

# **If You Have to Ask what the True is, You'll Never Know: On Frege and the Indefinability of Truth**

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## § 1. Introductory Remarks

Frege never wrote very much specifically about his views on truth. Further, what he did have to say on the subject is perhaps a bit elusive, and not altogether clear. However, if one puts together the salient passages from some of his later papers such as “Logic”, “Thought” and even a bit from “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*” a picture of Frege’s views on truth begins to emerge.<sup>1</sup> Common to these texts is the view that the word “true” is ultimately indefinable. In studying passages from the aforementioned texts, it also seems clear that Frege believed that there was a sound argument to this conclusion. What is not clear, however, is exactly what the central argument against the definability of truth is, and whether the claim that truth is indefinable is Frege’s final conclusion, or if it is a subsidiary conclusion in a larger argument. Some philosophers have claimed that Frege’s final conclusion is that truth is not a property.<sup>2</sup> Others argue that Frege held the view that truth is not a property independently of his views on definability, and that Frege’s view that truth is not a property contributes to the overall claim that truth is indefinable.<sup>3</sup> I am inclined to agree with the latter. In fact, I believe that in addition to the negative claim that truth is not a property,

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<sup>1</sup> To be more specific, concentration on these particular texts provides a picture of the later phases of Frege’s views on truth. In referring to ‘phases’ of Frege’s beliefs about truth, I follow Hans Sluga. In his paper “On the Indefinability of Truth” (2001), Sluga breaks down the evolution of Frege’s views into periods. According to Sluga, the phases that cover the time span in which the above-mentioned papers were written (1897-1918) were the fifth, sixth, and seventh phases. These phases are marked by Frege realizing his commitment to the view that truth is indefinable (1897), his reaffirmation of the primacy of judgment in logic (1915) and the application of his views against the definability of truth to target Wittgenstein’s picture theory specifically, and correspondence theories generally (1918). See esp. p. 86-92.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Michael Dummett (1981), Thomas Ricketts (1996), and James Levine (1996).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hans Sluga (2001), Tyler Burge (1984), and (it seems) Scott Soames (1999).

Frege's positive views on truth—what some have (somewhat misleadingly) called a redundancy or deflationary account of truth—also contribute to his argument that truth is indefinable.<sup>4</sup> Without wishing to give separate arguments for this interpretation, I will instead attempt to give a coherent account of Frege's argument treating the above contextual points as assumed.<sup>5</sup> In the remainder of section 1, I will summarize some of Frege's philosophical views which I think are crucial to understanding his views on truth. In section 2, I will begin with what I believe is the origin of Frege's view on the indefinability of truth. I will then follow the development of this view into its maturity, as doing so will provide valuable insight in interpreting Frege's argument. In section 3, I will present the argument as I believe Frege held it, and make an argument against a popular alternative reading of Frege. Once the argument is extracted and put into logical form, I will spend section 4 of the paper holding the argument to scrutiny. None of the criticisms made in that section will be given advantage by the context I have here presupposed.

## 1.2 Some relevant Fregean considerations:

To begin, it will be helpful to give a brief summary of Frege's relevant philosophical views. Frege came to believe that linguistic objects such as names, predicates, and sentences have both a reference and a sense.<sup>6</sup> The name "Chuck Norris" for example refers to the man Chuck Norris, but it also expresses a sense. One way to think of sense is as descriptive content. Two different definite descriptions that refer to Chuck Norris obviously have the

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than the converse, that his views on the indefinability of truth support his deflationary views on truth. Support of this assumption comes from Sluga, who puts Frege's rejection of truth as a property in an earlier period, possibly as far back as 1878 in Frege's distinction between function and object. While Frege may not have, at that time, realized his commitment to that view, Sluga thinks that he certainly is aware of it when he argues that truth-values are objects in the 1890s. See Sluga (2001) p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that I don't think that this is an interesting historical question. But for the present task, it seemed better to leave the issue outside the paper, and side with what I took to be the most plausible extant historical interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> The classic paper in these matters is "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" (1892). See Beaney, Michael ed., *The Frege Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999) p 151-171. Note that in my use of the word "sentence" here and throughout I mean indicative, or assertoric sentences. Also, in my calling a linguistic object, this should not be confused with the term "object" in the logical sense. A predicate, for Frege, is a concept, a function from objects to truth-values.

same referent, but will vary in sense. One might identify Chuck Norris as the man who starred in *Walker Texas Ranger*, thereby associating this description with the name “Chuck Norris.” Another person might associate a different sense with the name, say, the actor who played Major Scott McCoy in *Delta Force*. So while there are multiple senses associated with a name; all of them serve as the mode of presentation of the referent, the man Chuck Norris. The situation is similar with sentences. A sentence, like a proper name, expresses a sense and refers to a referent. The referent of a sentence, like a name, is an object, if anything at all. A difference between names and sentences with regard to reference is that while each proper name refers to some particular individual or other (if anything) out of a multitude of objects, sentences refer to one of only two objects (if anything): the True and the False. Truth-values, then, are objects for Frege.<sup>7</sup> The mode of presentation for a truth-value is not a sentence itself on Frege’s view, but the thought expressed by that sentence, the sense of a sentence. Take, for example, the sentence “Chuck Norris’ favorite move is the roundhouse kick.” This sentence expresses the thought that Chuck Norris’ favorite move is the roundhouse kick. This thought presents the True. The sentence itself refers to the True. Thus, the matter of truth of a sentence is essentially connected to the thought it expresses, or as Frege writes, “The predicate ‘true’ applies to thoughts” (Frege 1897, p.231).<sup>8</sup>

While both sentences and proper names alike name objects, it seems that Frege thought there was a difference in what kinds of concepts can sensibly apply to them.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> This is why, strictly speaking, truth is not a property, at least not essentially. While Frege never has a strict definition or ontological category for properties, he associates the term with concepts. A concept is the sense of a predicate. Since “the True” for Frege has the logical status of an object, to speak of truth as essentially a property is to make a category mistake.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that in “Thought” Frege claims that he speaks this way only because of the inadequacy of language. He is not comfortable speaking of truth as a predicate, but is limited by ordinary language to speak otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> It is important not to read too much into “sensibly” in the above point. It seems clear that Frege would have wanted it to follow from his view that all concepts are defined for all objects. Nevertheless, Tyler Burge spends a good deal of time discussing the fact that while in Frege’s ontology names and sentences are logically of the same type, they differ substantially in terms of application. For instance, only sentences can express thoughts. This, thinks Burge, gives them a privileged status in Frege’s logic. See Burge’s

application of a predicate to a name creates a sentence, which names a truth-value. On the level of sense, the sense of a concept is applied to the sense of a name to produce a thought. One calls a sentence true because one has moved from the thought (the sense) to a truth-value; one has judged that the pertinent sentence names the True. Thought of in this way, truth can be considered a property of a thought, the property a thought has in virtue of presenting the True. Again, this is not to say what truth is essentially, which is an object. Rather it is meant to show a secondary way in which truth can be characterized.

