Q&A: ABOUTNESS 1: DESCRIPTIVISM

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Questions about Russell

In the chapter "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," Russell aims to describe how humans come to, as he calls it, a knowledge of things. However, his argument touched on similar ideas from the 17th and 18th century epistemology of Locke, Leibniz, and Hume. One of his main concepts was only an expansion upon a posteriori versus a priori knowledge. The two are umbrellaed by, what Russell refers to as, knowledge by acquaintance, which divides into existent and abstract forms. However, he does begin to explore a more unique concept with knowledge by description, which can be either ambiguous or definite. —Maddy

You are absolutely right that Russell was influenced by these earlier philosophers, along with Berkeley, Kant, and others. This reading is a chapter from his book, The Problems of Philosophy, and he discusses some of these influences in other chapters. Still, Russell's theory of descriptions is usually seen as an important original insight, as it gives us an explanation of how the empiricist subject can go beyond their immediate experiences. The asnwer, according to Russell, is that we can formulate descriptions of the causes of our experiences, and each of the terms in the description will itself refer to something with which we're acquainted. So although I can't ever be directly acquainted with things in the external world, like a table, I can formulate a description of the table as "the cause of such-and-such sense experiences" (this may of course turn out to be a very complex description), and in this way I can go beyond what is immediately given to me by the senses. Then I can use "the table" as shorthand for this more complex description (or even give the table a name, as even more convenient shorthand), in order to make things simpler. But, he thinks, it must always be possible to analyze any expression that seemingly refers to something outside my immediate experience into descriptions of the experiences that allowed me to know about the thing.

In reference to acquaintance and description, Russell states "... we can know an object exists without being acquainted with it because we can know it is 'the so-and-so'[versus 'a so-and-so"]," (29). He later specifies that "the chief importance of knowledge by description is that it enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience," (32). These claims were most compelling because I interpreted them as his proof for our ability to exchange ideas. This is because, acquaintance includes the abstract (internal) as well as the existent (external). Therefore, "pass beyond the limits of our private experience" does not imply our ability to take in information external to us, but rather it implies our ability to take in information with which we have no experience. This, then, implies its origin is from another person with whom ideas are being exchanged. This connection he makes between acquaintance and description made for a more unique and compelling claim. —Maddy

I think it's true that Russell would say that much of our knowledge by description comes from other people, whereas knowledge by acquaintance is essentially private. That's a good point. However,

there's nothing essentially social about knowledge by description, as the above example about the table shows. But we can say that according to Russell, moving from knowledge by acquaintance to knowledge by description is an essential prerequisite for passing knowledge on to others.

According to the reading "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" written by Bertrand Russell he states that "Sense-data, as we have already seen, are among the things with which we are acquainted; in fact, they supply the most obvious and striking example of knowledge by acquaintance. But if they were the sole example, our knowledge would be very much more restricted than it is. We have therefore to consider acquaintance with other things besides sense-data if we are to obtain any tolerably adequate analysis of our knowledge." Perhaps Aristotle may agree that indeed experiences are the foundation of all intellectual knowledge. However, Aristotle would disagree with Russell that we should consider acquaintance with other things besides our sense data. According to "Academy of Ideas" Aristotle believes that the first step in the acquisition of knowledge is to recognize the puzzles and difficulties in which the different world phenomena present to us as. He states "one should have surveyed all the difficulties beforehand because people who inquire without first stating the difficulties are like those who do not know where they have to go." In other words, whether it's in ethics, natural philosophy or metaphysics, finding a puzzle involves the use of the senses. Observation with the senses allow us to 'state the signs,' making us aware of the puzzles that need clarification while also giving us the knowledge that our minds needs to discover the possible solutions to these puzzles. It is important however, to emphasize that for Aristotle this is not merely a sensory experience that leads to an understanding of the world, but rather comprehension results from the action of the mind working with the senses created by the knowledge. —Dayana

One of Russell's goals in *The Problems of Philosophy* (from which this chapter is taken) is to sort out which of our knowledge is derived from sensory experience and which is a priori. He agrees that much of our knowledge of the external world is derived from sense data, and as Maddy pointed out, he is quite influenced by the British Empiricists, including Locke and Hume. However, he is also influenced by Kant's idea that there are certain *a priori* prerequisites for our knowledge. In order to know about anything beyond my own experiences, for example, Russell argues that we must have innate knowledge of the fact that events (such as our sense experiences) have causes, and that patterns in our sense experiences likely aren't mere coincidences. He thinks of these as *a priori* pieces of knowledge that we must believe humans to be in possession of independently of their sense experiences. If we didn't have these pieces of knowledge a priori, Russell thinks, we would have no way of organizing our sense experiences into a body of knowledge.

