1 Thoughts as truth conditions

Michael Dummett has put forward the view, amounting to orthodoxy, that Frege’s notions of Sinn, or sense, and Gedanke, or thought, are closely connected to truth conditions of (indicative) sentences. Dummett writes (1976, 87):

Sense, Frege says, determines reference: but this could be understood in either of two ways. On the strong interpretation, to know the sense is to know the condition for the expression to have a given reference; on the weak interpretation, it is just that two expressions with the same sense could not have different references. It is clear to almost everyone that we need the strong interpretation so far as the sense of a sentence—a thought—is concerned: to grasp a thought is to know the condition for it to be true.  

Similarly, David Wiggins claims in a recent Companion that, on Frege’s view, ‘which thought it is that a sentence expresses and how the thought attaches to the sentence [−] depend[s] upon nothing other than this: under what conditions is the sentence to count as true?’ (Wiggins 1997, 4).

My aim in this paper is to argue that Dummett and others are mistaken in their claim that,

(1) To grasp a thought is to know the condition for it to be true,

is Frege’s view of thoughts and the grasping of them.

2 Frege and the correspondence theory of truth

The claim that Frege advocates (1) is in my opinion already refuted by the fact that according to Frege, there are no conditions of truth: Giving a condition by saying that something is true because of this-and-this leads

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1 See also, for instance, Dummett 1959 (p. 7), Dummett 1973 (e.g. 5, 102, 229, 446, 457–9, 488–9, 499), Dummett 1975 (117–8, 121, 132–3), Dummett 1978 (xlii), Dummett 1981 (e.g. 71, 80, 249–52, 270).

2 See also e.g. Wiggins 1971 (p. 17), Wiggins 1976 (223n6), Blackburn 1975 (198).
to nowhere since it may be asked whether it is the case that this-and-this, i.e. whether it is true that this-and-this. This derives from Frege's contention that the notion of truth cannot be defined; one cannot say in any illuminating manner what it is to be true; truth is an inexplicable, primitive notion. In particular, the correspondence theory of truth does not say anything substantial, on Frege's view. According to the correspondence theory, truth is agreement or correspondence with something:Whatever it is that is true—a sentence, statement, proposition, thought, belief, idea, judgement, Carnapian intension (as applied to a possible world), etc.—it is true if and only if it corresponds to 'reality'—a 'fact', 'obtaining state of affairs', 'how things really are', or 'the real world'.

Frege's most important objection to the correspondence theory is that any attempt of defining truth is bound to be circular and thus useless—which exactly shows that to be true is a primitive notion. Frege's point is that even if we said that \( A \) is true since it corresponds to \( B \), it would still be possible to ask whether it is true that \( A \) so corresponds to \( B \). Frege expresses this in his most important paper, 'Der Gedanke' (1918), as follows (Kleine Schriften 344 (Collected Papers 353)):

Could we not maintain that there is truth when there is correspondence in a certain respect? But which respect? For in that case what ought we to do so as to decide whether something is true? We should have to inquire whether it is true that an idea and a reality, say, correspond in the specified respect. And then we should be confronted by a question of the same kind, and the game could begin again. 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 round in a circle. So it seems likely that the content of the word 'true' is sui generis and indefinable. [-] Truth does not consist in correspondence of the sense with something else, for otherwise the question of truth would get reiterated to infinity.

The conclusion is that truth cannot be defined. This does not mean that it is incorrect to say, for instance: The thought that the Dalai Lama is wise is true if the world is such-and-such. Rather, the conclusion is that such a statement is utterly trivial and unsubstantial: 'A fact \([Tatsache]\) is a thought that is true.'

It is clear that Frege does not accept the correspondence theory of truth precisely in the sense that there is no (substantial) condition such that it

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3 Frege expresses this same objection over two decades earlier, in 1897; see Nachgelassene Schriften 139–40 (Posthumous Writings 128–9).
4 Kleine Schriften 359 (Collected Papers 368). See also e.g. Kleine Schriften 264n (Collected Papers 275n), Nachgelassene Schriften 140, 142 (Posthumous Writings 129, 131), Wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel 120 (Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence 184n18).
holds if and only if a given thought is true. However, the conception of thought entertained by Dummett and others, encapsulated in (1), apparently contains the claim that it is in Frege’s theory proper to speak of conditions such as,

(2) The thought expressed in the statement $S$ is true if and only if the following condition holds: The condition $C$

—what else can Dummett mean by his talk of knowing the condition for a thought to be true than knowing something like ‘the condition $C$’ of (2)? However, it is precisely the conditions of the sort (2) Frege explicitly denies. Or, to be more precise, Frege can, and should, accept (2) in the trivial, unsubstantial sense in which it becomes, for example, something like

(3) The thought expressed in the statement ‘Leibniz is a philosopher’ is true if and only if Leibniz is a philosopher (i.e. iff the condition that Leibniz is a philosopher holds).

