

REVIEW

ULRICH PARDEY, *Frege on Absolute and Relative Truth. An Introduction to the Practice of Interpreting Philosophical Texts*, History of Analytic Philosophy (no vol. number), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke-New York, 2012, xxiv+242 pp.

The book under review is about truth; or, more specifically, about truth in Frege; or, more precisely, the truth about truth in Frege. For the author claims that we are wrong about truth in Frege. According to him, standing in “Tarski’s shadow” (see p. 203 for what this means) and working in the wake of highly influential though mistaken interpretations (such as M. Dummett, *Frege. Philosophy of Language*, Harper & Row, New York, 1973, ch. 13), we display a cavalier attitude towards Frege. Since Tarski defined truth in the form of a correspondence theory, we are prematurely inclined to conclude that Frege, who argued otherwise, must be wrong. Consequently, scholars have identified a number of logical blunders in Frege’s arguments. The author, on the contrary, takes it to be highly unlikely that “Frege, arguably the most important logician after Aristotle, [committed] no fewer than *six* such mistakes in *one* paragraph” (p. 5; emphasis is always the author’s). His hermeneutical exercise therefore focusses almost exclusively on two paragraphs from one essay, *Der Gedanke* (1918), where Frege tries to establish the indefinability of truth (see pp. 326f. of the translation *Thought*, M. Beaney, *The Frege Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford & Malden, 1997). The author’s main goal is to show, “[B]y taking into account Frege’s *own* presuppositions” (p. 5), that “Frege’s argumentation is *free of logical mistakes* [and . . .] is consistent” (pp. 5, 204). *Grosso modo*, I believe, he succeeds.

In Chapter 2 the author introduces and distinguishes between two concepts of truth. First, “absolute truth,” which applies to Fregean thoughts and means “true *in itself* and *perfectly* true” (p. 8); in comparison, every other notion of truth then becomes “relative truth.” The author abbreviates absolute truth, the goal of all science, as “S-truth” and the notion of true ideas—a correspondence-based and hence, according to the author, relative notion—as “I-truth.” (Note that “idea” is a translation of the German *Vorstellung*, i. e., representation.) This distinction seems to be asking too much already for someone raised in Tarski’s shadow (as conceded on p. 33), but the author is able to show that it makes sense to assume that both types of truth are indeed present in Frege’s text.

In Chapter 3, based on this distinction and a very close reading of the original, German text, the author uncovers a novel structure underlying the third and fourth paragraphs of *Der Gedanke* and thus identifies a total of five independent but related arguments. The new structure is as follows: (i) Initial question: What are the bearers of truth; pictures, ideas, sentences, or thoughts (*Gedanken*)? (i.a) Can pictures or ideas be S-true via the I-truth of correspondence? (A1) No, since S-truth is absolute. (A2) No, since S-truth is perfect and doesn’t suffer degrees. (A3) No, since S-truth is not dependent on any property we may assume a correspondence relation has. (i.b) Can we define the truth of a picture or idea in any other way, then? (A4) No, any such attempt leads into a vicious circle. (i.c) Pictures or ideas can therefore not be S-true, but the senses of sentences (i. e., thoughts) can. Thus, Frege’s first answer is: the proper bearers of truth are thoughts. (ii) New question: can the S-truth of thoughts consist in some sort of correspondence? (A5) No, any such attempt leads to an infinite regress.

In subsequent chapters, the author provides a detailed defense of his reading of the text and a thorough analysis of each of the five arguments: arguments A1–A3 are discussed in Chapters 4–6, arguments A4–A5 in Chapters 8 and 12, respectively. Chapter 7 deals with a parallel text in the earlier but posthumous essay *Logik* (1897), while Chapters 9–11 assemble what is required for Chapter 12: circularity in a definition is not circularity in its application

(ch. 9); a critique of Dummett's version of the regress argument (ch. 10); thoughts as the proper bearers of truth (ch. 11). In Chapter 13, the author recounts the main mile markers on his way to the new interpretation. In the remaining chapters the author tries to prove that Frege's arguments are not only "internally consistent" but also "externally consistent . . . they can be reconciled with widely-accepted [sic] contemporary views" (p. 157). Chapters 14–15 deal with the antinomy of the liar for Frege's absolute concept of truth and show how Frege can be made compatible with Tarski; Chapter 16 serves as a summary, while the last chapter offers a critical summary of best exegetical practices. The book is a revised translation of the author's *Frege's Kritik an der Korrespondenztheorie der Wahrheit*, mentis, Paderborn, 2004.

