

Frege on truth and judgment

Peter Pagin

1. An interpretation of Frege's argument

For Frege's general views about truth the standard reference is the first couple of pages of 'The Thought'. Less attention has been paid to a short passage in 'On Sense and Reference' – in, fact, only one paragraph long – where Frege argues indirectly for the view that the relation between the thought and the True is an instance of the relation between sense and reference. He argues for this by discrediting the alternative view that it is an instance of the relation between "subject and predicate". Here is the paragraph:

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, pp 34-35).

Two subordinate, but still major, positive ideas are expressed in this passage:

(LP) If *that p* is a thought, then *that it is true that p* is a thought.

This is the thesis of *level preservation*. What a sentence expresses is something that belongs to the level of sense, not to that of reference. Frege's view, expressed in the paragraph directly preceding this one in 'On Sense and Reference', was that when a judgment is made the step is made from the level of sense to the level of reference. This is so since in a judgment the truth of the thought is acknowledged. The mind passes from entertaining the thought to judging what reference it is that corresponds to it (I'll come back to this below). By contrast, when the operation performed is that of prefixing the 'it is true that' operator to a sentence, the transition is not from a thought to a truth value, i.e. from a sense to a reference, but from a sense to a sense. No *judgment* has thereby been made. I take this thesis to be uncontroversial.

The second subordinate idea can be expressed analogously:

(R) If *that p* is a thought, then *that it is true that p* is the same thought.

This second thesis implies the first one. In claiming that the new thought actually is identical

with the old one Frege anticipates the redundancy theory of truth of Ramsey and Wittgenstein as well as later forms of minimalism. It is natural to call this a thesis of *redundancy*.¹ The expression ‘it is true that’ does not according to this thesis add any content to a sentence it is prefixed to, and so is redundant. It is natural to argue from this thesis that truth isn’t a property, and that has indeed often been done. If I understand him correctly, however, in the passage above Frege does argue that truth isn’t a property, but even though he states the redundancy thesis in the context, he doesn’t use it in the argument. Instead, he argues from the weaker thesis of level preservation, together with a premiss about the nature of judgment. I shall now turn to the reconstruction of that argument, and pay no more attention to the redundancy thesis.

When Frege does express a rejection of the view that the relation between a thought and the True is an instance of the relation between “subject and predicate”, he is naturally taken to reject the view that truth is a *property*, and more precisely the view that it is a property of thoughts. Being true would on that view consist in having the truth property, and if a thought is true, it is correct to predicate the property of being true of it.

It is not, however, completely easy to understand what the rejection of this view amounts to. It is easy to conflate it with a more general and obviously incorrect view that there is nothing that can be predicated of exactly all true thoughts. This would be to deny that there is any property shared by all and only true thoughts. On Frege’s own view it holds that

- (1) it is true that p iff any sentence expressing the thought that p refers to the True

Here the expression

- (2) any sentence expressing the thought that ... refers to the True

is a well-formed predicate, providing a Fregean indirect context for the argument place. Clearly, (2) is correctly predicated of all and only true thoughts. So it is possible to express a judgment that a thought is true by predicating a property of it. It can hardly be this that Frege wanted to deny. Rather, what he denied can, I believe, be somewhat imprecisely stated as the view that truth is *essentially* a property. Again, on Frege’s view, being true does not *consist* in having a particular property. There are properties shared by all and only true thoughts, such as that expressed by (2), but these properties exist only because truth already is something else than a property – an object – out of which those properties are constructed. Frege’s view is a metaphysical view about the nature of truth.

The second premiss in Frege’s argument is his doctrine about judgment. He expresses this view before and after the paragraph quoted above:

A judgment for me is not the mere comprehension of a thought, but the acknowledgment of its truth.²

1. The idea that the word ‘true’ (or ‘wahr’ in German) is redundant is also expressed in the Nachlass papers ‘Logik’, Frege (1897), pp 39-40, and ‘Logik in der Mathematik’, Frege (1914), pp 138-39.

2. Frege (1892), p 34, note 7. Here I have departed from the translation by Max Black, who has “admission” instead of “acknowledgment”, where the German original has “Anerkennung”.

Judging can be regarded as advancing from a thought to its truth value. Naturally, this cannot be a definition. Judging is something quite of its own kind and incomparable.³

A peculiar consequence of these formulations is that judgments are always correct. ‘Acknowledge’ is a factive (as is the German ‘anerkennen’), and so you cannot acknowledge the truth of a thought unless the thought is true. Similarly, if in a judgment you always advance to the truth value of the thought, a judgment is either advancing to the truth of a true thought or to the falsity of a false thought. If you consider a false thought and advance to the True, this is not a judgment, according to the given account. Max Black probably meant to correct for these consequences in his translations of the two passages. It is not so clear whether the formulations were slips of the pen on Frege’s part, but even though I prefer to stay closer to the German original in these respects, nothing in the discussion below will depend on assuming that Frege really thought that judgments were always correct.

