

## Introduction

Knowledge is hard to keep out of an account of thought; or at least, out of an account of rational thought: for, whatever definition one might prefer, it is usually agreed upon that rationality is a means of attaining knowledge. As Timothy Williamson puts it<sup>1</sup>, knowledge is what belief aspires to: and indeed it seems reasonable that any description of rational thought should take into account at some stage the fact that thinkers come – or, at least, intend to come – to know; that is, the fact that the point – or, at least, one of the points – of thinking *is* knowing. Thus if knowledge is closely related to rational thought, another central question which any theory of mind should concern itself with is the definition of rationality. And yet, despite the heavy contemporary emphasis on the links between philosophy and the "cognitive" sciences, the notions of knowledge and rationality themselves remain in general fairly marginal within the philosophy of mind.

In this dissertation, I would like to examine how Gottlob Frege tried to provide plausible answers to these questions by positing his notions of sense and thought – entities both language- and mind-independent which would nonetheless enable the mind to attain knowledge and make rational thought possible. I will also examine how post-Fregean thinkers have modified these notions, and, accordingly, how their conceptions of rationality and knowledge differ from Frege's.

Post-Fregean theorists can be seen, very broadly, as falling into either one of two main camps: those who acknowledge the need for a notion of sense akin to Frege's, but consider that Frege's conception must be modified and upgraded in some way (typically, in order to make its metaphysics more palatable); and those who reject the need for the introduction of sense into an account of thought and/or language

---

<sup>1</sup> Williamson 2000b, 1

altogether. In this dissertation, I will focus on the former, that is, on theorists who have attempted to give a modified version of Fregean sense; however, reference will also be made to certain non-Fregean theories (such as functional and evolutionary accounts of meaning and thought) at points where it is relevant for my argument. Crudely put, the main aim of this dissertation is to argue for the plausibility and preferability of Frege's original doctrine of sense by bringing into relief the shortcomings of the revisers' arguments, and by weighing these shortcomings against the problems in Frege's own account. A large part of my argument, then, is mostly negative: I claim that the problems of post-Fregean theories, both individually and collectively, far outweigh those of Frege's conception.

Of course, this is not to deny that the Fregean corpus contains obscurities and inconsistencies, or that his theory of sense leaves plenty of room for correction and expansion. But I do believe that its central tenets are clear and coherent, and that this conceptual core of Frege's doctrine fares considerably better in the explanation of the phenomena which it is intended to account for than any of the later alternatives which significantly depart from Frege. By examining how all these different accounts (beginning with Frege's) have attempted to solve the problem of identity, and how they differ from each other as regards language, psychology, and metaphysics, I will pinpoint their respective shortcomings, thus building up through accretion to my main argument – that no alternative account has yet provided a solution to Frege's Puzzle that is a significant improvement on the original proposal. This, put in a nutshell, is the main thesis presented in this work: that it was Frege who first formulated the question we are dealing with, and it was Frege who gave the best answer so far to it.

This thesis has two parts. Part I deals exclusively with Frege's doctrine of sense. Taking as its starting point the problem of identity, both Frege's formulation of it and his proposed solution – the doctrine of sense – are seen within the framework



of their original context. A detailed account of the relations of Frege's sense to language, psychology, and metaphysics is given. Some of the main objections to Frege's conception of sense are outlined, as well as some possible replies to them. Particular emphasis is given to Frege's motivations for his ontological causes: more specifically, Frege's metaphysics is described as resulting from a combination of his strong anti-psychologism and his particular version of rationalism, which, following Tyler Burge, I have called "pragmatic rationalism".

Part II considers the work of certain post-Fregean thinkers who have modified the Fregean conception of sense and Thoughts in different ways. Chapter 2 discusses John McDowell's and Mark Sainsbury's Davidson-inspired attempts to provide a language based sense constituted by knowledge of reference, and conclude that their Davidsonian underpinnings ultimately undermine them. Chapter 3 considers Michael Dummett's highly influential anti-realist interpretation of Fregean sense. Finally, I examine in Chapter 4 Christopher Peacocke's theory of concepts, both in its earlier version (based on primitively compelling possession conditions), and in its more recent one (involving implicit conceptions).

A note on terminology: in standard psychological usage, as well as in certain philosophical literature, the term "concept" is employed to refer to any sort of subjective mental representation or idea, often including memories, images, perceptions, or even neural patterns<sup>2</sup>. In this work, however, I will use "concept" in a quite different, and very specific, way: namely, to refer to what Frege calls *Sinn*, sense, as opposed to *Bedeutung*, which I will translate as reference<sup>3</sup>. Thus

---

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the various ways in which the term "concept" is used in contemporary psychology and philosophy of mind, cf. the Introduction to Margolis and Laurence 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The English translation of the German term *Bedeutung* is a vexed issue in Frege scholarship, with proposals ranging from the fairly common *reference* and *denotation* to the rarer *nominatum*, *designation*, *meaning*, *significance*, *indication*, *semantic value*, *semantic role*, *truth-value potential*, and sometimes even the option of leaving the term untranslated altogether. (For a discussion of the problems involved in the translation of *Bedeutung*, cf. the Introduction to Beaney 1997, 4). Although the term reference perhaps does not fully convey all the nuances of the German original, I have opted for it as the most prevalent standard translation, and in order to avoid confusion with Russell's notion of denotation.

concepts, as I will use the term in this account, are nothing other than Fregean senses<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, I will use the term "content" to translate Frege's *Gedanke* (plural, *Gedanken*; literally, a thought) – what is usually termed a Fregean proposition<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note that Frege distinguishes between singular and complex senses – where a complex sense would be a *Gedanke*, composed of simple senses (hence the expression "Frege's theory of sense" includes his doctrine both of senses and of *Gedanken*). The same relation holds, in my terminology, between concepts and contents: I will take a complex concept to be a content, which is composed of simple concepts. Given that Fregean contents (or Thoughts) are complex concepts (or senses), I will thus sometimes use the term "sense" as a carry-all expression to denote both kinds of entities.

---

<sup>4</sup> A potential source of confusion lies in the fact that Frege had his own, and very elaborate, notion of concept (*Begriff*) as the referent of a predicate. As mentioned, in this work a concept will be regarded as equivalent to a Fregean sense, not to a Fregean *Begriff*. This matter is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Gedanke* is often translated as "Thought", with a capital T, as opposed to the merely psychological, lower-case "thought", which would be *Denken*. For clarity's sake, in most of this dissertation I translate *Gedanke* as "content", even though this translation restricts application of the term to the contents of rational mental states. However, when dealing with Frege's own discussion of the doctrine of sense in Chapter 1, I have preferred to respect his terminology and thus employ the terms "sense" and "Thought" (which remain nonetheless respectively interchangeable with "concept" and "content").