Speaking of which:

How does Russell consider knowledge by induction? Sensory data counts as acquaintance so would things begat from sensory data count as description? Is deductive knowledge description also, since it is not directly immediate? —Shah

Russell has another chapter in *The Problems of Philosophy* on this topic. What he says there is that the principle of induction is something that we know a priori. If we didn't, then we wouldn't be able

to have any knowledge of things outside our direct experience. Of course, Hume would agree with this last claim, but would instead bite the bullet and say that since there is no a priori knowledge, we don't know anything beyond our immediate experiences. Russell's reply, I think, would be that whereas Hume takes his hardcore empiricism as the starting point of his philosophy, Russell (like, say, Kant) takes as a starting point the fact that we do have some empirical knowledge, and takes his project to be explaining how that could be the case. I think this is a reasonable move, since the idea that we know some things about the world around us does seem to be a much more plausible starting point than Hume's empiricist extremism.

Russell has *a lot* to say about deductive knowledge. Without getting into all of that here, I will say that yes, deductive knowledge can give us knowledge by description—for example, of the various mathematical entities that figure in mathematical and logical proofs. As we use proofs to expand our knowledge of facts, we thereby get knowledge-by-description of the things that figure in those facts.

Russell states that "every proposition which we understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted" (Russell, 32). Some of these include objects we physically touch and can describe with our senses but others are deductions and things we may hear from others. I find that Russell did not sufficiently draw a distinction between them, as our perceptions and understanding of the two are far more different than we think. I recall Plato's theory of forms, which included the distinctions between things we can physically feel, like the table example that Russell gave, and the things we can imagine from memory or things we know in one way or another. I would wonder how Russell would view the distinction between the brown table that we can touch, feel, and see as opposed to the brown table I picture in my mind. —Darya

To some extent this objection is answered a bit more elsewhere in The Problems of Philosophy, as Russell tries to demarcate the things with which we can be directly acquainted in a bit more detail. But like you, a lot of later philosophers have been unsatisfied with Russell's way of distinguishing acquaintance from description. And a surprising amount of 20th-century philosophy concerns different ways of getting at this distinction, while agreeing that there is a distinction.

For example, in the philosophy of science, it is usually assumed that there is some distinction between observable and non-observable (or theoretical) entities. For example, it seems that we can observe the readouts from a particle accelerator, and these readouts may lead us to theorize that bosons exist, but we can't directly observe bosons or other subatomic particles. Likewise, we can't directly observe black holes; we can only infer that they exist from their effects on other things. So, most philosophers of science think that this is a genuine distinction, but they constantly argue about how and where to draw it.

Russell is noteworthy in that he was very restrictive in his theory of acquaintance. He thought we could only be acquainted with the contents of our immediate experience, with their sensible qualities (like colors and smells) and perhaps with ourselves. Most later philosophers have tended to have more relaxed criteria, and to say that we can also be acquainted with physical objects that we can directly observe (like tables and chairs, other people, etc.). But there is still much controversy over where the boundary is, and whether, for example, it moves when we invent a new

technology, like a microscope, that seemingly allows us to see smaller or more distant things than before.

I also found it difficult to understand the way [Russell] described the only constant thing as the object itself (pg 30). It makes sense that whether Bismarck describes himself one way, or someone else describes him in another way, he is still the same person. I would question the parameters of what he means by object. In most cases this makes sense – that even if I say its eggshell white, but you say its pure white, the wall is still the wall, but what about non-physical entities, such as imagination, love, wonder, knowledge etc. Would Russell claim there is an underlying unchanging "form" of something as Plato would, or does this principle only apply to physical objects? Nevertheless, I found his analysis of different modes of thought to be interesting, as it is true that we perceive different methods of acquiring knowledge and the words we give these things to be differently. —Darya

This is a great question. I think that in many cases, Russell would say that we can refer to abstract entities by description. He is, in this respect, a Platonist: he believes that words like "justice" refer to what he called "universals", which are non-physical entities. We get knowledge of some of these universals by acquaintance (for example, redness or the property of smelling like fish), but others (like justice) can only be known by description. This is a topic that Russell discusses in detail in later chapters of *The Problems of Philosophy*.

I'll continue a though I had from my example in the Slack. My example of the "cardinality of the the set of Real numbers R" is a description in Russell's sense. However the object described is not one we can be acquainted with, nor is it one that we can somehow reach through the testimony of others "progressively removed from acquaintance with particulars". While this might be an example of a "knowledge of truth", which Russell doesn't deal with in the reading, it also seems acceptable to treat it as a "thing". Cardinality is an object of sorts, a size, and things with size seem to be...well...things. —Andrew

That's right. Russell would take the cardinality of a set to be a universal. We might call it a property now. This is actually something that Russell wrote a lot about, in works like *Principia Mathematica* and *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. But I'll let you finish:

Russell says that every object of knowledge should be reducible to knowledge by acquaintance of particulars, but "Aleph 1" has as its reference the continuum. But by definition this has an uncountably infinite size. So what, really, is being referenced? And how is this possible? It seems like by definition we cannot have knowledge of this object by acquaintance with particulars. But if we say that "aleph 1" or "the cardinality of the continuum" have a sense, but no reference, how can things we say about such an object have a truth value? This can't be the case, because we can in fact say things with truth value about cardinality, even of infinite sets. For example, "the natural numbers and the real numbers have the same cardinality" - this is False, and provably so.

