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Truth, Judgement and Assertion

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Abstract What Frege has bequeathed to us regarding the concept of truth is not a homogeneous, coherent and systematically worked out conception. It is rather an agglomeration of remarks, scattered throughout several of his writings, on the nature of judgement and assertion, the conception of the two truth-values the True and the False as the references of declarative sentences (as objects), the relation of a (true) thought to the True, the role and the purportedly unique sense of the word “true” and its alleged redundancy on the level of both sense and assertion, the characterization of logic as the science of the most general laws of truth, the “truth-conditional” approach concerning the semantics of his formal language — to mention some issues, but not all.

The core of my talk will be a critical examination of what Frege says in some key passages about truth, the True and “is true”. Where it seems useful and enlightening, aspects of the current discussion of the concept of truth — for example, the role of this concept in minimalism about truth — may be taken into account. I shall argue (a) that Frege’s reflections on the relation of a (true) thought to the True are incoherent; (b) that he fails to offer a convincing argument for rejecting the view according to which a sentence of the form “The thought that p is true” expresses the subsumption of a thought (qua object) under the concept *is true*; (c) that Frege seems to overlook the fact that in such a sentence, even if it is interpreted as expressing a subsumption of this kind, we still have the relation of sense to reference, of a thought to a truth-value; (d) that he falls short of providing a cogent argument for the purported synonymy of “p” and “The thought that p is true” and thus for the alleged redundancy of “is true” on the semantic level; (e) that, contrary to what he says, he has to concede that the word “true” makes an essential contribution to the thought expressed by “The thought that p is true”; (f) that there are indispensable uses of the truth-predicate anyway, not only in sentences such as “Everything Peter says is true” but also, for example, in informal “metalogical” discourse; (g) that, contrary to what Frege appears to claim, he is committed to acknowledging that *true* is a property (of true thoughts); (h) that it remains unclear what truth qua that which is acknowledged (but not predicated) in a judgement is supposed to be if it is neither the True nor the concept *is true*.

Handout

Frege on truth:

1. What is true or false is a thought.
2. Truth is not a property of a (true) thought.
3. The truth-value of a (referential) declarative sentence is its reference (*Bedeutung*), namely the True or the False. The True and the False are the primitive *objects* of logic.
4. The relation of a thought to the True is not that of a subject to a predicate, but that of the sense of a declarative sentence to its reference.
5. The word “true” is not a predicate in the ordinary sense. It has a sense that contributes nothing to the sense of the sentence in which it occurs as a predicate, for example, in a sentence like “The thought that 5 is a prime number is true”.
6. The sentences “p” and “The thought that p is true” or “It is true that p” express the same thought.
7. In order to acknowledge (or put forward) a thought as true we do not need the word “true”, but only the assertoric force with which we utter the sentence.
8. The assertoric force lies in the form of the declarative sentence.
9. Truth is indefinable.

Quotations from Frege’s work on truth:

From “On Sense and Reference” (1892)

One might be tempted to regard the relation of the thought to the True not as that of sense and reference [*Bedeutung*], but rather as that of subject to predicate. One can, indeed, say: “The thought that 5 is a prime number is true”. But closer examination shows that nothing more has been said than in the simple sentence “5 is a prime number”. The truth claim lies in each case in the form of the assertoric sentence, and when the latter lacks its usual force, for instance, in the mouth of an actor on the stage, even the sentence “The thought that 5 is a prime number is true” contains only a thought, and indeed the same thought as the simple “5 is a prime number”. It follows that the relation of the thought to the True may not be compared with that of subject to predicate. Subject and predicate (understood in the logical sense) are just parts of a thought; they stand on the same level for knowledge. By combining subject and predicate, one reaches only a thought, never passes from sense to reference, never from a thought to its truth-value. One moves at the same level but never advances from one level to the next. A truth-value cannot be a part of a thought, any more than, say, the Sun can, for it is not a sense, but an object.