To give an example of these views, and to foreshadow a bit of what is to come, I quote the following illuminating passage from “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*” at length.

One might be tempted to regard the relation of the thought to the True not as that of sense to reference, 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 arises in each case from the form of the declarative sentence, and when the latter lacks its usual force, e.g. in the mouth of an actor upon 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 and predicate. Subject and predicate (understood in the logical sense) are indeed elements of thoughts; 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 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 part of a thought, any more than, say, the Sun can, for it is not a sense but an object (Frege 1892, 158).

Several important points are being made in this passage. One is that a subject and predicate are logically both elements of a thought, *within* the level of sense. But to judge a thought to be true is to move *across* levels from sense to reference. This is integrally related to a second point in this passage, namely that the sentence “S” and the sentence “The thought that S is true” both have the same sense; both express the same thought. This point—as will be made clear by its continued reemergence in this paper—is a very important

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“Frege on Truth” in his *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. p. 97-101.

aspect of Frege's philosophical view. Call it the *sameness of sense thesis*. The basic idea that a sentence which ascribes the predicate "is true" to the thought expressed by that sentence has the same sense as the root thought. Take for example, the sentence

1. Snow is white.

This sentence expresses the thought that snow is white. Now it seems pretty obvious that the thought expressed by 1 is true, hence

2. The thought that snow is white is true.

Frege's further claim about 1 and 2 would be that they express the same sense. Further, since the thought that snow is white is the very same thing as the thought expressed by sentence 1, it seems too that

3. The thought expressed by 'Snow is white' is true.

likewise has the same sense as 1 and 2. Thus 1, 2, and 3 all have the same sense on Frege's view. This commits Frege to *at least* the following equivalence:

S iff the thought that S is true

where 'S' can be replaced by any indicative sentence. Since thoughts for Frege exist completely at the level of sense, and since the True is an object, asserting that the thought expressed by a sentence is true does not contribute anything in terms of sense over merely uttering the sentence itself. The recognition that the sentence expresses a true thought is an identification of the object (truth-value) which that thought presents. So while combining subject and predicate brings one to a sense, recognizing the thought as true brings one to a referent. This recognition of truth-value is implicit right in the assertion of a sentence. One 'predicates' truth in the assertoric force of an utterance.

Another component crucial to understanding Frege's conception of truth emerges here as well. If a concept, in Frege's ontology, is a function from objects to truth-values, then truth is presupposed in every act of predication. This gives truth a special status: it is

prior to, and foundational to the application of, every concept. Frege says, in fact, that one cannot recognize a property of anything without also knowing that it is true that that thing has that property.<sup>10</sup> If so, then truth is thus presupposed in any indicative statement whatsoever. Soames makes this point nicely, writing “Whenever we say something has a certain property P, Frege believes we are, in effect, saying or thinking that a certain thought is true—namely the thought that the thing does have property P. So whenever we say or think anything, we are implicitly invoking the notion of truth” (Soames 1999, p.21).

I think that contained within this conception of truth are the seeds of what will eventually bloom into the reason Frege thinks that “true” is indefinable. It may not contribute to the sense of expressions that use the term, but without a proper grasp of the sense of truth, we would not have the ability to grasp any thoughts at all. The task of the next section will be to show how these seeds germinated.

## § 2. Truth, Definition, and Logic

Armed with the conception of truth described above, how would one go about giving a definition of the term? Before asserting that it cannot be done, Frege considers some possible candidates for a definition of “true”, finding fault with all of them.

### 2.1 What Truth is Not

One possibility, Frege suggests, might be that the bearers of truth are ideas. One could then hold the view that truth can be explained in terms of agreement between the contents of that idea and reality. If so, then it seems plausible that a definition of the word “true” could be “an idea is true if it agrees with reality” (Frege 1897, p. 228).<sup>11</sup> Frege immediately rejects this definition on the grounds that “in order to apply [it] we should have

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<sup>10</sup> The passage this comes from is in Frege (1918) p.328. Further along into the same passage, Frege reiterates the sameness of sense thesis, which was found above in “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.”

<sup>11</sup> The way it is construed in this paper, what Frege suggests here is not even a definition. But I think this is a minor point. If we can grant that Frege probably understood his own notion of definition, then we can correct this minor mistake by putting it into the correct form i.e. “For any idea I, I is true iff I corresponds to reality.”

to decide whether some idea or other did agree with reality. Thus we should have to presuppose the very thing that is being defined” (*Ibid*). Frege’s argument here seems to be that if “true” is defined as agreement between an idea and reality, in order to decide whether an idea is true, one must already know whether it is true that that idea is true. Since knowing whether it is true that some idea is true requires already knowing whether that idea is true, the definition requires of its user the very thing it is expected to supply. The strategy used by Frege here will turn out to be the same strategy he uses for his general argument.

In the above argument, Frege criticizes a definition of “true” characterized by an agreement between two things, an idea and its correspondence to reality. In “Thought” Frege adds to this criticism, arguing that truth cannot be characterized as *any* sort of correspondence relation between two things. He argues that truth grammatically looks like a property, and in light of the way that the word is used in ordinary language, it cannot be a relation. Suppose that the bearer of truth is any sort of picture or idea. Suppose further that “true” predicates, or is a property of, an idea or a picture that is supposed to represent something. “It might be supposed from this that truth consists in a correspondence of a picture to what it depicts” (Frege 1918, p.327-328). But correspondence is a relation; a correspondence relation exists relative to the picture/idea corresponding to some other thing. The word “true” is not used in this way (to refer to a relation between two things). “If I do not know that a picture is meant to represent Cologne Cathedral, then I do not know what to compare the picture with in order to decide its truth” (Frege 1918, p.328). The argument here is actually quite simple and effective, though the conclusion is not very dramatic. It can be put as follows.

1. “True” is used in language as a predicate of a single thing.
2. If “true” is used in language as a predicate of a single thing, then truth is not a relation between two things.
3. Correspondence relations are relations between two things.
4. Therefore truth is not a correspondence relation.

I believe this argument is sound, though not all that interesting. Scott Soames points out of a similar argument he attributes to Frege that while it may be sound, it does not refute any version of a correspondence theory of truth that is actually held. Soames asserts that correspondence theories do not suggest, as the above argument would have one believe, that the word “true” means “corresponds to”. “Rather, they say that truth is a relational property—the property of corresponding to something in reality” (Soames 1999, p.24). That being said, it seems that this way out is easily generalizable to any attempt to define truth in terms of a relation. Any definition of truth that is stated in the following form: some object  $O$  (of the appropriate type) is true iff  $O$  stands in  $\psi$  to some  $x$ ’ (where  $\psi$  is standing in for the salient relation) will fall victim to Frege’s argument, but to amend this problem the form need only to be changed to the following: Some object  $O$  (of the appropriate type) is true iff there is an  $x$ , and a property  $\varphi$  of  $\psi$ ’ing  $x$ , and  $O$  has  $\varphi$ .”