This is a lot of fuss over a bizarre example, but I imagine there are other things we say that have this same puzzling quality. We can utter the words, they have a sense and a truth value, but the

reference cannot be known by acquaintance, even in an abstract way. Russell suggest (although he doesn't elaborate) on a way out. These kinds of knowledge follow logically from something we do happen to know from acquaintance. But then, how far can we stretch the notion of acquaintance? To infinity? —Andrew

Interesting question. Russell would say that we have knowledge of things like the cardinality of the set of real numbers only by description. We do mathematical proofs (something with which he was intimately familiar), and this gives us knowledge of various mathematical facts. But these facts concern certain abstract objects: numbers, quantities, sets, and so on. By virtue of having knowledge of truths about these objects, we get knowledge-by-description of them.

Now, that's not the whole story of course. Russell thought that all of the truths and entities of mathematics could be reduced to a few basic logical truths and entities. This position is called "logicism", and Russell was (along with Frege) one of the two most influential proponents of logicism. In *Principia Mathematica*, Russell and Alfred North Whitehead tried to show how all of arithmetic and set theory could be rigorously proven from a few logical axioms. So ultimately, he would have said that in order to know various mathematical entities by description, we need only be acquainted with a few basic logical entities, such as propositional functions.

These views about mathematics came were actually the inspiration for his theory of empirical knowledge. After writing *Principia*, Russell hoped to use similar logical methods to show how we can go beyond our immediate sensory experiences and achieve knowledge of the external world. His theory of knowledge by description was his answer.

Russell on acquaintance with the self

I'm having a hard time following Russell's argument for being acquainted with one's "self." It seems to me that he's arguing that since an individuals knowledge by acquaintance always comes from their perspective, they must have at least a very basic level of acquaintance with themselves, not just acquaintance by introspection. Some of his arguments seem uncompelling, such as "Further, we know the truth 'I am acquainted with this sense-datum'. It is hard to see how we could know this truth, or even understand what is meant by it, unless we were acquainted with something which we call 'I'" (Russel, 28).

Maybe I'm missing something but it seems to me like this is just an extension of acquaintance by introspection, the capability to have knowledge of our own internal mental desires and objects. The argument seems to place value upon that one characterizes their acquaintance with some sense data as being in relationship to the word "I," but aside from in writing I don't think it is common to characterize one's knowledge of things in that manner. When I think about facts I'm in acquaintance with internally, I don't think in terms of the word "I". If I were to read a really interesting article online I might think, "That was really interesting", but I would never think, "I thought that was really interesting."

Maybe I'm just misunderstanding it though, but I don't think I see the difference between acquaintance by introspection, vs by the self. I would be interested to read longer arguments for

or against being acquainted with one's own self as opposed to simply having knowledge in relation to introspection. —James Forman

Very nice criticism. This is actually a version of a debate that goes back to Descartes, who thought that the most basic truth one can know, independently of anything else, is that "I exist", since any kind of thought, including doubt and skepticism, presupposes the existence of someone doing the thinking. One criticism of this argument has been that our stream of consciousness might just consist in a series of thoughts and experiences, and the idea that there is a single, constant subject having all of these experiences is unnecessary. Perhaps the idea of the thinker of all of these thoughts is something that we erroneously infer, but that needn't actually exist (or remain constant) in order for the thoughts to exist.

Not everyone is convinced any this reply to Descartes, but it is widely seen as one of the main threats to his argument. I think you're essentially raising the same issue for Russell. It's possible that Russell's uncertainty about acquaintance with the self stems in part from his anticipation of this reply.

As far as knowledge of acquaintance and knowledge of description go, how would this apply to things that don't really exist? For example, unicorns. We all have an idea of what a unicorn is but would that be knowledge of description since we have never actually seen one, we can only describe what it looks like? Or would it be knowledge of acquaintance because we have all seen an image of one (or what it would look like if it were real) and we have the sense data from that to then understand that it is a unicorn? Russell does say that anything we can be acquainted with must be "something particular and existent" but he also says that knowledge of descriptions is knowledge of truth and that all knowledge rests upon acquaintance. So does that mean that we wouldn't/couldn't actually have knowledge of things like Unicorns, or even God, really, since we've never seen him/her? —Yakira

This was actually one of the puzzles that motivated Russell's theory of descriptions in the first place. Take the following sentence: "Santa Claus does not exist." This sentence is true. (Apologies to those of you who didn't know!) But, we might wonder, how can it be a true sentence if its subject doesn't even refer to anything? Why isn't it meaningless instead?

