CONTENTS

ARTICLES
Legitimacy of Religious Beliefs: Has Science disproved the existence of God?
ANKUR BARUA 0

Meaning, Understanding and Language
ASHOK VOHIRA
2

Misusing the Use Theory of Meaning: Kripke’s Rule-Following Skepticism
GOPAL SAHU 39

Deconstruction and Communicative Action: A Study on Derrida and Habermas
R.P. SINGH 57

Diversity of Sense: An Appreciation of Frege’s Theory of Sense
SANJIT CHAKRABORTY 79

Exploring Morality in Artificial Intelligence
RAJKISHORE NATH 97

Freedom in Action
KALYANI SARANGI 109

Business Ethics
PRABHAT K. MISRA 120

BOOK REVIEWS
Amartya Sen: The Idea of Justice
RAMESH CHANDRA PRADHAN 131

R. C. Pradhan, Language, Reality and Transcendence: An Essay on the Main Strands of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,
RANJAN K. PANDA 142

Professor K. Satchidananda Murty: An Obituary
ASHOK VOHIRA 151
Diversity of Sense
- An Appreciation of Frege’s Theory of Sense

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Gottlob Frege’s broad philosophical framework is basically dependent upon his philosophy of language, which is concerned with the notion of an ideal language. But symbolic logic takes an important role in his philosophical thinking. In the history of philosophy, Frege’s paper “On Sense and Reference” (1892) was an important marker of a new era of thinking which is now called the analytic trend. A language to which Frege’s philosophical thinking is completely apt would be a rigid and fully regimented language. As Dummett puts it, “Frege’s model of language is both rigid and static, and therefore fails to be a naturalistic portrait of ordinary language. It represents an ideal, however, just because its interconnections are minimal: there are just as many as are needed to confer on our sentences the use to which we want to put them — what Quine calls utility in social communication — and no more”! Frege also claims that in an ideal language every term would be specific and significant. In his paper “On Sense and Reference”, Frege wants to refute the traditional theory of meaning, i.e., Referential theory of meaning on the way of establishing a new theory of meaning from a different perspective, which he called the theory of sense. Frege mainly arrives at this thinking from three different angles. If we critically follow his thinking, we will find that he elaborates the idea of sense from three different perspectives.
Proper Name

In the case of ‘proper name’, Frege relinquishes the theory of reference to realize the importance of the theory of sense. There have been attempts in contemporary philosophy to dissolve the concept of ‘proper name’ into the conception of singular terms. In the article “Some Notes on Singular Reference”, Professor P.K. Sen writes: “The class of singular terms seems to be ever swelling”. He also claims that proper names, singular pronouns, demonstratives, definite descriptions, indefinite descriptions, all of these terms are considered as singular terms. We may here mention that Frege even took sentence to be a complex singular term.

It might be argued that in our ideal language every term has sense (*sinn*) and also reference (*Bedeutung*). In the first part of his article “On Sense and Reference”, Frege raises a question regarding the relation of identity. To the traditional philosophers, the identity relation is based on the logical law of identity, i.e. everything is identical with itself. For instance, ‘A is A’ or ‘gold is gold’. But Frege assumes that not all identity relations, however, take the form ‘A is A’, we may find another sort of identity statements of the form “A is B”.

Frege admits that the identity relation relates names but not things. Here his main purpose was to make an explanation of true identity propositions. But later on he realizes that identity relation could not be regarded as a relation between objects and here the idea of sense and also of reference is of great value. Let us clarify this point a little bit. If we admit that the relation is a relation between objects then we should have to also admit that there is no fundamental difference between these examples, ‘A is A’ and ‘A is B’ in the case where such an identity is a true identity. At this point we must note that if the meaning of a name is entirely determined by what it designates (or its reference) then the cognitive value of the propositions expressed by these two
sentences will be the same. Now Frege argues that there is a puzzle surrounding identity which sheds some light on the traditional understanding of word meaning. He emphasizes on the epistemological distinctions that we find between these propositions which make the relation of identity puzzling.