Frege then moves from criticizing particular faulty attempts to define truth to a more general point: attempting to define “true” even as any sort of property will fail. In “Logic,” Frege frames the problem as follows. Any attempt to define truth using either the form ‘ $A$  is true iff  $A$  has  $\varphi$ ’ or ‘for some  $x$ ,  $A$  is true iff  $A$   $\psi$ ’s some  $x$ ’ will suffer the same fate as attempting to define “true” as “agreement between an idea and reality.” In each case, Frege argues, it would always come back to the question whether it is true that  $\psi(A, x)$  or it is true that  $\varphi(A)$ .<sup>12</sup> Frege concludes from these considerations that “Truth is obviously something so primitive and simple that it is not possible to reduce it to anything still simpler” (Frege 1897, p. 228). Frege now has an argument for the conception of truth that we saw the beginning of in “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.” Moreover, I think this discussion contains a rudimentary form of Frege’s central argument. It is not until he writes “Thought”, however, that he fleshes out some of the detail of the argument. Suppose that, like in the immediately

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<sup>12</sup> See Frege (1897) p. 228.

above argument, the proper definition of “true” is as some property, as follows: ‘A is true iff A has  $\varphi$ ’ (where A is the primary bearer of truth). Now in order to apply a definition in this form, one must already know that A has  $\varphi$  in order to decide if A is true. In the above cases of ideas or pictures,

We should have to inquire whether it is *true* that an idea and a reality, say, correspond in the specified respect. So the attempted explanation of truth as correspondence breaks down. And any other attempt to define truth also breaks down. For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be specified. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were *true* that the characteristics were present. So we should be going around in a circle. So it seems that the content of the word “true” is *sui generis* and indefinable (Frege, 1918, p.327).

The first thing that must be straightened out concerns what kinds of objects count as the primary bearers of truth. He writes, “What is improperly called the truth of pictures and ideas is reduced to the truth of sentences” (*Ibid*). So to say that an idea *n* corresponds to reality is really to say that the sentence “*n* corresponds to reality” is true. Given Frege’s views on truth, this means that the thought that *n* corresponds to reality is true; and we can see why Frege believes that thoughts are the primary bearers of truth. But even if thoughts are the primary bearers of truth, “true” still must not be defined in terms of a thought corresponding to, or standing in some relation to, some other thing, “*for otherwise the question of truth would get reiterated to infinity*” (*Ibid*).<sup>13</sup>

Different philosophers have held that Frege’s argument in the above passages can be explicated one or both of two different ways. One way is to argue that all attempts to define truth are circular. Another way is to argue that all attempts to define truth lead to a vicious

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<sup>13</sup> The emphasis is mine. N.B. It seems that there is at least one Fregean way to characterize truth as a relation to some other thing: a thought A is true if and only if A presents the True. I think Frege would probably accept such a characterization, though I think he would point out that anything said about truth qua predicate is a secondary notion, and fails to capture what truth is most fundamentally. I think Frege *would* object, however, to trying to use this (or any) characterization to stipulate a definition of truth.

infinite regress.<sup>14</sup> Below I will consider each formulation of the argument, though ultimately I think that to interpret Frege as making a *bona fide* infinite regress argument is uncharitable.

Yet before we can get to putting forth a detailed interpretation of Frege's argument, a couple terminological and conceptual clarifications need to be brought into light. The first matter to attend to is to clarify what Frege means when he talks about giving a definition. This will be the subject matter of 2.2. Then, in 2.3 I will clear up some matters concerning linguistic environments in which "true" is used, and how these relate to his conception of logic. Such a consideration helps to provide Frege's motivation for thinking predicate for truth was needed at all.

## 2.2 Getting clear on definition

Since Frege has a specific and technical notion of what it is to define something, crucial to determining why Frege thinks "true" is indefinable is an understanding of that notion. According to Frege, some senses are simple, or primitive, and some are complex. Complex, or nonprimitive senses are composed out of the primitive ones. Complex senses can then be analyzed in terms of their simple component senses. For example, perhaps the sense of "good" is simple, but that of "good and self-identical" complex. Notice as well, that even though "good" and "good and self-identical" differ in their degree of complexity, they refer to the same concept.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the linguistic terms or expressions which express these senses, too, can vary from simple to complex and still refer to the same concept. To give a definition of a term is to introduce the term into a language and assign it a complex sense. Frege writes "Every definition contains a sign (an expression, a word) which had no meaning before and which is first given a meaning by the definition" (Frege 1980, 36).

Hence, a definition binds a simple term to a complex sense; and thus to the expression

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Soames (1999) thinks the argument can be made both ways. Ricketts (1996) reads it solely as an infinite regress argument. Burge (2004), on the other hand, explicitly states his distaste for the infinite regress reading and reads Frege as making the circularity version of the argument.

<sup>15</sup> The reason, of course, is because concepts are functions. Thanks to Kevin Klement for the example.

which expresses that sense. The term “bachelor” is defined as “unmarried adult male,” for example, when the sense of the complex expression “unmarried adult male” is assigned to the term “bachelor;” and both the term and expression have the same sense; they refer to the same concept. An application of the definition, then, would be substitution of the term for the expression that expresses the term’s complex sense. Given this understanding of definition, it is clear that terms or expressions with primitive senses cannot themselves be defined. As Frege puts it,

If in such a case the meaning to be assigned is logically simple, then one cannot give a proper definition but must confine oneself to warding off the unwanted meanings among those that occur in linguistic usage and to pointing to the wanted one, and here one must of course always rely on being met half-way with an intelligent guess” (Frege 1980, 37).

Furthermore, Frege would say that not all primitive senses are arbitrarily chosen. Some have an objective metaphysical status as such. When he speaks about the notion of truth being primitive and simple, for example, he also calls it *sui generis*.<sup>16</sup> Again, this underscores the special role of truth in Frege’s ontology discussed above.

Another feature of this view of definition I wish to point out has to do with the role epistemic considerations play in a definition. Frege claims that “By defining, no knowledge is engendered; and thus one can only say that definitions that have been altered into assertoric thoughts formally play the role of principles but really are not principles at all” (Frege 1984, 274). To my mind, the main point that Frege is trying to make here is that there is nothing more to a defined term than the complex sense assigned to it. Thus, to know whether a defined term applies is just to know whether the conditions specified in the sense-complex obtain. This gives an epistemic ordering such that the primitive senses in the sense-complex are epistemically prior to the defined term. Burge summarizes this idea nicely as follows.