So, Russell's answer is that "Santa Claus" is really an abbreviation for a description that each of has in our mind: "the guy who lives at the north pole, delivers gifts on Christmas, etc". And when someone says "Santa Claus doesn't exist", what they're saying would be more fully expressed by saying: "There doesn't exist someone who lives at the north pole, delivers gifts on Christmas, and so on". Once we expand the original sentence to this version, there is no longer any single expression that purports to refer to a non-existing person. And so this resolves the puzzle. So, according to Russell, one of the benefits of his theory of descriptions is that it makes sense of the way that we sometimes seem to talk about things that don't exist,.

Objections to Russell

If we have an acquaintance with all that we possess knowledge of, how can one explain syntactic rules that seems to be available across language and found to be consistently implemented by

children regardless of being taught (Chomsky's Universal Grammar)? Is it that these rules Chomsky speaks of are not knowledge and are simply faculties? Are Russell and Chomsky definition knowledge in different ways that I'm missing? Lastly, if any proposition that we understand requires constituents that we are acquainted with, are we simply acquainted with these syntactic rules Chomsky speaks of? —Anna

Russell doesn't think that we "have an acquaintance with all that we possess knowledge of". He thinks that we know some things only indirectly, by description.

I think Russell's and Chomsky's views are actually quite compatible (although Russell was writing decades before Chomsky and so wasn't familiar with his work). Russell thinks that some of our knowledge is grounded in our acquaintance with sense data, but we need to say that some of our other knowledge is a priori in order to explain how we ever generalize from knowledge of our own private experiences to knowledge that goes beyond them. Chomsky's whole argument for Universal Grammar (as we'll see in a few weeks) is that we need to assume that children have substantial innate knowledge of language in order to explain how they manage to learn a full language on the basis of such a small amount of messy sensory data. The views are quite similar in this way.

Just as Frege emphasizes in his article that with proper names, one must have a strong belief about the proper name in order for it to contain a reference, we must have a strong set of beliefs about ourselves and thus affirm the existence of ourselves in order to attain knowledge especially through sense-datum and from memory. How is it that we can form truth values based on our memories of our experiences of the world if we doubt that we are even acquainted with ourselves. These sets of beliefs are necessary in order to call ourselves real and to be able to affirm the experiences and the information that we attain from our environment. —Zaida

I think Russell, at least, would agree with this. Although he thinks that a person might be acquainted with their present self, they know their past and future selves only indirectly, by description, as a result of various memories with which they can be acquainted.

This week the only critical feedback I would have is that on page 27 Russell's mentions the idea that man is the only one who has a form of consciousness and that animals lack these senses and therefore are unable to know that they exist as a result. Personally, I believe this to be false, and I think they have thoughts and wants and senses due to our ability to watch them fight and get curious between themselves, etc. Observing them fight and be curious though doesn't show that they are conscious of themselves, but their ability to decipher between themselves is a good indication that they know what makes them unique from others. I think one professor from Hunter goes into this research with elephants and mirrors and that many other's try this experiment with chimpanzee's but I'm not sure of the names or if they exist to begin with. Other than this nothing else stands out. —Naresh

It's certainly right, at the very least, that Russell didn't have any good reason to say this about animals. But it's also very difficult to adjudicate issues like this about animal minds, and so we need to dig into the empirical research in order to do so, as you suggest. I would be interested to know

more about the research that you mention. You should track it down and actually cite it when you make a point like this, it will be much more persuasive that way.

Questions about Frege

Frege says that "The Reference of a proper name is the object itself that we thereby designate; the idea we have when we do so is wholly subjective. In between is the Sense, which is no longer subjective, like the idea, but which is not the object itself either" (5). According to Frege, proper names refer to the meanings. He distinguishes between Reference and Senses. Reference is objective (ideas are subject,) and Senses are neither objective nor subjective. I agree that some name looks much more subjective, and some name looks much more objective. However, I think that the difference between Reference and Sence is vague. The same object has many functions. A variety of people sense or understand it in each way. Frege mentions the difference between Reference and Sense, but it is ambiguous. Besides, I think that the meaning of a name depends on how to use the name in a sentence. —Misa

One common criticism of Frege's work is to point out that it's very implausible that different speakers associate the same sense with a given word. We all know such different things about the objects and people with whom we interact, and have such different perspectives on them, that it's hard to see how there could be any single "mode of presentation" that we all associate with (for example) the name "Barack Obama". Since Frege thinks that communicating requires that the speaker and hearer both grasp the same senses of the words being used, it's hard to see how we could therefore ever really communicate, on his view.

Frege's response to this critique would have to be to explain how it is that we are able to triangulate on common senses even though the private ideas that we associate with words might be different. Some philosophers have made valiant attempts at fleshing out this line of defense (most influentially, Gareth Evans, in his book, *The Varieties of Reference*), but not to everyone's satisfaction. So the point that you raise here is one of the most lasting and influential criticisms of Frege.