However, Dummett does not take statements like (2) in this trivial sense, for according to him, ‘we grasp the information that is conveyed by a sentence [i.e. its sense, i.e. the thought it expresses] just in case we know what is needed to establish it as true’ (Dummett 1975, 132) and ‘the truth- and falsity-conditions for any sentence [...] should [...] be taken as ones which we are capable of recognizing effectively whenever they obtain’ (Dummett 1973, 467). In numerous passages like the ones just given Dummett, quite unjustifiably, imposes on Frege some sort of verificationist theory of truth. Also, Dummett 1973 (458-9) contrasts the redundancy (or deflationary) theory of truth—according to which, roughly, truth is fully explicated by giving instances such as “Leibniz is a philosopher” is true if and only if Leibniz is a philosopher’—with genuine or substantial truth-conditions, opposing the redundancy conception precisely because it is trivial, or makes us ‘impotent to explain the link between meaning and truth, and, in particular, to represent a grasp of meaning as a knowledge of truth-conditions’ (Dummett 1973, 459).\footnote{Thus, Dummett seems to think that Frege would dispute the redundancy theory. This is a curious opinion in view of Frege’s many apparent avowals of such a theory (see note 8 below). However, I shall not go into this matter here because the purpose of this paper is not to study theories of truth, and not even to consider which theory, if any, Frege accepts, but just to point out that Frege does not really explicate his notion of thought by means of truth conditions. (After all, (1) is not a formulation of a truth theory of any kind.)}
3 Grundgesetze I, §32

To back up their account of thoughts in terms of truth conditions, Dummett and others appeal to the following passage in Grundgesetze der Arithmetik, Band I, §32:6

Not only a referent [Bedeutung], but also a sense, appertains to all names correctly formed from our signs [of Begriffsschrift, i.e. Frege’s formal system]. Every such name of a truth value [i.e. every statement (Satz)] expresses a sense, a thought. Namely, by our stipulations [for the basic signs of Begriffsschrift, cf. below], it is determined under which conditions the name denotes the True. The sense of this name—the thought—is the thought that these conditions are fulfilled. [Last two emphases mine.]

Even though Frege may seem to confirm the ‘thought is a truth condition’ claim (1) in this passage, the following fact speaks against the claim that Frege is here ‘defining’ the notion of a thought by means of truth conditions: After his introduction, in 1891, of the notions of sense and thought, Frege is struggling to spell out definitely what he means by them. If he is giving here, in 1893, a truth-conditional conception of thoughts, what would have been more easier for him than to assert always, when talking about thoughts, that he means by them the conditions of truth? However, this seems to be the only place where Frege even appears to be talking about truth conditions (in reality, as we are about to see, he is not). More importantly, what Frege is actually saying in this passage can be shown to amount to nothing more than the following (for instance):

A statement such as ‘Leibniz is a philosopher’ expresses the thought that Leibniz is a philosopher.

In order to see this, let us apply what Frege says in the quoted passage from §32 to a particular case: In §7 of Grundgesetze I Frege gives the following ‘stipulation’:

\[ T = \Delta \]

shall denote the True if \( T \) is the same as \( \Delta \); in all other cases it shall denote the False.7

