singular term is that we know something about the language as it is arbitrarily related to the world. To know that ' $a = b$ ' is true requires that we know, in addition to the convention that ' a ' names a , the convention that ' b ' names this same object.

Even a nonarbitrary name/reference relation does not make any difference with this procedure. Coder claims that the relation between a definite description and its sense is *not* arbitrary, for "its sense is a function of the senses of its components." (p. 340) Given that this name/sense relation is nonarbitrary, then the relation between name and reference could also be nonarbitrary. Still, how would this enable us to identify the reference of a definite description in a nonstipulatory fashion? What we would need to know is which object its descriptor picks out. As this descriptor can only be a term which is conventionally affixed to some characteristic, then it seems that this characteristic (or, that object which it characterizes) must be stipulated. Hence the process of coming to know the reference of a definite description is no different from that for proper names.

Here we see Frege's motivation for attempting to establish the sense/reference distinction for both names and descriptors. At bottom, the relation between any piece of language and the world must rest on *some* arbitrary relation. Rather than vitiating the sense/reference distinction, this necessitates at least some version of it if language is to function informatively. In regard to the relative informativeness of identity sentences, it is not the end point of the knowing process which matters. Rather, what matters is that knowledge which we must have in order to know, and so which follows from our knowing, that a given identity sentence is true.

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