

# The Strengths and Weaknesses of Frege's Critique of Locke

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This essay will explore a number of issues raised by the approaches to the philosophy of language offered by Locke and Frege. This will involve an exploration of, in particular, Frege's criticism of Locke's 'psychologism', and Frege's view that thought is objective and intrinsically public. The essay will also show that Frege's advances on Locke do not go far enough, or at least do not satisfactorily and unambiguously settle the problems which Frege detects in Locke. They do not go far enough if we want to achieve an effective account of the relationship between language, thought and the world. It is assumed here that the primary objective of a philosophy of language is to illuminate the role which language plays in linking thought with the world and that it should be judged in terms of its effectiveness in doing that. My contention will be that Frege is less than effective because of unresolved tensions in his philosophy of language.

Locke is a good starting point for reflecting on language because he presents 'in a clear and simple way the background to analytic philosophy of language' (Morris 2007, p.5). As Morris puts it, 'Locke's general theory of language initially strikes many as extremely natural. His views about what words are and what language is for are shared with almost the whole analytic tradition' (Morris 2007, p.5). However, at the same time his approach has been the object of thoroughgoing critique, and 'Frege's philosophy of language can be said to begin with a rejection of what seem to be central features of Locke's view' (Morris 2007, p.5). What are those central features?

The starting point for Locke's theory of language is his empiricism and rejection of innate ideas of the kind put forward in Descartes' rationalism. For Locke, unlike Descartes, the mind at birth is a tabula rasa which is subsequently populated through experience. The contrast with Descartes is stark. 'For Descartes, human minds are created already in possession of certain innate foundational ideas or primitive notions, such as those of God, self, existence, thought, extension, and the union of mind and body' (Phemister, Introduction to Locke's 'An Essay concerning Human Understanding,' 2008, p.xii). For Locke, a person's knowledge is acquired only through experience; that is, experience through the senses which results in our ideas. 'This great Source, of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly on our senses, and derived by them to the Understanding, I call SENSATION' (An Essay concerning Human Understanding Book 2, Chapter 1, paragraph 3). This causal theory of perception provides the basis for Locke's philosophy of language.

There are a number of key points at the foundation of Locke's view of the relationship between language, thought, and experience. First, language is necessary for people to communicate with one another. It is a necessary condition of social cooperation as Locke points out. (See 'An Essay concerning Human Understanding' Book 3, Chapter 2, paragraph 1).

Second- and this is critical for an understanding of the contrast between Frege and Locke- what is communicated are the private ideas of individual people. Ideas are

internal to individual minds and are intrinsically private. The privacy of individual ideas makes finding ways of communicating all the more necessary.

Third, for Locke, it is ideas that are the basis of thought. Thought, therefore, consists of the ideas in individuals' heads. This is further underlined by Locke's claim that it is not actual objects in the world that we have knowledge of. We can never directly know those objects. Rather, what we know are our *ideas* about those objects in so far as we have engaged with them through the senses. In this way, Locke is firmly - contra Putnam and Kripke- in the 'internalist' camp of seeing meanings as being in the head..

Fourth, for Locke words are the basic atomic components of language. They are the way in which people communicate their ideas to others, and the meaning of a word is the idea it represents. This is consistent with Locke's underlying nominalism which sees reality as essentially atomistic and consisting of particulars. On this view words represent the particulars which are experienced through the senses.

There is a commonsense simplicity and plausibility about Locke's view, but Frege's philosophy of language demonstrates a number of key problems. Frege's approach moves the understanding of language forward in highly significant ways which have subsequently been deeply influential. The key problems with Locke from a Fregean point of view are examined in what follows.

For Frege, Locke's approach presents a deeply problematic view of the nature of meaning because of what he regards as Locke's 'psychologism'. To see why Frege arrives at this view of Locke we need to go back to the foundations of Frege's own thinking.