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<sup>16</sup> See the above lengthy quotation from Frege 1918 (p 327)

DEF: “A definition gives an epistemic order of priority or justification: the defined term is known to apply through applying the definition.”<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3 The Truth Predicate and Fregean logic

A second matter I wish to draw attention to concerns the linguistic environments in which the word “true” appears. Soames points out two different linguistic environments that Frege describes in which ‘is true’ is used to predicate thoughts.

Environment 1. It is true that S. / The thought that S is true.

Environment 2. -Everything John says is true.  
-There are true thoughts that are not supported by available evidence.  
-Every thought is such that either it or its negation is true.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence for this distinction is found in a passage from “Thought” in which Frege reiterates that “nothing is added to [a] thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth;” but he adds here that “... is it not a great result when the scientist after much hesitation and laborious researches can finally say ‘My conjecture is true?’”(Frege 1918, p.328).

Above I mentioned that Frege is committed to the simple equivalence:

S iff the thought that S is true

where S can be replaced by any indicative sentence. With this distinction between linguistic environments in hand, then, we can say that statements of truth in environment 1 for Frege are trivially equivalent to their respective root thoughts, just as one would expect given the sameness of sense thesis. As such, it seems that “true” adds nothing to the meaning in environment 1 contexts. On the other hand, when “true” appears in environment 2 contexts, e.g. the declaration of the scientist, there is something being added to the meaning of the declaration that would be missing without the presence of “true”. Soames characterizes the difference between these two linguistic environments as follows.

“Environments of type 2 are important because they provide the only reason we need a

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<sup>17</sup> Burge (2004), p. 139. Burge adds that while this might not be most modern logician’s view of definition, it was certainly Frege’s.

<sup>18</sup> Soames 1999, p. 22.

truth predicate of thoughts or propositions; environments of type 1 are important because they play a privileged role in explaining what truth consists in” (Soames 1999, p.23).

Consideration of the equivalences that are generated by environment 1 expressions of truth can further contribute to our understanding of what it would take to give a definition of “true.” Since these equivalencies are between a true sentence and an attribution of truth to the thought expressed by that sentence, then these equivalency relations might serve to define the notion of a true thought. To introduce a definition of “true,” like any other term, is to assign a complex sense to it. Like the definition of “bachelor” as “unmarried man” an appropriate definition of “true” will have to identify its sense with the complex sense of some other expression. Since Frege holds that thoughts are the primary bearers of truth, the general form of a definition of truth will be “For any thought A, A is true iff  $\varphi$  (A),” where  $\varphi$  is used schematically for an expression built up of words with senses already understood (and understood independently of truth).<sup>19</sup> The definition will be *admissible* under the condition that it is satisfied in every case where a thought is true.

One last matter that needs to be attended to is to clarify how Frege saw the connection between truth and logic, and how some philosophers incorrectly describe Frege’s conception of truth as a deflationary or redundancy view. Frege thought of logic as a normative science whose fundamental goal or aim was truth. One can achieve a better understanding of the kind of normativity Frege has in mind in calling logic “normative” in the following passage. “Logic is concerned with the laws of truth, not with holding something to be true, not with questions of how people think, but with the question of how they *must* think if they are not to miss the truth” (Frege 1897, p. 250).<sup>20</sup> He compares logic’s pursuit of understanding truth to ethics’ goal of understanding the good and aesthetics’ goal

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<sup>19</sup> While it may have been easier to formulate this with property-talk, I avoid it so as not to raise unnecessary issues.

<sup>20</sup> The emphasis is mine.

of understanding the beautiful. The comparison of truth to goodness and beauty, however, ought to be taken with a grain of salt. The pursuit of truth in logic is far more basic and important.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Frege suggests, "...the task we assign to logic is only that of saying what holds with the utmost generality for all thinking, whatever its subject matter" (Frege 1897, p.228). Frege characterizes the connection between logic and truth by holding that the laws of truth are concurrent with the laws of logic; that logic is the science of the most general laws of truth.<sup>22</sup> This view can perhaps be put concisely (and I hope not too inaccurately) as follows:

Frege's Conception of Logic: Any maximally general logical law is a law of truth.

Hence, while Frege will come to believe that the word "true" is indefinable, he seems to think that truth can be specified by maximally general logical laws. The kind of specification to which I refer must not be confused with a definition. This can be made clearer by returning to the comparison of the role of "good" in ethics. While the word "good" cannot be properly defined, the field of ethics involves itself in the discovery of principles which are best explained by use of these terms. So while goodness may be irreducible, the totality of true ethical principles can serve to illuminate what it is for something to be good. No one of these principles, nor the conjunction of them all, can adequately serve as a definition of the word "good;" but taken in their entirety, these principles are prescriptive for the preservation of goodness. So too with "true," and its role in logic.

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<sup>21</sup> Further, there is an important difference between the predicate 'true' and that of, say, 'beautiful.' For example, two beautiful objects can possess different degrees of beauty. One can be more or less beautiful than the other. This is not the case with 'true'. Any two objects predicated as 'true', if the word is being used correctly, are equally true. Truth, in other words, does not come in degrees. See "Logic", p.231-233, also "My Basic Logical Insights" (1915) p. 323.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* In "Thought" Frege adds to this that "The Bedeutung of the word "true" is spelled out in the laws of truth and the task of logic is to uncover those laws (Frege 1918, p.326).

Given the fundamental importance of truth to logic, then, it seems odd that one would use the terms “redundant” or “deflationary” to describe Frege’s philosophical views on truth.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, the origin of this kind of labeling of Frege’s view stems from his sameness of sense thesis. Yet, using such terms as “deflationary” or “redundancy” to describe the view seems to downplay the importance that Frege believed truth to have in logic, to say that there is nothing substantive about truth that is worth studying.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, as has just been shown, Frege believed that truth is of the utmost importance in logic, and the only way to understand truth is through an understanding of logic. So despite the fact that quibbling over terminological choices will seem trivial to some, I think nevertheless that the role of truth in logic in Frege’s philosophy is too important to be called a “deflationary” or “redundancy” view.<sup>25</sup>

### § 3. The Indefinability Argument

With these terminological and conceptual matters having been brought to light, the following points are now clear. First, Frege thinks that in order to introduce a term by definition, one must be able to assign to that term a complex sense, reducible to simple senses. Such a view of definition provides an epistemic order of justification. Second, truth is the fundamental pursuit of logic; the laws of logic spell out the laws of truth. Third, the notion of truth is prior to the application of any concepts. Given these points, a better understanding emerges of what Frege had in mind in the following quotation.