I have a question on the differences between Frege's Truth-Value and Russell's Truth. Is it correct to interpret Frege as asserting that the Truth-Value of an assertoric sentence is to be derived solely from its contents? Russell seems to suggest that truth requires something more, some form of external validation that he calls Knowledge by Acquaintance. But one can ask whether even this is enough? Application of judgment to the available facts is mentioned but not clearly spelled out. —Leonard

Frege thought that truth values were objects. Roughly, the true is all that is, and the false is all that is not. True sentences all refer to the true, but present it to us in different ways, via different thoughts. (Likewise for the false.) The idea that the referent of a sentence is its truth value is one of the most counter-intuitive parts of Frege's overall theory, but he had complex reasons for believing it. There is a (relatively) clear explanation of it here.

By contrast, Russell held a version of the correspondence theory of truth. He thought (at least at some times in his career) that the world is structured into structured components called "facts",

which are made up of objects, properties, and relations. A sentence is true if it corresponds to one of these facts, and false if it does not.

So a big difference between Frege and Russell is that Frege thought there is one big truth (which we can take different perspectives on, by thinking thoughts or expressing them in language) and Russell (at least at some points in his career) thought that there are many truths—facts—to which true sentences correspond. On Russell's view, we can know some of these truths just by thinking about the things with which we're acquainted, but most of them require inference, which means that we can only know about them indirectly.

In Frege's terms the problem of language (signs and names) and what it actually refers to becomes an issue because the object of reference - what we aim to talk about - is constrained by the sense in which human language addresses it. Thus, Frege's theme is reference oriented, and the 'sense', as he defines it, should serve a faithful purpose to the reference. Of course, that purpose is not always accomplished, and yet the purpose is always a relation of correspondence. —Oscar

Very well put, Oscar!

It seems to me that the reference that he tries to target is always and object, or else a subject of a sentence, but always an empirical and discreet object. The reference always depicts a sense/s; though Frege argues that a sense may not always depict a reference, such as when it is said that 'the celestial body furthest away from the Earth," among many other statements, does have a sense and yet a doubtful or inexistent referent. Well, there could be an actual reference for such a statement regardless of our current knowledge of the existence of such discreet object. For instance, there is a sense of time before Einstein's theory of general relativity that was the one that obeyed Newtonian laws. Einstein followed a sense of time that had no reference yet up until his theory was proven right. Time was considered 'absolute' in the gravitational field of Newtonian sense, but later on was regarded 'relative' and intertwined with space and a moving observer. The sense of time of have changed from Newton to Einstein. I'd have asked Frege if the reference has also changed. Of course, strictly speaking, the reference ought to remain the same - time - but truly, does the reference not suffer any kind of change? —Oscar

It's a bit misleading to say that the object (i.e. the referent of an expression) "depicts" a sense. There may be infinitely many different senses that all depict the same referent—infinitely many modes of presentation of it. Here are two ways of thinking about this: on one hand, we can see a single object from an unlimited number of different angles. On the other hand, we can describe a thing in an unlimited number of different ways. All of these perspectives and descriptions take us to the same thing, but present it to us slightly differently.

Your question about time for Newton vs. Einstein is an excellent one. I think both Frege and Russell would have to say that the word "time" refers to something different for Newton than it does for Einstein (assuming it refers at all for either or both of them). This is because Newtonian and Einsteinian physics don't merely have different theories of what time is, they have *conflicting* theories. This is to say that they connect the word "time" with different senses (Frege), or take it to abbreviate different descriptions (Russell). Many philosophers have taken this to be an odd

conclusion, since it follows that Newton and Einstein weren't really disagreeing about the nature of time at all, they were just talking about different things. That's counterintuitive, but some philosophers of science have embraced it. The most famous example is Thomas Kuhn, in his extremely influential book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, in which he argues that scientific revolutions create "incommensurable paradigms," which can't be directly compared with what came before.

On the other hand, the idea that scientific terms change their reference every time someone comes up with a new theory is the basis of one of the most influential criticisms of Frege and Russell. We'll touch on this a bit next week when we look at Kripke and Putnam.