From “Logic” (1897)

Truth is obviously something so primitive and simple that it is not possible to reduce it to anything still simpler. Consequently we have no alternative but to bring out the peculiarity of

our predicate by comparing it with others. What, in the first place, distinguishes it from all other predicates is that predicating it is always included in predicating anything whatever (*dass es immer mit ausgesagt wird, wenn irgendetwas ausgesagt wird*). If I assert that the sum of 2 and 3 is 5, then I thereby assert that that it is true that 2 and 3 make 5 ... Therefore it is really by using the form of an assertoric sentence that we assert truth, and to do this we do not need the word 'true'. Indeed we can say that even where we use the phrase 'it is true that ...' the essential thing is really the form of the assertoric sentence.

From Frege's letter to Russell of 13.11.1904

I agree with you that 'true' is not a predicate like 'green'. For at bottom, the sentence 'It is true that $2 + 3 = 5$ ' says no more than the sentence ' $2 + 3 = 5$ '. Truth is not a component part of a thought, just as Mont Blanc with its snowfields is not itself a component part of the thought that Mont Blanc is more than 4000 metres high.

From "Introduction to Logic" (1906)

If we say "The thought is true", we seem to be ascribing truth to the thought as a property. If that were so, we should have a case of subsumption. The thought as an object would be subsumed under the concept of the True. But here we are misled by language. We do not have the relation of an object to a property, but that of the sense of a sign to its reference. In fact at bottom the sentence "It is true that 5 is prime" says no more than the sentence "2 is prime". If in the first sentence we express a judgement, this is not because of the word "true", but because of the assertoric force we give the word "is". But we can do that equally well in the second sentence, and an actor on the stage, for example, would be able to utter the first sentence without assertoric force just as easily as the second.

From "Logic in Mathematics" (1914)

For brevity, I have called a sentence true or false although it would certainly be more correct to say that the thought expressed in the sentence is true or false. But this, surely, strikes a discordant note. If I say 'the thought that $(16 - 2)$ is a multiple of 7 is true', I am treating *true* as a property of the thought, whereas it has emerged that the thought is the sense and the True the reference [*Bedeutung*] of the sentence. Of course, treating truth as a property of sentences or thoughts is in accordance with linguistic usage. If we say 'The sentence " $3 > 2$ " is true', then the form of words is such that we are predicating something of a sentence: we are saying that it has a certain property, a property we designate with the word 'true'. And if we say 'The thought that $3 > 2$ is true' the corresponding thing holds of the thought. Still the predicate *true* is quite different from other predicates such as green, salty, rational, for what we mean by the sentence 'The thought that $3 > 2$ is true' can be more simply said by the sentence '3 is greater than 2'. Thus we do not need the word 'true' at all to say this. And we can see that really nothing at all is added to the sense by this predicate. In order to put something forward as true, we do not need a special predicate: we only need the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered.

If a man says something with assertoric force which he knows to be false, then he is lying. This is not so with an actor on the stage, when he says something false. He is not lying, because assertoric force is lacking. And if an actor on the stage says 'It is true that 3 is greater than 2' he does not assert it to a higher degree than if he says '3 is greater than 2'. Thus what matters is not the word "true", but solely the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered. So to say of a sentence, or thought, that it is true is really quite different from saying of sea-water, for example, that it is salty. In the latter case, we add something essential by the

predicate, in the former we do not. Showing as it does, that truth is not a property of sentences or thoughts, as language might lead one to suppose, this consideration confirms that a thought is related to its truth-value as the sense of a sign to its reference.

From “My Basic Logical Insights” (1915)

The word “true” is not an adjective in the ordinary sense. If I attach the word “salty” to the word “sea-water” as a predicate, I form a sentence that expresses a thought. To make it clearer that we have only the expression of a thought, but that nothing is meant to be asserted, I put the sentence in the dependent form “that sea-water is salty”. Instead of doing this, I could have it spoken by an actor on the stage as part of his role, for we know that in playing a part an actor only *seems* to speak with assertoric force. Knowledge of the sense of the word “salty” is required for an understanding of the sentence, since it makes an essential contribution to the thought — in the mere word “sea-water” we should, of course, not have a sentence at all, nor an expression of a thought. With the word “true” the matter is quite different. If I attach this to the words “that sea-water is salty” as a predicate, I likewise form a sentence which expresses a thought. For the same reason as before I put this also in the dependent form “that it is true that sea-water is salty”. The thought expressed in these words coincides with the sense of the sentence “that sea-water is salty”. So the sense of the word “true” is such that it does not make any essential contribution to the thought. If I assert “It is true that sea-water is salty”, I assert the same thing as if I assert “Sea-water is salty”. This enables us to recognize that the assertion is not to be found in the word “true”, but in the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered. This may lead us to think that the word “true” has no sense at all. But in that case a sentence in which “true” occurred as a predicate would have no sense either. All one can say is: the word “true” has a sense that contributes nothing to the sense of the whole sentence in which it occurs as a predicate.