The starting point of Frege's philosophy is his approach to the philosophy of mathematics, in particular arithmetic and his attempt, contra Kant, to develop an approach which rests on the assumption that arithmetic and logic fall within the same conceptual field. ('Frege Explained' Weiner 2004, chapter 2). As Frege himself puts it, there 'is no such thing as a peculiarly arithmetical mode of inference that cannot be reduced to the general inference-modes of logic'. (Quoted in Kanterian 2012, p.2). Frege's work on language, sense and reference, and his attacks on empiricists and others, flow from this fundamental concern with the logical basis of arithmetic and its implications for our broader understanding of meaning and thought. (Kanterian 2012, p.3).

It is this preoccupation with the logical basis of mathematics and its extension into other branches of philosophical understanding, in particular language, which leads Frege to the view that it is necessary to develop a new language free from the ambiguity and confusion of ordinary language. 'With the aid of a calculus, such a language would enable us to settle the truth and validity of philosophical claims and arguments' (Kanterian 2012, p.7). Frege is explicit about this when he claims that 'we could reason in metaphysics and morals similarly to how we reason in

geometry and analysis'. (Quoted in Kanterian 2012, p.7). <sup>1</sup> This is the thinking behind Frege's 'logicism'.

The connection between Frege's logicism and his critique of Locke is clear. Reducing thought to its logical foundations is, for Frege, to display the conditions of *objective* thought. But if, as for Locke, thought consists only of the subjective 'ideas' in people's heads, and if language provides, as it does for Locke, symbolic expression of those subjective ideas, there is no guarantee that our language will express objective truth. It is subverted by Locke's 'psychologism' and the associated pitfalls of ordinary language. As Dummett has put it, for Frege natural<sup>2</sup> language 'came to appear to him more of an obstacle than a guide in logical and philosophical enquiries' (Dummett 1993, p.5). We need to penetrate beneath ordinary language to its inner logical and objective truths. Or, as Dummett has put it, Frege saw the need to achieve 'the extrusion of thoughts from the mind' (Dummett 1993, p.22).

The objectivity of a thought for Frege is further captured by Dummett. Frege 'allows that grasping a thought is a mental act: but is an act whereby the mind apprehends that which is external to it in the sense of existing independently of being grasped by that or any other subject' (Dummett 1993, p.22). Put simply, this amounts to the claim that what is true is the case whether or not subjects consider it to be true. For example, the number '1' symbolises the abstract and real entity 1 but is not the same as that entity. In Frege's philosophy of language the True and the False are the objective referents of all propositions and, so it seems, exist in some way <sup>3</sup> which is independent of the subjective mind. Frege himself sums up his position in the following principle: 'Always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective'. (Quoted in Miller 2007, p.37).

These issues resurface in relation to Frege's concept of sense and his account of the relationship between sense and reference. As Michael Beaney has put it: 'The distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is undoubtedly the most widely and influential element of Frege's philosophy, and...it was certainly viewed by Frege as playing a crucial role in the justification of his logicist project' (Beaney 1996, p.151). He uses the concept of sense to tackle a number of puzzles about direct reference; for example, puzzles relating to bearerless names, substitution in belief contexts, negative existentials, and the informativeness of identity statements. In

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<sup>1</sup> In this respect Frege was influenced by Leibniz. (See Kanterian 2012, p.8-9).

<sup>2</sup> A W Moore has described Frege's attitude towards natural language as follows: 'He was largely contemptuous of natural language, which he held to suffer from all sorts of defects which hamper clear thinking' (Moore 2012 p.197).

<sup>3</sup> The 'in some way' expression is used here given the different interpretations that have been offered of Frege's account of objectivity. For some, Frege posits some kind of Platonic 'third' realm, while others (including Dummett in Dummett 1993) seek to demythologise Frege's account of objectivity. For discussion see Tyler Burge 'Frege on Knowing the Third Realm' *Mind*, vol. 101, No. 404, October 1992, pp.633-650; also B. Scot Rousse 'Demythologising the Third Realm: Frege on Grasping Thoughts' *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy*, Volume 3, Number 1, 2015, pp. 1-14.

developing the notion of sense, Frege moves well beyond Locke (and Mill) by recognising that: 'In addition to having semantic values, expressions also have semantic properties which determine what those semantic values are. The property which determines semantic value is the property of having *sense*' (Miller 2007, p.28). Frege also says that sense is 'the mode of presentation' of the referent, and his use of the Hesperus/Phosphorus distinction is often cited as an example of this.