[I]n a definition certain characteristics would have to be specified. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise whether it were *true*

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<sup>23</sup> Frege’s best explication of his redundancy view is in “My Basic Logical Insights” (1915).

<sup>24</sup> Of course, many philosophers *do* believe that logic is without content, and that logical truths tell us nothing substantive about the world. Frege, however, is *not* one of these philosophers.

<sup>25</sup> According to Burge, “Frege uses this view to ward off possible doubts about the postulation of truth-values as objects denoted by all sentences, regardless of subject matter” (1986, p. 104). Furthermore, claims Burge, Frege combines his deflationary view of truth with the view that the denotations of sentences are truth-values “as a weapon against the sceptic about the objective world” (1986, p.106). This move, says Burge, justifies Frege’s claim that every act of judgment aims toward truth. I raise this point to show the interconnectedness of Frege’s views.

that the characteristics were present. So we should be going around in a circle. So it seems that the content of the word “true” is *sui generis* and indefinable (Frege, 1918, p.327).

In short, if we were to try to define truth in terms of some defining expression—that is, assign a complex sense to the term “true”—then we would find that the definition failed because whenever we tried to apply that definition to anything, we would be presupposing the notion of truth that we were attempting to define. To put this into more Fregean language:

- (1) In a definition of truth certain characteristics (e.g. corresponds to reality) would always have to be specified.
- (2) If (1), then any application of the definition of truth would give rise to the question whether it was true whether those characteristics were present (e.g. does it correspond to reality?).
- (3) But this is circular.
- (4) So truth is indefinable.

As it stands, this argument is incomplete. Indeed, it is not even valid unless some additional premises and assumptions are supplied. Nevertheless, it stands as a rudimentary statement of the indefinability argument, and provides a good framework that can be used to formulate the complete argument.

In section 3.1, I will flesh out the premises, expanding on some of the insight provided by Burge (2004). As I mentioned above, different philosophers have held that Frege’s argument can be made one or both of two different ways: by concluding that any attempt to define truth leads to an infinite regress, and that any attempt to define truth will end up being epistemically circular. In 3.2 I will take up the task of showing why I think that Frege is best read as giving the circularity, but *not* the infinite regress, version of the argument. Finally, in 3.3 I will humor the regress version of the argument just long enough to show that Frege would not have endorsed such an argument.

### 3.1 The argument stated

While (1)-(4) is the way Frege puts the argument, it would seem that he must have assumed some unstated premises when making it. For example, Burge points out that as Frege puts the argument, he “does not explain why a definition of truth and meta-level propositional attitudes using the definition must be relied upon in order to decide whether a thought is true. One might simply make judgments that do not contain the notion of truth and then infer the truth of the judged contents from them” (Burge 2004, p.139). To avoid such a worry, the argument might be filled out a bit more.

Burge suggests that Frege’s argument might be saved by adding three additional premises/assumptions. One is that “Ordinary non-factive judgments presuppose a notion of truth in some looser way than actually employing or containing the notion” (*Ibid*). This gets Frege out of Burge’s potential objection because if non-factive judgments presuppose a notion of truth, then it is not possible to make a judgment that does not contain the notion of truth in some way. Since at the very least, a non-factive judgment must be made in order to apply a definition, this initial objection is avoided. One way to see the problem is as a dilemma. In applying a definition, a judgment needs to be made whether the expression containing the complex sense is present. For example, suppose that the definition of “true” is “For any thought A, A is true iff A corresponds to a fact.” To apply this definition, a judgment needs to be made whether A corresponds to a fact. This judgment must either be factive or non-factive. If it is a factive judgment, then a notion of truth is overtly presupposed in the application of the definition. For example, one cannot establish that P without it being the case that P is true. If it is a non-factive judgment then while directly employing the notion of truth or making a judgment directly containing that notion has been avoided, truth is still presupposed in the judgment. For example, questioning whether P (or inquiring whether P) does not contain the notion of truth, but given the sameness of sense thesis, one cannot inquire whether P without simultaneously inquiring whether the thought

that P is true. Now if we let P be “A corresponds to a fact” and one cannot even inquire whether A corresponds to a fact without inquiring whether the thought that A corresponds to a fact is true, then even if we limit the kinds of judgments that need to be made to apply a definition to ordinary non-factive judgments, truth still trickles into the judgment. Hence, either way, truth is somehow presupposed in the application of the definition. This seems to support Burge’s claim that “Frege would hold that non-factive judgments at least aim at truth, and this aim constitutes a presupposition of any application of belief or non-factive judgment” (*Ibid*). I agree with Burge not only that this seems true of non-factive judgments, but also that Frege would have thought so.

Another assumption that Burge thinks needs to be incorporated into Frege’s argument has already been discussed above; it is

DEF: A definition gives an epistemic order of priority or justification: the defined term is known to apply through applying the definition.

Burge thinks one further premise needs to be added as well, namely one which states that “if a definition understood in the way indicated in [DEF] defines a notion that is presupposed in a full account of what it is to apply the definition, the definition is inadmissible. Even if one tried to substitute the definiens for the definition in the presupposition, the definition, understood in light of [DEF], would be involved in epistemic circularity” (Burge 2004, 139-140). With these tools in hand, the argument can be formulated on its strongest leg.

Since Frege believed that thoughts are the fundamental truth-bearers, let A be a variable for thoughts. As put forth above, the general form of a definition of truth will be “For any thought A, A is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ,” where  $\varphi$  is used schematically for an expression built up of words with senses already understood (and understood independently of truth). Since Frege liked to make reductio-style arguments we should follow suit.

Assume: “True” is definable:

Given the above discussion of definition, (1) might be restated as follows.

IT1. If “true” is definable, then some  $\varphi$  can be specified such that there is an admissible definition of the form “For any thought  $A$ ,  $A$  is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ”

What is most important to (2) is that any application of the definition of “true” will raise the question whether  $\varphi(A)$ . Even to raise the question whether  $\varphi(A)$  is to make a non-factive judgment about  $\varphi(A)$ . To answer the question would seem to require making a factive-judgment. But even if it is not required that the question be answered, it seems that the question cannot avoid being raised. Hence,

IT2. If some  $\varphi$  can be specified such that there is an admissible definition of the form “For any thought  $A$ ,  $A$  is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ” then in order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true”, an ordinary non-factive judgment would have to be made whether  $\varphi(A)$ .

Next we can reinforce the argument with the considerations made in the above discussion of non-factive judgments with the following two premises:

IT3. Ordinary non-factive judgments presuppose a notion of truth.

IT4. If in order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true”, an ordinary non-factive judgment would have to be made whether  $\varphi(A)$ , and ordinary non-factive judgments presuppose a notion of truth, then in order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of truth, the notion of truth is presupposed in that application.

From our original assumption and IT1-IT4 it follows that

IT5. In order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true” the notion of truth is presupposed in that application of  $\varphi$ .

