

FREGE ON TRUTH

From a natural perspective, Frege's view that sentences denote (*bedeuten*) objects appears to be an irritating peculiarity. His claim that there are only two objects denoted by sentences and that these are Truth and Falsity has seemed to many to advance from the peculiar to the bizarre. Indeed, a standardized form of philosophical humor has grown up around talk of "naming the True". I think that the natural perspective is sound and that the humor has its point. But understanding Frege's motivations for these views provides insight into the fundamentals of his philosophical standpoint and method. Such insight enriches the natural perspective.

The importance of Frege's views on truth values in his system has been appreciated by a number of philosophers. Michael Dummett characterizes Frege's claim that sentences denote objects as "an almost unmitigated disaster" for Frege's later philosophy of language (*FPL*, 196, 643–4).¹ Several authors have seen in Frege's writings the skeleton of an a priori argument, later given by Church and Gödel, that sentences *must* denote only Truth or Falsity. And Frege's method of identifying the truth values with certain courses of values has been construed as indicating a non-realistic attitude toward numbers. I think that each of these interpretations is mistaken. But they correctly suggest that Frege's odd-sounding conclusions about truth and falsity should be taken seriously as a key to his philosophies of language, logic and mathematics.

My aims here are historical. I shall argue in Section I that Frege's view that sentences denote only truth or falsity has profound and natural motivations, and that his view that truth values are objects is more pragmatically based — and therefore less strange — than has usually been thought. In Section II I criticize Dummett's influential interpretation of Frege's theses on truth values and his evaluation of the effect of those theses on Frege's philosophy of language. I also delineate the development of Frege's views on assertion and truth between *Begriffsschrift* and *Basic Laws*. In Section III I argue that Frege's identification of the truth values with the particular objects he identifies them with undergirds his realism about logical objects, and proceeds from

some of his deepest philosophical conceptions. In particular, it proceeds from a theory about the nature of logical objects, from a thesis about the aim and ordering of logic, and from his conceptions of assertion and truth.

In order to lay the groundwork for our discussion of Frege's conceptions of assertion, truth, and logical objects, I will have to go over a fair amount of familiar ground in Section I. Some readers may wish to work through this section quickly in order to concentrate on Sections II and III. I should caution, however, that although many of the doctrines discussed in Section I are well-known, the ways they fit together and the means Frege uses to motivate them are less well recognized. Understanding these ways and means is critical to a proper appreciation of Frege's use of the notion of truth in his philosophy of logic and mathematics — and indeed, to an appreciation of his depth as a philosopher.

Although defective in various ways, Frege's views on truth are richer and more central to his logical theory and much of his philosophy of mathematics than is often realized. One reason why these views are underappreciated is that Frege refused to allow a meta-theoretic semantics, as we know it, to be part of his logical theory. Another reason is that Frege's presentation of his views has tended to encourage concentration on his philosophy of language or his mathematical work as somewhat separate enterprises. The philosophy of language is expounded largely in the great articles of the 1890's and in unpublished writing, with little discussion of its connection to logicism. The mathematical project is spun out in *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, which is cast in the form of a traditional mathematical treatise — its philosophy kept to a minimum. Underlying Frege's work is, however, a remarkably integrated vision. We shall try to lay out the central place that Frege's views on truth have in this vision.

I

It is useful to separate Frege's views on truth values into several theses, although the theses are interrelated and his arguments for them overlap. The relevant theses are

- (a) Sentences (when not defective) have denotations (*Bedeutungen*).
- (b) The denotation of a sentence is its truth value.