I shall preliminarily ascribe to Frege the following view about judgment:

(AT) Judging that p is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought that p to taking the thought that p to be true.

This is the doctrine of judging as *advancing to truth*. I have here chosen the locution “taking the thought that p to be true” precisely because it is unspecific regarding the nature of the resulting state. The conclusion of the argument should be neither blocked nor anticipated by the articulation of the view.

I have also preferred to speak of advancing to truth rather than of advancing to truth value. The latter had been more appropriate had we considered two basic kinds of judgment, affirmation and negation, as in the older tradition of logic. For then it would have been better to say that in affirmations you advance to truth while in negations you advance to falsity, and hence that in general in judging you advance to a truth value. Frege’s view, however, was that there is just one kind of judgment, and that we can replace negation as a separate act with a single judgment act and a negation operator, i.e. an operator that takes a content into a content.⁴

The final ingredient in Frege’s argument is a thesis concerning the connection between the nature of truth and the nature of taking a thought to be true:

(TP) If truth is essentially a property, then taking a thought to be true consists in predicating truth of that thought.

3. Frege (1892), p 35. I have departed from Max Black by using the gerundives “judging” and “advancing” for the German “Urteilen” and “Fortschreiten”, instead of “judgments” and “advances”. I have also preferred “of its own kind” to “peculiar” for the German “einzigartiges”. Finally, Black has the indefinite “a truth value” rather than the reflective “its truth value”, where the German is “seinem Wahrheitswert”.

4. This is clearly expressed in ‘Die Verneinung’, p 154. Granted, ‘Die Verneinung’ was published in 1919, 27 years after ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, and one should be careful about projecting views backwards. But since Frege to my knowledge never expressed a view to the contrary it is better to conform to the view he undoubtedly held later. Again, nothing essential turns on this choice.

This is the thesis of *truth predication*. It has an intuitive plausibility. Whatever the entity, if you take that entity to have a certain property, the act in which this is done is an act of predication.⁵ And an act of predication is to be understood either as outwardly asserting a subject-predicate thought, or making a judgment of a subject-predicate content. That is, if you take entity *e* to have property *P*, you do this by way of judging that *P(e)*. Applying this to the case of truth of thoughts provides the last premiss for Frege's argument. Let's make this explicit:

(PJ) Predicating truth of a thought that *p* consists in judging *that it is true that p*.

Here, then, is the argument:

1. Truth is essentially a property (assumption)
2. If truth is essentially a property, then taking a thought to be true consists in predicating truth of that thought. (TP)
3. Judging *that p* is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought that *p* to taking the thought that *p* to be true. (AT)
4. Taking a thought to be true consists in predicating truth of that thought. (1, 2)
5. Predicating truth of a thought that *p* consists in judging *that it is true that p*. (PJ)
6. If *that p* is a thought, then *that it is true that p* is a thought. (LP)
7. Judging *that p* is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought that *p* to judging *that it is true that p*. (3–6)
8. The assumption that it is judged *that p* generates an infinite regress. (7)
9. It is impossible to judge *that p*. (8)
10. Truth is not essentially a property. (1–9, RAA)

Since statement 9 is obviously absurd, the inference to 10 is justified as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

5. This may be an overstatement. For instance, Jonathan Berg recognizes a separate act which he calls "referential attribution". In referential attribution you ascribe a property to an object by means of adnominal modification, like ascribing the property of being barefoot by means of the noun phrase 'that barefoot singer', provided the reference of the demonstrative is fixed independently of the adnominal. Taking account of referential attribution would complicate the discussion, but would not essentially alter it, since there is still a sense/reference distinction to make, and hence a distinction between merely grasping the sense of a noun phrase and taking it to have a reference. Hence an analogous regress can be produced.

The nature of the regress is clear: in order to judge *that p*, I will have judge *that it is true that p*, and since that again is a thought, I will have to judge *that it is true that it is true that p*, and so on.

I shall take the argument as set out above as Frege's argument. Exegetically it is rather clear that a regress argument isn't even hinted at in the quoted passage. On the other hand, I think it is equally clear that Frege does take himself to have an argument against the idea that the relation between a thought and truth is one between subject and predicate. It also seems plausible that he regarded the thesis of level preservation as a reason for rejecting that idea. Then, when one tries to make such an argument explicit, the regress form is the most natural. The question now is whether Frege's argument is sound.