It is at this point in the argument where DEF comes into play. To connect IT5 to the final conclusion about the indefinability of truth using DEF, one additional premise is needed, namely one that states that in light of DEF, any definition which defines a term or an expression whose sense is presupposed in a full account of what it is to apply the definition is inadmissible. We can apply this point to the argument at hand as follows.

IT6. If in order to apply some  $\varphi$  as a definition of truth the notion of truth is presupposed in that application of  $\varphi$ , then there is no  $\varphi$  such that there is an admissible definition of the form “For any thought  $A$ ,  $A$  is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ .”

The rationale for IT6 is simple: the condition it puts forth is violated on pain of circularity; this preserves (3) from Frege's original argument above. Thus, from IT5 and IT6 it follows that

IT7. There is no  $\varphi$  such that there is an admissible definition of the form "For any thought A, A is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ."

Finally, since our assumption that "true" is definable leads to the contradictory conclusion that there both is and is not an admissible definition of the form "For any thought A, A is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ", then it follows by reductio that

IT8. "True" is indefinable.

### 3.2 Circularity or infinite regress?

Given the way I have formulated the indefinability argument, the conclusion turns on the idea that any attempt to define "true" results in circularity. Indeed, in the passage I quoted at the beginning of this section, Frege specifically claims one's attempts to define "true" will have one going around in a circle. That he means to give at least this version of the argument, then, seems indisputable.<sup>26</sup>

So why have some philosophers read Frege as giving an alternate, infinite regress version the argument (or worse still, judged that it is his sole conclusion)? The only evidence I can find in studying Frege's work is further down the same page when he claims that "true" must not be defined in terms of a thought corresponding to, or standing in some relation to, some other thing, "for otherwise the question of truth *would get reiterated to infinity*" (*Ibid*). If this is indeed the only evidence for this alternate reading, then I think it is a weak claim that Frege intended the argument to be made as an infinite regress. One reason for thinking that it is a weak claim is that it is easy to interpret Frege's remark about the question

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Ricketts (1996). He makes no mention of the circularity version of the argument, and formulates it solely in terms of an infinite regress.

of truth being reiterated to infinity to be another reference to the circularity that results when one attempts to define truth. In short, if something is circular, then it gets reiterated to infinity (going round and round, etc.). So without any other evidence, the interpretation of the argument as an infinite regress (that doesn't go around in a circle), I think, is spurious.

A lack of textual support, however, has not stopped philosophers from interpreting Frege this way. Soames, for instance, believes that the argument can be given both ways, and gives an interpretation of both.<sup>27</sup> Further, Dummett gives a famous interpretation of Frege's "regress" argument, and claims of it that the regress Frege generates is non-vicious. Hence, it seems important to give *some* consideration to this interpretation. Before addressing the issue of whether the indefinability argument that I just attributed to Frege is sound, then, I should address a first, obvious objection: that I have misrepresented Frege; that he did indeed intend to give a regress argument. I think what will emerge from this consideration is that attributing the regress argument to Frege is not only baseless, but also uncharitable.

### 3.3 Why the Regress Reading is Uncharitable to Frege

The first thing I should point out is that I don't think a regress can even be generated—vicious or otherwise—the way I have formulated the argument above. In order to generate a regress, I think some modifications would need to be made. First, IT3—what served as a sort of circularity generating assumption—seems to need to be replaced with a regress generating assumption (RGA). Further, IT4 would then need to be modified to account for the change; instead of making some claim about circularity, the new IT4\* will have to show how the regress is built. A final premise would then have to be thrown in to do the work that DEF is implicitly doing in the original formulation, saying that if in order

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<sup>27</sup> See Soames 1999. esp. p. 25.

to apply a definition, an infinite regress of judgments would have to be made, then that definition is inadmissible. Such alterations might go as follows.

First, from the assumption, and from IT1 and IT2 it follows that:

(IT2b) In order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true”, an ordinary non-factive judgment would have to be made whether  $\varphi(A)$ .

To parallel the above argument, I will place the regress generating schema (RGA) in the position of premise IT3\*.

IT3\*, (RGA). To inquire whether S is to inquire whether it is true that S, which is to inquire whether the thought that S is true.

RGA is essentially the premise schema given in Soames’ interpretation of Frege’s regress argument.<sup>28</sup> The schema works as follows. “S” is a schematic variable ranging over indicative sentences. An instance of RGA is a premise. The first relevant instance of RGA is obtained by first noting that one way to make a non-factive judgment whether  $\varphi(A)$  is simply by inquiring whether  $\varphi(A)$ . The first application of the schema, then is to put “ $\varphi(A)$ ” in for S. The regress is generated by then making further applications to the output produced from the application before it. As a result, you get

IT4\*. (If IT2b and RGA), then in order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true” it must be inquired whether it is true that  $\varphi(A)$ , which is to inquire whether  $\varphi(A)$  is true, but this is just to inquire whether  $\varphi(\varphi(A))$ , which is to inquire whether it is true that  $\varphi(\varphi(A))$ , which is just to inquire whether  $\varphi(\varphi(\varphi(A)))$  is true, ..., and so on *ad infinitum*.

From which it follows that

IT5\*. In order to apply  $\varphi$  as a definition of “true”, it must be inquired whether it is true that  $\varphi(A)$ , which is to inquire whether  $\varphi(A)$  is true, but this is just to inquire whether  $\varphi(\varphi(A))$ , which is to inquire whether it is true that  $\varphi(\varphi(A))$ , which is just to inquire whether  $\varphi(\varphi(\varphi(A)))$  is true, ..., and so on *ad infinitum*.

To conclude that the regress is vicious, and again by *reductio*, that “true” is indefinable, the argument would be completed as follows.

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<sup>28</sup> Soames (1999) p. 25. He puts the principle as follows. “To inquire (establish) whether S is to inquire (establish) whether it is true that S, which is to inquire (establish) whether the thought that S is true.”

IT6\*. (If IT5\*), then applying  $\varphi$  as a definition of truth requires completing the impossible task of inquiring about the truth-values of infinitely many distinct thoughts.

And from IT5\* and IT6\* it follows that

IT7\*. Applying  $\varphi$  as a definition of truth requires completing the impossible task of inquiring about the truth-values of infinitely many distinct thoughts.

Since no definition can be admissible if its application requires an impossible task, our assumption that “true” is definable leads to the contradictory conclusion that there both is and is not an admissible definition of the form “For any thought A, A is true iff  $\varphi(A)$ ”.

Hence, it follows by reductio that

IT8. “True” is indefinable.

The first problem that might be raised against the argument is that the move from the regress to the claim that it is vicious, or that it leads to circularity, is unwarranted.

Dummett, in the following passage makes his famous claim that the regress is not vicious.

