

## Postscript to “Sinning Against Frege” (2003)

I would like to make one comment on what I wrote in this article. On pp. 223–230 I offered a response to the rigid-designator criticism of Frege’s notion of sense. In a careful discussion of this issue, without specific reference to “Sinning Against Frege”, Scott Soames argues against a defense of Frege that appeals to an actuality operator on definite descriptions.<sup>1</sup> “The actual F” used by someone in non-actual circumstances will pick out whatever satisfies the description in those non-actual circumstances, whereas a rigid proper name in the same circumstances, used by the same person, will pick out the bearer of the name in the actual world. So the two thoughts are different and the actuality-operator account has not provided a satisfactory account of the modal behavior of proper names in thoughts.

Soames points out that the modal behavior of proper names in uses within non-actual situations can be mimicked by a definite description if the definite description is fitted out with David Kaplan’s *dthat*-operator.<sup>2</sup> He maintains that a descriptivist cannot accept this expedient, however, since *dthat*-operators in effect obliterate the descriptive content of the definite description. This would compromise the point of appealing to descriptions as senses or cognitive values.

None of this discussion touches the defense of Frege that I give against the rigid-designator objection in “Sinning Against Frege”. The @ operator with which I outfitted definite descriptions is explicitly contrasted with the actuality operator in just the way that Soames takes intuitive usage and the *dthat*-operator to contrast with the actuality operator. It denotes the actual referent of a definite description, no matter whether that description is used in the actual circumstances or in counterfactual circumstances. It anticipates and specifically deals with exactly the problem that Soames raises.<sup>3</sup> The @ operator that I introduced is, however, not explained in such a way as to obliterate content, as the *dthat*-operator is. It retains the descriptive content in the content of the singular term.

So how are we to understand uses of such descriptions (as stand-ins for proper names) in counterfactual circumstances? According to the descriptivist Fregean, if the name is used in the counterfactual circumstance with the same sense that it expresses in the actual circumstances, it will be used in the counterfactual circumstance as expressing the same descriptive content that it is used to express in the actual circumstance; and (given the rigidifying

<sup>1</sup> Scott Soames, “The Modal Argument: Wide Scope and Rigidified Descriptions”, *Nous*, 32 (1998), 1–22.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. note 15a above.

operator) the descriptive content will, in the counterfactual circumstance, determine the same referent that the name denotes, and the expressed descriptive content determines, in the actual circumstance.

Of course, Frege showed little interest in modality. And it is open to him to say that in counterfactual circumstances there is no general reason to believe that a name will be used to express the same sense as it does in a given actual circumstance. Still, the @ operator gives the descriptivist Fregean the wherewithal to say what it would be to express the same sense in both actual and counterfactual circumstances—while maintaining a rigid reference. And this device enables the descriptivist Fregean to mimic correctly the modal behavior of rigid proper names in his theory.

So Soames’s defense of the rigid-designator criticism does not come to grips with the reply that I gave. Soames does not claim that it does. But others have maintained that it undermines my discussion. I continue to believe that the rigid-designator criticism is not decisive against a descriptivist Fregean view.

On the other hand, I want to emphasize that my defense of a descriptivist Fregean view against the rigid-designator criticism has a strictly “for the sake of argument” character. In the first place, I do not think that Frege was committed to anything as general as descriptivism. More importantly, I do not accept any version of the Fregean position—much less any generalized descriptivism. I think that many proper names (or uses of them) do not express (even in the most liberal sense of “express”) thought components that determine their referents independently of any occurrences in time. And I think that there are thought components that are in no sense descriptive. In fact, the thought components normally expressed by proper names have no *descriptive* elements at all in their representational contents.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> These non-descriptive elements are not only the applications of demonstrative elements in thought and the constant demonstrative elements themselves. They are also the predicative element in proper names. “Is a Smith” does not describe anyone. “Is a Smith” does not mean “is named ‘Smith’”, although such phrases are sometimes approximately equivalent in extension. The metaphor does not describe anyone either. For the background of these remarks, see “Reference and Proper Names”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70 (1973), 425–439, and “Belief *De Re*”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 74 (1977), 338–362.