2. Soundness of Frege's argument

If Frege's argument is sound, then we have a short, striking and conclusive argument that truth isn't a property. Already the nature of that conclusion should make us suspect that there is something wrong with the argument, for central philosophical results do not normally come that easily. Indeed, I do think that something is wrong in Frege's argument, even though the correctness of Frege's conclusion depends on questions about the nature of judgment to which at least I have no answer.

One possible reason for suspecting that the argument isn't sound is that the regress it considers isn't vicious. Michael Dummett draws such a conclusion about a formally similar regress that Frege considers in 'Der Gedanke' in connection with the correspondence theory and other attempts at defining the notion of truth.⁶ Dummett comments on this arguments as follows:

This argument gives a first impression of sophistry. For, one might say, by this means we could show that the notion of truth had to be rejected altogether. Suppose that I wish to find out whether Goldbach's conjecture is true. Then I must enquire into the truth of the statement, 'Goldbach's conjecture is true' and hence into the truth of the statement 'The statement "Goldbach's conjecture is true" is true', and so on. The possibility of the regress has nothing to do with whether truth is definable or not. Furthermore, the argument might continue, the regress is not vicious. For suppose it truly said that the truth of a statement *A* consists in its correspondence with some state of affairs *W*. Then, in determining whether *A* is true I am determining whether *A* corresponds with *W*; but this does not involve that I have to frame to myself the thought '*A* corresponds with *W*'; and even if I do I can merely ask myself, 'Does *A* correspond with *W*?', without framing my query in the form, 'Is the statement "*A* corresponds with *W*" true?'. It is true enough that, in determining that some statement *A* is true, I thereby also determine the truth of infinitely many other statements, namely '*A* is true', 'The statement "*A* is true" is true', ... 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 it were supposed that, 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 1973: 443)

For our present purposes, this is a valuable passage. In the last sentence Dummett states the condition for the regress to be vicious, where the regress sequence is almost the same as our

6. Frege (1918), p 60.

sequence above. The condition is that “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”. However, in the case of Frege’s argument as considered here, and in contrast to the argument Dummett discusses, the condition is met. If *in order* to judge *that p* I am forced to judge *that it is true that p*, then for any term in the sequence, I first have to determine the next one. It is not simply that the judgments are equivalent, it is that the second has to be made as a means of making the first. So in this respect, Frege’s argument survives scrutiny.

Or perhaps we should rather say that, as Frege’s argument is *formulated*, the regress is vicious. There is still a question about whether the crucial claims that force the regressive steps in the regress are correct. The crucial claims are those of *advancing to truth* and *truth predication*:

(AT) Judging *that p* is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought *that p* to taking the thought *that p* to be true.

(TP) If truth is essentially a property, then taking a thought to be true consists in predicating truth of that thought.

My view, or perhaps conjecture, is that although both these claims are correct, you cannot without equivocation use them together in an argument. The reason for this is that the locution ‘taking the thought *that p* to be true’ is used differently in (AT) and in (TP), and has to be, if both claims are to be correct. Its use in (TP) is straightforward.⁷ The peculiarity pertains to its use in (AT), and the way it is used to characterize the difference between entertaining a thought and judging.

There are several ways in which a thought *that p* can be entertained without being judged.⁸ I can ask whether it is the case *that p*, I can ascribe the belief *that p* to someone else, I can use the thought *that p* as part of other thoughts that are judged, for instance as a disjunct in an asserted disjunction, or as antecedent or consequent in an asserted conditional, and perhaps I can simply think the thought *that p*, like in the context of reading a poem or even without that thinking being part of anything else at all. Whatever the case, entertaining a thought is different from judging, and we are interested in understanding what the difference is.⁹ Frege was certainly right in drawing attention to the relevance of truth. When I do judge *that p* the truth of the thought *that p* is in a sense part and parcel of my act, and when I think *that p* in the context of reading a poem it isn’t, or perhaps isn’t normally. It would be incorrect to say that if I don’t judge, truth doesn’t matter, for normally I am interested in the truth of the thought *that p* when I

7. See, however, note 11 below.

8. The locution ‘entertain a thought’ is ambiguous between an inclusive sense, in which one entertains any thought one judges, and an exclusive sense, in which judging and entertaining are incompatible. Kathrin Glüer, who pointed this out to me, also says that the latter is the sense normally employed. For convenience, I have still chosen the former sense here, but that is only a terminological matter.