It is true enough that, in determining that some statement A is true, I thereby also determine the truth of infinitely many other statements...But there is no harm in this, as long as we recognize that the truth of every statement in this series is determined simultaneously: the regress would be vicious only if...in order to determine the truth of any member of the series, I had first to determine that of the next term in the series” (Dummett 1981, 443).

One might object, similarly to Dummett, that the regress just generated is only problematic if one cannot judge infinitely many thoughts to be true.<sup>29</sup> While it is true that a finite being cannot judge infinitely many novel thoughts to be true, why assume that this is the kind of judgment that is involved here? If it were the case that in judging that A is true, one simultaneously judged that it is true that A is true, then one, in effect, could be judging infinitely many thoughts simply in judging the one. In order for the regress to be vicious, it

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<sup>29</sup> Dummett draws the further conclusion that since the regress is not vicious, Frege’s argument is not that truth is indefinable (contrary to Frege’s own claims) but that the definition of “true” has to be limited in certain ways.

would have to be the case that in order to judge any thought in the chain of judgments, one would first have to judge the thought in front of it.

If it would no longer be an impossible task to make infinitely many judgments, premise IT6\* would be false. The question, then, is how does one explain how an infinite number of judgments can be made at once? Dummett does not actually give such an explanation. Shieh attempts to remedy this by providing an explanation of his own. Shieh calls his explanation a quasi-supervenience explanation. The situation for judgments, Shieh claims, is analogous to how one can simultaneously raise one's arm and hail a taxi, while still maintaining that these are distinct actions. Suppose *p* is the proposition (thought) that it is raining. When one decides whether *p* is the case, one observes that *p*. "So we ascertain that *p* is true by observation. But, surely, by this *same* observation, we also recognize simply that it is raining, that is, simply that *p*. So by this same observation we simultaneously ascertain the truth of all the thoughts expressed by the judgments in the regress" (Shieh 2001, p.106). This explanation is easily adapted to fit the current framework. One wants to know whether *P*. One then observes, and accordingly judges that it is true that *P*. By this same observation, one also judges simply that *P*. So by this same observation, we can simultaneously establish all the links in the chain.

Someone sympathetic with the regress interpretation, but not with Dummett/Shieh's attempt to disarm it might respond to this by pointing out that the crux of this objection is the claim that the infinite chain of judgments that arises from the regress can be judged simultaneously. Shieh's explanation of how this can occur seems plausible, but can it really account for judging infinitely many thoughts at once? It seems that one could *infer* from having judged *P* that he also judged that *P* is true, or vice-versa. But making this inference is not the same as simultaneously judging these thoughts to be true. For example, when I ascertain by observation that it is raining outside, I can infer that I also believe that it is true

that it is raining outside. I may even judge that it is true that it is raining outside. It is not clear, however, that I also judge, at the same time, for example, that it is true that it is true that it is true that it is raining outside. Once again, if pressed on it, I may infer my commitment to judging this, and then upon making this inference, judge this new thought to be true, but it seems implausible to say that I made *that particular judgment* at just the same time as when I judged that it is raining.

I am not moved by a response like this to Dummett's objection. While I disagree with Dummett that Frege gives a regress argument, I agree that such a regress can be disarmed. Perhaps a better way to explain the problem is not to say, as Dummett did, that the regress is benign, but rather to say that it cannot even be generated. This can be shown by showing an inconsistency within the premises of the argument. First, note that crucial to the regress version of the argument is RGA. The justification for RGA, and what would make Frege endorse it, is just that each element contained in an instance of the schema has exactly the same sense. For example, if we apply the schema to the sentence "*Quantum Leap* is TV's greatest show" we get the following: To inquire whether *Quantum Leap* is TV's greatest show is to inquire whether it is true that *Quantum Leap* is TV's greatest show, which is to inquire whether the thought that *Quantum Leap* is TV's greatest show is true. What makes it such that to inquire about one is to inquire about each in the chain, for Frege, is that each has the same sense. But what then are we to make of premise IT6\*? For the regress to work, one is required to judge that it is true that *A before* judging that *A*.

The problem now seems to be that if we accept RGA we are then forced to abandon the infinite regress, since each new thought in the alleged chain of judgments would have the exact same sense as the one previous to it. Since in order to judge a thought one must grasp it, and each of these judgments in the chain presumably is the same, then to grasp one is to grasp all of them. If this is the case, then there are not infinitely many judgments at all, there

is just one; so there really is no chain. Furthermore, if there is only one judgment to be made, then there is good reason to reject IT6\*. The irony of course is that RGA was supposed to be the very thing which got the regress going. However, one cannot consistently accept both RGA and IT6\*. It can now be seen why it is uncharitable to attribute this argument to Frege. While there is an interpretation of RGA such that Frege would accept it, that interpretation is so obviously inconsistent with IT6\* that Frege would not have endorsed an argument containing both.

#### § 4. Soundness

Having cleared up the possible objection that I have just misinterpreted Frege (or at least that I have misinterpreted him in the way described in the previous section), I will now move on to more closely examine some directly relevant objections to the argument which, I contend, *is* Frege's. I propose we set aside any further consideration of the starred (\*) premises, then, and focus on IT1-IT8.

Perhaps one might object that IT3 is closer to RGA than initial appearances might suggest. What makes each true, or at least what might move someone to endorse them, is their reliance on the equivalence discussed above: S iff the thought that S is true. The sense in which truth is presupposed by making the judgment whether  $\varphi(A)$  is just in light of the view that there is a sameness of sense between the indicative sentence " $\varphi(A)$ " and an ascription of truth to the thought expressed by that sentence. Hence, making a non-factive judgment like wondering whether P and wondering whether it is true that P are one and the same.

Like with RGA, then, one might suppose that IT3 works only if every instance of the equivalence schema works. Now consider Frege's claim that sentences like "Scylla had six heads," have no referent in way similar to, and in light of the fact that, "Scylla" has no

referent.<sup>30</sup> So a sentence can be true, false, or neither, as in the case of fictions (Frege 1897, p.230). The problem comes in when one puts in the sentence “Scylla had six heads” for S. When we put this sentence into the equivalence we get “Scylla had six heads iff the thought that Scylla had six heads is true”. The left-hand side of the equivalence will lack a truth-value, while the right-hand side will be false. Hence the equivalence is not applicable in all cases. If the equivalence is not applicable in all cases, one might argue, it is not the case that all non-factive judgments presuppose a notion of truth, loosely or otherwise. Thus, premise IT3 is false.