The author's strong suit is that he is a native speaker of German who has demonstrated already in earlier publications that he has highly developed linguistic instincts able to discern subtle differences (see, e. g., U. Pardey, *Identität, Existenz und Reflexivität*, Beltz, Weinheim, 1994). This makes his suggestion for re-grouping the text the most compellingly argued part of the book. The weakest point in this respect seems to be the demarcation of a fifth argument since it requires buying into all of the author's previous exegetical decisions. Additional assumptions are plausible enough, however, to make the entire argument sufficiently convincing for any serious Frege scholar not to want to ignore it.

Showing that, contrary to received wisdom, Frege's argumentation can be made consistent is certainly an accomplishment the author deserves to be recognized for. (*Caveat emptor*: the author doesn't always employ terminology the way most readers of this journal would; for example, "consistent" doesn't mean "free of contradictions" but rather "coherent" or "free of logical mistakes.") What we have, though, is a conditional result: provided we make certain assumptions, we can render Frege's text consistent. The major remaining challenge I see for the author is to furnish proof that he worked with "Frege's own presuppositions" (p. 5) rather than relying on some of his own (i. e., the author's). Let me give two brief examples of what I have in mind.

First, language. At a number of crucial junctures the author's argumentation depends on a very close reading of the text and the assumption that Frege chose each word with fine precision; examples include, among others, "to restart a game" (pp. 47, 53); "relation word" vs. "relation" (pp. 31, 171); role of "it" (p. 94); stress on "application" (pp. 118 *seqq.*). What I believe missing is additional evidence that, first, Frege did indeed wordsmith his essay to an extent that supports the author's reliance on single words and, second, the meaning assigned to certain phrases does reflect Frege's intentions and not just the author's own wishful thinking (for which see his own caution on p. 217).

Second, historical context. The author translates the German word *Bild* as "picture" and understands it as a painting (p. 165) whose I-truth corresponds to a single sentence (p. 141). But what if Frege, who lectured on mechanics almost every single year, really had in mind not realistic depictions of objects (e. g., paintings or photos) but the concept of scientific image—*Bild* in German—which Hertz had famously introduced in his *Prinzipien der Mechanik* (1894). Such an assumption makes perfect sense in a context where Frege speaks about scientific truth and would also explain why he was so eager to have Wittgenstein read his essay *Der Gedanke*. The entire discussion would shift; and this is just one among many possible examples. By my lights, as long as the author speaks about "the dispute" that motivated Frege's objections (p. 181) but doesn't pinpoint it, his interpretation lacks sufficient historical grounding.

Similar reservations apply to the concept of absolute truth which, the author states, is modeled upon Kant's concept of the absolute good (pp. 7ff). Even if those (mostly German) scholars were right who claim (Neo-)Kantian influences on Frege, this does not discharge any author from the responsibility to establish the credibility of any specific "Kantian claim" by adducing the appropriate historical evidence. Questions as to possible influences have become even more pressing in recent years, in particular since the competing approach to read Frege as a student of Stoic logic has been proposed (see G. Gabriel *et al.*, *Zur Miete bei Frege – Rudolf Hirzel und die Rezeption der stoischen Logik und Semantik in Jena*, *History and Philosophy of Logic*, vol. 30 (2009), pp. 369–388). It thus appears that the book's most crucial notion, absolute truth, is claimed to be of Kantian origin without proper justification.

But whether we understand absolute truth to be of Kantian, or Stoic, or some other heritage seems to make a difference. A related question which I feel needs to be addressed in this context is what role, if any, the opposition of absolute vs. relative truth plays in Frege's entire *oeuvre* and how it fits into everything else we seem to know about Frege (see, e. g., D. Greimann (ed.), *Essays on Frege's Conception of Truth*, *Grazer Philosophische Studien*, vol. 75 (2007), pp. 1–236) and especially in light of Frege's own suspicion that, while we lack a "more appropriate way of speaking," truth "cannot be called a property in the ordinary sense at all" (*Thought*, op. 61f.).

In short, whether it concerns language or historical context, providing more and appropriate internal and external evidence is, to me, absolutely vital for proving that the author stayed solely with "Frege's own presuppositions."

To this reviewer the author has provided an original and in many ways compelling interpretation of an highly important textual passage in Frege. The main block I see for the book's reception is its somewhat pedantic style. This makes for difficult reading. Whether the new interpretation can be sustained when placed in a larger exegetical and historical context remains to be seen. The author has completed his turn; I feel it's now up to the community of Frege scholars to make their move.

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