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6 See, for instance, Dummett 1981 (80, 250, 252), Wiggins 1997 (4).
7 This is not a definition of the sign ‘\( = \)’—cf. Grundgesetze der Arithmetik, Band II §146n. In a (nominal) definition a new sign is introduced by means of previously introduced signs of the system at hand—but one must obviously always presuppose something as already given when one starts to construct a system: ‘Not everything can be defined’ (Nachgelassene Schriften 290 (Posthumous Writings 271)). In the present case, the notion of identity is assumed to be known in advance, and it is here just told or ‘stipulated’ that ‘\( = \)’ is to be the sign for identity. It is in fact Frege’s view that identity cannot be defined at all, because the notion of identity must be utilized in any definition; see especially Kleine Schriften 184 (Collected Papers 200).
Here 'T' and 'A' are not schematic letters or variables in any sense but are used 'as if they were names denoting something, although [—] their denotation is left 'unspecified' (Grundgesetze I §5n); and in the developments of the Begriffsschrift itself they will occur no more than will [placeholders such as] "ξ" and "ζ" (ibid.). It is thus clearer and in fact more correct to consider an example with real singular terms (Frege's Eigen-namen) such as '36' and '739'. Accordingly, the following is an instance of the stipulation Frege gives in §7 of Grundgesetze I:

'36=739' denotes the True if 36 is the same as 739; in all other cases it denotes the False.

Applying this to what Frege says in §32, quoted above, we have:

The thought expressed by '36=739' is the thought that the condition that 36 is the same as 739 is fulfilled.

Here, it is obvious that 'the thought that the condition that 36 is the same as 739 is fulfilled' means precisely the same as, 'the thought that it is true that 36 is the same as 739'. The latter, in turn, says no more and no less than 'the thought that 36 is the same as 739', as Frege explicitly states over and over again. Thus, what Frege is really saying in §32, is, as applied to our case,

(4) The thought expressed by '36=739' is the thought that 36 is the same as 739.

Thus, what Frege is saying in §32 turns out to be entirely trivial in view of the §7 stipulation of the use of the identity sign '='. In particular, there is no 'condition of truth'—trivial or not—to be found in (4) at all. All in all, the often cited §32 fails to give any support for the claim (1).

It is not a sound objection that this analysis is problematic just because it makes Frege's statement in Grundgesetze I §32 trifling. There are myriads of trivial statements in the writings of philosophers—this does not constitute a reason for looking for some secret deep meaning in them. For example, when a philosopher of language states, 'A singular term purports to refer to an individual', we do not presume that since such a triviality is hardly worth stating, something else is secretly meant. I think Frege is in §32 only mentioning in passing what he means by his term 'Gedanke'—viz., that it is what is expressed. Frege has no reason for saying anything really substantial in this connection.

8 See e.g. Kleine Schriften 345, 347, 361 (Collected Papers 354, 356, 370); Nachgelassene Schriften 138, 153-4, 211, 251-2, 271-2 (Posthumous Writings 127, 141-2, 194, 233-4, 251); Wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel 245 (Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence 163).

9 Cf. here Haaparanta 1985 (69-70).
4 Thoughts

What I think is Frege's foremost characterization of the notion of thought is that thoughts are something for which the question of truth arises in the first place, or just something serving as bearers of truth values. Frege quite often presents this rather an abstract explanation; he says that a thought is 'something of which one can say that it is true' (Kleine Schriften 316 (Collected Papers 332)); that ['a] criterion for whether a mode of connection [Verknüpfung] constitutes thinking [i.e. thought-grasping] is that it makes sense to ask whether it is true or untrue' (Nachgelassene Schriften 189 (Posthumous Writings 174)); that '[w]hat is capable of being judged true or false [...] alone is of concern to logic and is what I call the thought expressed' (Wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel 106 (Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence 70–1)); that ['a] statement must have a sense if it is to be useful [...; w]ithout a sense, we would have no thought, and hence also nothing that we could recognize as true' (Wissenschaftlicher Briefwechsel 127–8 (Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence 79–80)); and that he 'introduce[s] a thought as that to which the question “Is it true?” is in principle applicable' (Nachgelassene Schriften 273 (Posthumous Writings 253)). Further, in 'Der Gedanke' we find (Kleine Schriften 344–6 (Collected Papers 353–5)):

Without offering this as a definition, I mean by ‘a thought’ something for which the question of truth can arise at all. [...] A command [...] has a sense, but this sense is not such that the question of truth could arise for it. Therefore I shall not call the sense of a command a thought.

For Frege, there are no conditions or circumstances that somehow determine whether a truth is true (so to speak), e.g. conditions under which a statement is true.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) Compare: An object perceptible by sight is that to which the question ‘Is it blue?’ is in principle applicable. (And not that with respect to which we ask: Under which conditions is it to count as blue?)

\(^{11}\) Cf. here Kemp 1995 (39–40).—I wish to thank the anonymous referee of Facta Philosophica for constructive criticism of an earlier version of this paper.
References