A defender of Frege’s argument might first question the connection between IT3 and RGA. Just because both rely in some way on the same equivalence, does not make them equivalent. Nevertheless, even if that were granted, one could reply to such an objection by pointing out that this consideration about the equivalence scheme at best merely limits the scope of its applicability, but not in any way that Frege would find unfavorable. If one were to raise such an objection, one would be doing so without considering that it is the role of truth *in logic* that is of the utmost concern for Frege. In a logical system like the *Begriffsschrift*, the logician, on Frege’s view, “does not have to bother with mock thoughts” (*Ibid*). Such sentences like “Scylla has six heads,” Frege would reply, fall outside the realm of logic altogether. “In myth and fiction, thoughts occur that are neither true nor false. Logic has nothing to do with these. In logic it holds good that every thought is either true or false, *tertium non datur*” (Frege 1906, p.300). So at best, the objection succeeds in pointing out that, since Frege’s argument seems dependent upon the

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<sup>30</sup> Such sentences still have senses though. That they have senses is important in understanding what Frege means by “false.” “False” as Frege conceives of it is as indefinable as “true” is. It is often thought that “false” can be defined in terms of the denial of “true.” Frege points out that this is problematic not only because “true” has no definition, but also because the denial of the truth of a sentence containing an empty proper name as the one above is not false, but fictitious.

equivalence, its domain of relevance is limited to truth for a logical language. Hence, we ought not give up on the equivalence, and so not IT3 so easily.

Furthermore, if rejecting IT3 is tantamount to rejecting the equivalence, then we may want to be wary of disparaging it for another reason. Dummett points out that it is crucial in maintaining a connection between truth and propositional attitudes. For example, without the equivalence between P and it is true that P, one could believe P without believing that P is true. The same would hold also of asserting P, establishing P, inquiring whether P, and, perhaps, judging P.

Another objection to the argument closely relates to this last point. One might object that Frege's argument relies on a sort of odd connection between the admissibility of a definition and certain propositional attitudes we have about the definition's application. Given what has been put forth above about admissibility, there are at least two conditions that must be met in order for a definition of "true" to be admissible. One was that the definition will be *admissible* under the condition that it is satisfied in every case where a thought is true. The other was that the first condition must be satisfied without circularity. But neither of these conditions says anything about our psychological capacities. Yet by making this connection between the admissibility of a definition and propositional attitudes, might claim the objector, the argument places too much importance on psychological features of us language users. It seems to allow that one can establish that a definition is admissible merely by appealing to kinds of judgments we make. Yet there seems to be good reasons to want to rule out that the admissibility of a definition depends somehow on anyone's abilities to judge it so. For instance, the objector might continue, it seems plausible that there are circular definitions so covert that it is not epistemically possible to judge that they are circular. It also seems possible that there are terms such that it is possible to give them a noncircular definition, but it is not epistemically possible for anyone (or at least one

of us humans) to give that noncircular definition. For, it would seem to follow from the fact that terms can be assigned complex senses that these senses could be arbitrarily complex, composed of more primitive senses than could be simultaneously grasped by any person. If it is possible that there are terms whose senses are too complex to be grasped, then should it follow that there is no proper definition that could be given to such a term? Perhaps, one might suggest, that it follows only that we cannot provide the definition, and not that there, in principle, isn't one. The limits of our psychological capacities may prevent us from having attitudes about such definitions, but there is no metaphysical reason for them to be ruled out. *Our ability* to make judgments about the admissibility of definitions, an objector could claim, is not a necessary condition for them to be proper.

Given Frege's antipsychologism, it does not seem that he would want to commit himself to the claim that there are epistemic considerations that must be made in order for a definition to be proper. Given the enormous stress Frege has placed on the observer-independence of truth, it would be odd for Frege to endorse an argument so heavily reliant upon our psychological capacities. In fact, it would be inconsistent.

As before, I am not particularly moved by most of this objection. In response to such an assault, then, a couple of things need to be said.

The first thing that needs to be said concerns the two metaphysical considerations about definition. First, even if it were possible that there is a circular definition so covertly circular that it was epistemically impossible for one to detect that circularity, the definition would still be circular. So it is unclear to me how making such a consideration does anything to make a case against Frege's argument. The second point—that it may be possible that there are terms such that it is possible to give them a noncircular definition, but it is not epistemically possible for anyone to give that noncircular definition—seems at least more initially compelling. But one immediate response is that such a consideration is just wrong.

It doesn't make sense to speak of definitions in this way. A person claiming the possibility that a term which this—perhaps infinitely—complex sense would be assigned to would need to explain how such an assignment could occur without a language user or linguistic community to grasp that complex sense. So it doesn't seem possible that there exists such a definition, and if there is, the burden of proof is on the objector to say how the definition *is* possible.

Another thing to point out is that if one were to wage such an objection, one would be completely missing the point of supplementing the argument with the additional premises. Burge points out a very similar objection himself, as I mentioned earlier, when he claims that the way the argument is stated, Frege “does not explain why a definition of truth and meta-level propositional attitudes using the definition must be relied upon in order to decide whether a thought is true” (Burge 2004, p. 139). The whole point of adding IT3 was to circumvent this very problem. What IT3 contributes to the argument is that the kinds of judgments necessary to give a definition at all themselves require an understanding of what it means for something to be true. Factive judgments directly employ a notion of truth. Non-factive judgments may not overtly presuppose a notion of truth like factive ones, but nonetheless presuppose the notion. Since a judgment must be either factive or non-factive, how then can truth *not* be presupposed in an attempt to define truth? If it is impossible for me to inquire whether  $\varphi(A)$  without at the same time inquiring whether it is true that  $\varphi(A)$ , then it is impossible to apply a definition of truth of the form described in the argument, and no amount of expansion of our epistemic capacities will change it.

The kind of circularity I have just described is epistemic circularity. This leads to a third major problem for this objection, which is that it inappropriately conflates epistemic considerations with psychological ones. Frege did have a deep vein of antipsychologism, and if he had really set up an argument that violated that antipsychologism, it would have

been blatantly inconsistent for him to do so. All the more reason to suppose he did not intend the argument to be read in this way. What makes any definition of “true” fall short is that there is objective fact of the matter that any attempt to apply such a definition will involve epistemic circularity. That this circularity is present is a wholly objective fact, no matter what sense is put in for “ $\varphi$ ”. Hence while our epistemic situations are limited by our capacities, it seems wrong to suggest that a worry about epistemic circularity should be tied in to some consideration about our psychologies.

Neither of the objections considered seems to carry much weight against Frege’s argument. Whether that makes it sound, however, is not an issue I have addressed. What I have done is generated an account of Frege’s indefinability argument and shown that argument is consistent with, and flows from Frege’s other pertinent philosophical views. I am sympathetic with the argument, and consider this consistency as a mark in favor of it. I think the best conclusion of this evaluation is to say that if you accept Frege’s views on concepts, and how the applicability of concepts is tied to truth, then you should think this is a sound argument. In short you should think that truth is simple, irreducible, and *sui generis*.

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