9. It cannot really be excluded that there is no uniform difference between entertaining and judging. Perhaps different ways of entertaining a thought even correspond to different differences between entertaining and judging. I don’t believe so, however, and I shall not pursue this possibility here.

ask whether it is the case *that p* or assert *that if p, then q*. The difference must be stated more precisely. Again, Frege was obviously right in pointing to the fact that in judging, as opposed to for instance asking, I *take a stand*, and likewise right in thinking that this stand is related to truth. The question is how that relation should be characterized.

We have agreed that judging *that p* involves entertaining the thought *that p*, or having entertained the thought *that p* (immediately before), and ask what the missing element is. We identify the missing element as a further attitude on the part of the thinker, and characterize that attitude as taking the thought entertained to be true. This, however, can be seen both as the only right analysis and as misleading, depending on how the characterization itself is taken.

To illustrate, consider the difference between a straightforward assertoric utterance of a sentence and an embedded occurrence of that sentence where it does not occur with assertoric force:

- (3) The earth moves
- (4) Galileo said that the earth moves

The sentence 'the earth moves' does not occur with assertoric force in an utterance of (4), even if the utterance of (4) is itself assertoric. Now consider the context

- (5) that the earth moves.

The argument place can be filled by expressions such as 'Galileo said', 'Clinton believes', 'it is possible', 'it is necessary' etc. We might regard these expressions as denoting properties of thoughts. Some of these expressions are non-factive and will yield sentences that do not imply (3), such as (4). Others, like 'it is necessary that' are factive, yielding sentences that do imply (3), such as

- (6) It is necessary that the earth moves

However, (3) does not imply (6). If we are looking for an expression that yields a sentence equivalent with (3), we find it precisely in 'it is true' (or, 'it is the case', 'it is a fact'). The sentence

- (7) It is true that the earth moves

implies and is implied by (3). We can even go as far as saying that (3) occurs assertorically in (7), for the logical properties of an assertion of (3) are virtually the same as those of embedding (3) in an assertoric 'it is true that'-context, i.e. the same as those of an assertion of (7). Because of this we can regard 'it is true' as having an effect equivalent with *that*-cancellation. Prefixing 'it is true' to a *that*-clause yields a sentence equivalent to the result of simply deleting 'that' from the initial position of the *that*-clause. This is analogous to Quine's characterization of the sentence predicate '... is true' as a *disquotational* device, for suffixing '... is true' to a quoted sentence has an effect equivalent to that of removing the quotes (Quine 1992: 80). Asserting

(8) 'the earth moves' is true

is again equivalent with asserting (3).

In both cases, however, the effect is *equivalent* to a cancellation, but not exactly the same.¹⁰ Rather, it is what corresponds to the effect of cancellation at the meta-level. If I have moved to the meta-linguistic level by quoting 'the earth moves', I can do something on that level which corresponds to using the sentence, namely ascribe truth to it. But that is still different from using it. Similarly, if I have moved to the meta-propositional level by explicitly referring to the thought *that the earth moves*, I can do something on that level which corresponds to judging *that the earth moves*, namely ascribe truth to it. But that is still different from judging it.

Now, if I characterize the relation between a thinker and a thought as that of entertaining, as in

(9) Galileo entertains the thought that the earth moves

I am already at the meta-propositional level. If at that level I want to characterize the difference between entertaining and judging, i.e. as a difference in the thinker's relation to the thought referred to, then my option is to say that the speaker now takes the thought *that p* to be true, for that is what corresponds on the meta-propositional level to simply saying that the thinker judges *that p*, as in

(10) Galileo takes the thought that the earth moves to be true.

And now it is easy to slide into the confusion of levels by ascribing the meta-propositional stance to the thinker, Galileo, whereas it really pertains to the ascriber, the speaker of (10). Galileo's attitude does not involve reference to a thought. The speaker makes reference to a thought in characterizing Galileo's attitude. But of course, it is also possible for Galileo himself to take the meta-propositional attitude. We can thus distinguish between two different readings of sentences like (10), containing the locution 'takes the thought that ... to be true', namely the *object-level reading*, where only an object level attitude is ascribed to the thinker, and the *meta-level reading*, where the thinker is ascribed a meta-propositional attitude. This is exactly the equivocation that obtains in Frege's argument. For in

(AT) Judging that *p* is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought that *p* to taking the thought that *p* to be true

10. In fact, even the equivalence claim must be restricted. (7) and (8) do not have exactly the same logical properties as (3). Substitutivity properties are the same, for replacing 'the earth' by 'the third planet from the sun' will preserve truth both in (7) and in (8). But there is a problem with quantifying in. The expression 'x("x moves" is true)' is false, and 'x(it is true that x moves)', is not unproblematic either. It would be in line with Frege's views to regard *that*-contexts as indirect contexts with senses as indirect referents. Given this, the quantified sentence would be made true by the existence of a sense (a mode of presentation of something that moves), whereas 'x(x moves)' is made true by the existence of an object that moves. Depending on the domain of quantification, the one can be true while the other is false.