If we say, 'sunrise is the time of the day when the sun rises over the horizon," and of course, the sun is the reference. However, the sense of it all is from the standpoint of a moving observer, even though, in fact, neither does the sun rises nor sets over the horizon. We still call the morning event that refers to the sun during sunrise, sunrise regardless of our knowledge of whether the sun moves or is stationary in relation to the earth. Knowledge of the fact due to scientific discovery did not rename the event, but the sense did change and was incorporated anew in our daily language. Synonyms for sunrise and sunset, respectively as sunup and sundown, do not change the reference nor the sense. Language has the license to keep the word sunrise, despite the facts, as it is while have the sense be changed. On another token, sense could be thought about as more specific, if not greater than, referent. For instance, during sunrise there is a moment in time called dawn, while during sunset there is a dusk. Each also refers to the sun but in different ways, or sense, while dawn is the earliest part of sunrise, dusk is the latest part of sunset. Here, sense says more and yet specific of what the referent denotes. — Oscar

This is another great question. In natural languages like English, almost all of our referring expressions are context sensitive to some degree. For example, if I say "everyone in the class has finished their homework", it's clear that I don't intend to be presupposing that there is one and only one class in the world. So which class am I talking about when I say "the class"? What I mean is something like "the PHILO 364 class that I am teaching in Fall 2020," or something like that. But since I assume that my audience can figure out how to fill in the details, I don't waste time saying them out loud. Similarly, whenever someone says "the sunset", we have to assume that their description is somehow relativized to a particular time and place, or else there is no particular sun-setting event to which it will refer.

Context-sensitivity has been a major topic among linguists and philosophers of language since the 1970s or so, but it wasn't properly on Frege's and Russell's radar, in part because their interest in language originally arose from their study of the language used in mathematical proofs, where there isn't any context sensitivity. Later in the semester we'll read a recent paper by Ray Buchanan in which he'll argue that the sort of context sensitivity that you describe gives rise to a very serious puzzle about how we manage to communicate.

Does the sense and reference division still apply to things between different languages/system that refer to the same thing? Like one=1 or ich=I? It seems to me they have the same sense. — Shah

I think the standard view among Fregean philosophers is that words in different languages can have the same sense, and that when we translate from one language to another, the goal is to find expressions that have senses that are as similar as possible.

But there are difficult questions about whether it's ever actually possible to find two words with exactly the same sense, and about what it means for two words to have more or less similar senses, and how that sort of similarity could be measured. This makes some people skeptical about the idea that sameness of sense is a good criterion for translation.

According to Frege he states that "When one uses words in the ordinary way, their Reference is that about which one wants to speak. But occasionally one wants to talk about the words themselves or about their Sense. This occurs, e.g., when one cites the words of another in direct speech. In this case one's own words first Refer to the words of the other, and it is only these that have the ordinary Reference." I was a bit puzzled about this statement as it states that when we cite other people's work, we usually use reference to give them credit but what about when we paraphrase? For example, when we put others' work in our own words wouldn't this be considered senses because we are using the amount of information given about an object or topic? —Dayana

I think you're mixing up two different uses of the word "reference" here. When writing a paper, to reference someone is to give them credit for an idea. But Frege is using "reference" to talk about the thing that a particular word, phrase, or sentence refers to. So, for example, the reference of the name "Will Smith" is the actor, Will Smith, to which it refers.

What Frege is getting at in the passage you quote is that normally when we use a word like "Will Smith", we use it to talk about the guy. But sometimes we want to talk about the words themselves. In that case, we use quotation marks, as I have just done. Ths is what Frege is calling "direct speech", also known as direct quotation.

But we also sometimes talk about what someone has said or thought without referring to their exact wording. For example, I might say, "Galileo said that the earth moves". Here I am telling you what Galileo said, but I am not telling you the exact words that he used. After all, he spoke Italian, not English, and so his exact words would not have been "the earth moves" or even "still it moves" but rather "Eppur si muove". This kind of report of what someone else has said, where we say something of the form "X said that Y", without putting "Y" in quotation marks, is called "indirect speech" or "indirect discourse". In this case, Frege thought, we are using the words following "said that" to refer not to their usual referents, or to the words themselves, but to the sense of the original words. So Frege says that in indirect contexts, we use words to refer to what would normally be their sense rather than their referents. This is a very influential but also controversial idea.

If my understanding is correct, the referent is where it is indicated/denoted. A reference can be a part of a sense. It might sound somewhat odd, but if I say this without hesitation, a referent is a set of descriptions/properties. It seems that the reference does not have a specific figure. That is because when we say, "the Grand Central Terminal," is there any specific figure? When we say, "the Niagara Falls," what is its figure? When we say, Plato/Jupiter, what is its figure? When we

say “France,” does it denote the land of France? Would ‘today’s Mt. Everest’ and ‘yesterday’s Mt. Everest’ be the same object? —Chateldon

It’s not right to say that either Frege or Russell thought the referent of an expression is (at least in most cases) a set of descriptions or properties. The referent of “Chateldon” is just you, the person, Chateldon. On the other hand, many people have taken Frege to think that the sense of a name is something like a description of the person or thing named, and Frege himself seems to suggest this with his remarks about the name “Aristotle.”

You’re right, though, that there are puzzles about what makes things identical over time. But this is usually thought to be a metaphysical puzzle about the nature of ordinary things, and not specifically a semantic puzzle about how we manage to refer to them.