In terms of his critical stance on Locke, what is important is Frege's claim that the sense of a sentence is a thought (Miller 2007, p.34), and a thought is neither subjective nor psychological. As Dummett puts it, a 'thought for Frege, is a timeless object' (Dummett 1993 p.61). Moreover, it is in principle accessible by anybody; that is, it is *publicly* accessible. Frege's position is, therefore, radically different from Locke's for whom an idea is an inner mental phenomenon inaccessible by others. In arguing for the public accessibility of thought, Frege on the face of it provides a compelling response to the obvious limitations of the Lockean position for which the possibility of effective communication over shared meaning is on shaky ground.

However, a question arises as to how effectively Frege has moved beyond Locke and whether his theory provides us with a compelling account of both meaning and communication. The suggestion argued for in this essay is that Frege ends up between a rock and a hard place with the implication that some further philosophising is required to get beyond the difficulties. The issue is as follows.

Frege's philosophy faces a dilemma in setting out the conditions of the objectivity of sense. One possibility which much of his writing suggests is to assume that sense can be explained as some sort of Platonic 'third realm'. He has been interpreted as holding such a position. As A W Moore has put it: 'The objectivity that [Frege] accords [senses] is not just thorough; it is Platonic.' He sees senses as abstract entities whose existence is completely independent of us' (Moore 2012, p.212). (See also Burge 1992). The obvious problem is that it is difficult to defend the existence of such a realm. How would we ever know whether the sense of an expression derived from access to a third dimension of abstract reality or whether it was just the outcome of some sort of shared understanding within a linguistic community? Platonic realms of abstract objects are hard to defend metaphysically and present severe epistemological challenges.

The alternative is to posit the notion of a linguistic community, and Frege seems at times to imply such a notion. 'For one can hardly deny that mankind has a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another' (Quoted in Miller 2007, p.39). This is the view that the sense of an expression lies in the common language of a community. Dummett arguing against a Platonic interpretation of Frege, claims that this is precisely what Frege sees as the source of objectivity. 'One in this position has therefore to look about him to find something non-mythological but objective and external to the individual mind to embody the thoughts which the individual subject grasps and may assent to or reject. Where better to find it than in the institution of a common language?' ((Dummett 1993, p.25).

Several problems arise from the above for Frege's attempt to move beyond Locke. One is that his attempt to establish the objectivity of sense either falls at the Platonic hurdle, or founders on the rock of historical relativism since 'shared conceptions' inevitably change over time. Second, if sense is connected to 'shared conceptions' there is no guarantee that there will always be agreement over them. Frege, thus, has the same problem as Locke, namely differences of opinion over the meaning of terms and the consequent problems for communication.

Third, while a common language exists independently of any one particular individual's thought, it only exists because there are thinking individuals who draw on and make use of a common language. There is a sense, then, that the common language is intimately connected with individual thought processes and cannot be conceptualised independently of them. Thus thought cannot be wholly extruded from the mind.

In conclusion, what has been discussed above resolves into a number of key points. First, Frege undoubtedly forces our thinking about the meaning of expressions beyond consideration of the private domain of individuals' ideas. The notion of shared and publicly accessible conditions of thought and meaning makes more sense than the individualistic empiricism of Locke. Second, however, Frege's attempt to ground thought on logic looks problematic. It is not clear how he could make the leap from his account of logic to the defense of a Platonic third realm. Nor is it clear that his recognition of the role of 'a common store of thoughts which is transmitted from one generation to another' enables him to sustain the distinction between a formal language and natural language given that 'a common store of thought' resides in natural languages. Third, it seems that further philosophical work is needed to move beyond Frege's dilemma and the apparent failure of his commitment to logic to yield the conclusions about meaning and language which he seeks. Frege offers useful insights into the relationship between language, thought and the world but leaves crucial questions unresolved.

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