But it is precisely for this reason that this word seems fitted to indicate the essence of logic. Because of the particular sense that it carried any other adjective would be less suitable for this purpose. So the word ‘true’ seems to make the impossible possible: it allows what corresponds to the assertoric force to assume the form of a contribution to the thought. And although this attempt miscarries, or rather through the very fact that it miscarries, it indicates what is characteristic of logic. And this, from what we have said, seems something essentially different from what is characteristic of aesthetics and ethics. For there is no doubt that the word ‘beautiful’ actually does indicate the essence of aesthetics, as does ‘good’ for ethics, whereas ‘true’ makes only an abortive attempt to indicate the essence of logic, since what logic is really concerned with is not contained in the word ‘true’ at all but in the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered.

From “The Thought” (1918)

Grammatically, the word ‘true’ looks like a word for a property. So we want to delimit more closely the region within which truth can be predicated, the region in which there is any question of truth. —^[SEP]A thought is something imperceptible: anything the senses can perceive is excluded from the realm of things for which the question of truth arises. Truth is not a quality that answers to a particular kind of sense impressions. So it is sharply distinguished from the qualities we call by the words ‘red’, ‘bitter’, ‘lilac-smelling’. —

All the same, it is something worth thinking about that we cannot recognize a property of a thing without at the same time finding the thought *this thing has this property* to be true. So with every property of a thing there is tied up a property of a thought, namely truth. It is also worth noting that the sentence “I scent the smell of violets” has just the same content as the

sentence “It is true that I scent the smell of violets”. So it seems, then, that nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth. And yet is it not a great success when the scientist after much hesitation and laborious researches can finally say “My conjecture is true”? The meaning [*Bedeutung*] of the word “true” seems to be altogether unique. May we not be dealing here with something which cannot be called a property in the ordinary sense at all? In spite of this doubt, I will begin by expressing myself in accordance with ordinary usage, as if truth were a property, until some more appropriate way of speaking is found. Consequently we distinguish:

(1) the grasp of the thought — thinking^[SEP] (2) the acknowledgement of the truth of a thought — the act of judgement (3) the manifestation of this judgement — assertion. —

We express acknowledgement of truth in the form of an assertoric sentence. We do not need the word ‘true’ for this. And even when we do use it the properly assertoric force does not lie in it, but in the form of the assertoric sentence; and where this form loses its assertoric force the word ‘true’ cannot restore it. This happens when we are not speaking seriously. As stage thunder is only sham thunder and a stage fight only a sham fight, so stage assertion is only sham assertion. It is only acting, only fiction. When playing his part the actor is not asserting anything; nor is he lying, even if he says something of whose falsehood he is convinced. In poetry we have the case of thoughts being expressed without being actually put forward as true, in spite of the form of the assertoric sentence; although the poem may suggest to the hearer that he himself should make an assenting judgement. Therefore the question still arises, even about what, according to its form, presents itself as an assertoric sentence, whether it really contains an assertion. And this question must be answered in the negative if the requisite seriousness is lacking. It is unimportant whether the word ‘true’ is used here. This explains why it is that nothing seems to be added to a thought by ascribing to it the property of truth.

From “Notes for Ludwig Darmstaedter” (1919)

Truth is not part of a thought. We can grasp a thought without at the same time recognizing it as true — without making a judgement. Both grasping a thought and making a judgement are acts of a knowing subject, and are to be assigned to psychology. But both acts involve something that does not belong to psychology, namely the thought.

From Frege’s letter to Jourdain (undated)

Judging (or recognizing as true) is certainly an inner mental process; but that something is true is independent of the recognizing subject; it is objective. If I assert something as true I do not talk about myself, about a process in my mind. And in order to understand it one does not need to know who asserted it. Whoever understands a sentence uttered with assertoric force adds to it the recognition of the truth.