I encountered the paragraph (6-7) that Frege replies to a possible skeptic view. The paragraph ends with the line: “in case there is such a Reference.” Could you elaborate on the paragraph a little? —Chateldon

Frege thinks that it’s possible for a word to have a sense but no reference. So, for example, the word “Santa Claus” seems to be meaningful, even though it doesn’t refer to anyone. Frege accounts for this by saying that it has a sense but that this sense doesn’t uniquely determine any person or thing. Works of fiction, he thinks, are long strings of mostly referenceless expressions, but we get something out of them by appreciating their sense.

However, in this particular example: the Morning Star and the Evening Star, I had been wondering and struggling to think about the referent of the MS and the ES. I have wondered if they are different. That is because If we take the referent as the planet, a dark huge “stone,” the referent might be the same (roughly speaking). But I would like to say that their references would not be the planet itself. What we look at in the sky are phenomena composed of reflected sunlight, atmosphere, clouds, and so on (strictly speaking, all that we see are so though). In this planet’s case, it sounds like that as if the referent of a ‘crescent moon’ and 'a full moon' is the same. Those phenomena seem different. To sum up, if I may say so, I would doubt if the referent of MS and ES is the physical object of the planet Venus, and I think they would be their phenomena, and therefore I do not think their references are the same. —Chateldon

The point of the example is that the morning star and the evening star were once thought to be different heavenly bodies, but turned out to be the same one (namely, the planet Venus). So these two descriptions turned out to refer to the same thing. Frege explains the fact that this was an interesting discovery (and so “the morning star is the evening star” has cognitive value) by saying that the two terms have different senses. When we learn that they pick out the same referent, what we are learning is that the two senses that we associate with these terms are different ways of getting at the same object.

Frege on the sense and reference of sentences

Frege's work in general, seemed a bit confusing to me. The way he went about explaining a sense and reference didn't make it as clear as he could have. However, the part that tripped me up the most, was when Frege's discussed sentences starting on page 7. Frege questioned whether the thought that a sentence conveyed is seen as a sense or a reference. In a sentence, the thought of a word is seen as it's reference, which makes sense. When talking about a sentence as a whole, Frege says that we should think about it in the sense of the sentence. He uses the morning star vs evening star example, saying that anyone who doesn't know the difference between the two can say that one sentence is true and the other is false. But that doesn't make sense to me. Not knowing whether the two are the same doesn't make a difference in my opinion. Whether it's in the day or the evening, a star is a star. Using the fall vs autumn example, you have to look into the reference of the word to understand the thought of the sentence. Saying "it is fall" and "it is autumn" is the same thing whether you know that fall and autumn are the same thing. As long as you know the sense of the word, the reference is what will tell you whether the sentence is true or not. The sense of fall could be different things which can make the sentence false. For example, fall can mean to trip on the floor. Obviously using that sense, saying "it is fall" wouldn't make the sentence true as you would be saying it is to trip on the floor, which just isn't a cognitive sentence. Therefore you'd have to look at the reference before you look at the sense. —Alexandra

The reading on Frege was difficult for me, I had to read over it a few times to feel like I understood it, and I'm still not completely sure. As my understanding faded and came back, I was struck by one sentence on page [[33]]: "If only the Sense of the sentence, the thought, mattered, it would be unnecessary to care about the Reference of a sentence part; for the Sense of the sentence only the Sense of a part, not the Reference, is taken into consideration." The first statement of the sentence – before the semicolon – made sense to me, but then the second statement totally threw me off. I understand that to mean thought is the Sense of the sentence, and if only that mattered then the Reference doesn't. My confusion is around "...for the Sense of the sentence only the Sense of a part...." Does that mean only the Sense of a part of the Sense of a statement matters? Meaning, "the Sense (of a part) of the statement matters," like it's optional? Or is it necessary that what matters is a Sense of a part of a statement that has a Sense? Perhaps it's better written as "... for the Sense of the sentence [if and] only [if] the Sense of a part...." That would make more sense to me, but please let me know if I'm overthinking it or if I'm making some sense. —Jacob

Frege's theory is the most intuitive when we apply it to referring expressions, like names. It is relatively clear to say that "Jay Z" and "Sean Carter", two different names for the same person, nevertheless give us different ways of thinking about the guy, and that the two names have different meanings as a result. The difference between them, Frege thought, is that they have different senses.

I think it's almost just as intuitive when we think about predicates. "Triangle" and "trilateral" refer to all and only the same shapes, but the two words have different meanings: "triangle" means a shape with exactly three vertices and "trilateral" means a shape with exactly three sides, and it turns out

that these two properties have to be possessed by the exact same shapes. So Frege might say that although "triangle" and "trilateral" refer to the same things, they have different senses, and so present those things to us in different ways.