the reading that makes the claim true is the object-level reading. By contrast, the reading that makes

(TP) If truth is essentially a property, then taking a thought to be true consists in predicating truth of that thought

come out true is the meta-level reading, where the thinker that takes the thought to be true has a meta-propositional attitude.¹¹ Hence, if both premises are true, Frege's argument suffers from equivocation and therefore isn't valid. The invalidity would be made explicit if we replaced (AT) with the more cautiously stated

(AT') Judging that *p* is making a transition from merely entertaining the thought that *p* to a state equivalent to taking the thought that *p* to be true.

The level equivocation in Frege's argument has its counterpart in a parallel argument concerning utterances and assertions, but in this case it is more conspicuous. We would ask what the difference is between merely uttering a declarative sentence and making an assertion, i.e. uttering it assertorically. One could then propose a claim corresponding to Frege's:

(AT'') Asserting a sentence *s* is making a transition from merely uttering *s* to advancing *s* as true.

If we now were to proceed with a claim parallel to (TP) that advancing a sentence as true is predicating truth of it, the equivocation would be glaring. Dummett is clearly right in drawing attention to the flaw in the corresponding step of the argument of 'Der Gedanke':

Then, in determining whether *A* is true I am determining whether *A* corresponds with *W*; but this does not involve that I have to frame to myself the thought 'A corresponds with *W*'; and even if I do I can merely ask myself, 'Does *A* correspond with *W*?', without framing my query in the form, 'Is the statement "A corresponds with *W*" true?'

Still, despite the fact that we can identify the flaw in Frege's argument and in similar ones, I remain somewhat uncertain about the possibility of a modified argument that might in fact succeed. The reason is that we really don't have much in the way of theoretical understanding of what a judgment, or an assertion, is.¹² For instance, Gareth Evans followed Frege's analogy between sentences and singular terms to the effect of claiming that thinking a thought is thinking *about* a truth value (Evans 1982: 17). If the idea of truth has to be introduced at such a basic level in characterizing propositional attitudes, then maybe Frege's argument can be vindicated somehow. On Evans's view, however, truth is entered already at the stage of entertaining a

11. Dag Prawitz has suggested that the phrase 'predicate truth of a thought', and hence (TP), is itself ambiguous between an object-level and a meta-level reading. My own intuitions do not support this, but even if this is correct, the argument is still invalid, for if we do not have any equivocation between (AT) and (TP) we do have one between (TP) and (PJ), the statement linking truth predication of the thought that *p* to the explicit judgement of the thought that it is true that *p*.

12. I am here considering only doxastic judgments, not ethical or aesthetic judgments.

thought (unless entertaining a thought would be to think about a thought, but that certainly doesn't fit with the observation that antecedents of judged conditionals are merely entertained). Judging, on that view, would consist in identifying rightly or wrongly a truth value thought of canonically as the True with a truth value thought of under the mode of presentation of the thought at hand. But that is phenomenologically implausible. Moreover, the identifying could not itself be thought of as judging *that* the identity holds, for that would generate the regress again.

The question, then, is what judgment, or assertion, is. As regards assertion, a number of proposals have been made, by Searle, Brandom and others, to analyze the concept in terms of the social conditions for and consequences of making assertions, for instance in terms of making certain commitments.¹³ I don't think any approach of this kind has any chance of working. All such social analyses of assertion will fail to capture precisely the judgmental element of the act.¹⁴ No other very plausible proposal has been offered either, as far as I know.

It is fairly uncontroversial, I think, to say that a judgment is an event in which a belief is formed. We could even speak with Frege and say that a judgment *that p* is a transition from merely entertaining the thought *that p* to believing *that p*. If we desire a theory of judgment on the basis of this observation, then on the one hand we must explain what the difference is between judgments and other forms of belief formation, if any, and, eventually, what belief is, or at least what the difference is between believing and merely entertaining thoughts. It is not easy to predict what the result of such an investigation would be or could be for the nature of truth.¹⁵

Department of philosophy
Stockholm university

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13. See Searle 1969: 66, and Brandom 1994: 175.

14. I have argued this at length in Pagin (submitted).

15. For helpful comments I am indebted to Kathrin Glüer, Dag Prawitz, Gunnar Svensson, Karl Weigelt and Dag Westerståhl.

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