Things get much less intuitive when it comes to sentences, and a lot of people think that Frege's whole sense/reference distinction just doesn't really apply neatly to sentences. But that is not how Frege saw it. He said that the sense of a sentence is a "thought", by which he did not mean something that happens in any one person's head. Rather, we can think of a thought as a public piece of information—something that more than one person could think. (This is less unintuitive than it might initially appear. It's normal to say that two people had the same thought. Whatever it is that they have in common—the thing that they were both thinking—is what Frege calls a "thought".)

Then Frege says that the referent of a sentence is its truth value. All true sentences refer to the same thing (truth, or "The True") and all false sentences likewise refer to the same thing (falsity, or "The False"). This is probably the most unintuitive aspect of Frege's theory. For an explanation of why Frege believed it, see here. But let me try to make it a bit intuitive. The idea is that what a true sentence does is to give you a way of getting at how things are (reality, the truth about the world), just in the same way that a name gives you a way of getting at the person or thing to which it refers. But just as there are many ways of thinking about a person or thing, so there are also many different ways of thinking about how things are. Any one name for a person gives you only a partial perspective on them: "Jay Z" gives us a different (and only partial) view of the rapper than "Sean Carter". Similarly, although two true sentences both give us ways of accessing the truth, they give us different, and only partial perspectives on it. The sentence "2+2=4" gives us one partial way of thinking about the truth and the sentence "the earth rotates around the sun" gives us a different, partial perspective on the truth. All true sentences/thoughts point us at the same thing (reality, the truth) but get us there in cognitively different ways. Different true sentences give us access to different aspects of The One Big Truth. I'm not sure if that will help you, but it's the way that I've come to explain Frege's weird idea to myself, and I think it sort of makes sense.

Objection to Frege

Frege describes reference as the object spoken about or nominated and sense only seems appropriate to be described as an ability gained in knowing a language. When one knows a language, one can look at different words and extract its reference or group different words, that have the same reference, together. Frege calls this ability objective because language is shared therefore this version of extended knowledge, is accessible to every knower of the language. However, I could not help but recount Heidegger's Being and Nothingness [I think Zaida means *Being and Time* —DWH] and how he talks about the ways in which we identify the objects in the world around us by identifying or projecting its usefulness. Frege does not seem to talk much about the subjective ways of attaining knowledge or truth-values through sense datum. He only characterizes sense datum as mainly inner images that cannot not actually be shared. Even if two people had the same ideas, it would not be exactly the same because you could still find differences in those two ideas. Yet, Frege still seems to emphasize knowledge as something that is shared and this is very similar to the way that Nietzche describes in his passage On Truth and

Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, how truth comes about by society affirming the connection of similar ideas and in this way granting these ideas true for all participants in that society. —Zaida

I think you're misreading Frege here. He distinguishes the "ideas" that we associate with a word, which are subjective and differ from person to person, from the sense of the word, which is objective and shared by all competent users of a language. Admittedly, it's a bit mysterious how this objectivity is possible (though see Putnam next week for a possible answer), but Frege definitely would not have agreed with the Nietzsche article that you mention, where Nietzsche seems to think that humans can arbitrarily attach whatever meanings we want to words, and that none of them gets us any more objective grip on reality than any others. Frege very much believed in an objective reality that transcends our linguistic practices, and he also thought that we are able to grasp that reality with our minds and with our language. He was a realist.

Your comparison to Heidegger is interesting. It's true that what Frege says about sense makes it sound as though grasping the sense of a word is usually a purely intellectual matter. It is about the mind "grasping" some "mode of presentation" of a thing. This sounds a lot like what Heidegger called "presence at hand," and criticized as being insufficiently rooted in our practical engagement with the world to give us an adequate understanding of human thought.

However, some later philosophers have argued that this is not the right interpretation of Frege, and have developed his ideas in a way that is more Heidegger-friendly. For example, in his book "Know How," Jason Stanley tries to explicitly combine Frege with Heidegger. He argues that knowing how to do something normally requires that we grasp some truth about how to do something, but that it's not good enough to grasp the truth in a purely intellectual, present-at-hand sort of way. For example, I can't teach you how to ride a bicycle by just explaining it to you. Instead, one has to grasp the truth about how to do the thing via a "practical mode of presentation," or a "practical sense," and this requires practical engagement with it, and not merely intellectual engagement. There are other Fregeans who have defended similarly Heidegger-friendly ideas (e.g. Gareth Evans).

And just on a historical note: Frege is often represented as the grandfather of analytic philosophy, and Heidegger as one of the major figures of continental philosophy, and for a lot of the 20th century the philosophers within these two traditions tended to go around dissing one another. But as the last paragraph illustrates, the distinction is a lot less well defined than it used to be. And it's also worth noting that although Frege influenced analytic philosophy in many ways, he was also a major influence on Husserl, who was Heidegger's biggest influence. So to some extent the analytic/continental divide is kind of a fiction created after WW2, and one that has now started to fade out.