The first claim is regarding the identity proposition “A is A”, Frege takes a famous example — “The morning star is the morning star”, the kind of proposition that is expressed by the sentence according to the Kantian view is analytic. Here we find that the predicate term is contained in the subject or is a part of the meaning of the subject term. The moment we clarify the meaning of the subject term, we also comprehend the predicate. Here the guiding principle is of course the law of non-contradiction. On the other hand, Frege wants to show that under the Kantian analysis ‘A is B’ or “The morning star is the evening star” is a kind of synthetic judgement where the predicate term is not included in the subject term and its negation does not involve any self-contradiction. So the puzzle is that there is a significant difference between the sentences and the propositions they express.

The second claim arises from an epistemological point of view. According to Frege, ‘morning star is morning star’ expresses a proposition which is a priori. Hence, it is known to be true independently of our experience. It is in fact a tautologous proposition, the knowledge of its truth value being independent of experience. But in the case of “the morning star is the evening star”, the truth value of this proposition is basically dependent upon our experience. So it may be true or false, i.e., a contingent proposition. If we acquire such a piece of knowledge through experience, it would be a posteriori knowledge. So as there is a sharp difference between the a priori and the a posteriori propositions, there is also a difference between “A is A” and “A is B”.

Diversity of Sense
The third claim acknowledges a distinction between “The morning star is the morning star” and “The morning star is the evening star”; here the first sentence gives us no information and so we may call it uninformative. But the second sentence (A is B) gives us new information, so it is an informative sentence.

Now what is curious is that Frege draws a puzzling picture from a different angle. There is a difference in cognitive value, if we take the relation of identity to be one between objects. This is so because if it was a relation between objects then we should not have found any cognitive difference between the two kinds of identity sentence. But there is such a difference and so we must explain it. To solve this problem Frege suggests that, “[t]he designation of a single object can also consist of several words or other signs. For brevity, let every such designation be called a proper name.” To get some ideas of the difficulties, let us look closely at these problems. Two cases have just been considered:

a) Morning star is morning star.
b) Morning star is evening star.

Here, ‘morning star’ and ‘evening star’ each designates the same planet Venus as its reference. The Referential theory of meaning is unable to make a distinction between these two sentences. But now Frege concludes that the meaning of the term ‘morning star’ and ‘evening star’ is not grasped merely by grasping its reference. We must also see its sense, — how the object or reference is presented by the term in question? Earlier we noted that Frege believes that in our ideal language each term has two aspects — its sense and its reference. We have found that in the case of “morning star” and the “evening star”, though the reference is the planet Venus in each case yet the senses are different. The notion of the sense is here defined as the mode of presentation of the reference. Let us now consider the sense of
‘mornig star’ in this way: ‘A star which rises in the morning sky’ and the sense of ‘evening star’ would be ‘A star which rises in the evening sky’. Frege, though, cautions us that it would be wrong to think that every term which has sense has also a reference. In our common use we may find some words which have some sense but no reference. For instance abstract entities, number etc.

We have found a new idea in the Fregean philosophy. In his ‘Logic’, Frege argues that names, which have no designation, are called “mock proper names”, For instance: Scylla has six heads, Scylla does not have six heads.

The proper name ‘Scylla’ fails to designate referent. So, according to Frege it is just a “mock proper name”. Even a ‘fictitious’ proper name like “Sherlock Homes” is to be regarded as a ‘mock proper name’ because it has some sense but lacks reference. Let us briefly discuss Frege’s view on what he calls “mock proper names”.

We must remember that in “Logic”, Frege’s notion of a mock proper name plays an important role. We also know that Frege believed in the Context Principle, which says that the sense of a term can be understood only in the context of a sentence in which that term is used. So the sense of a term for Frege is the contribution that the term makes in the determination of the sense of the sentence in which it is used. Frege assumed that in logic we are concerned with assertoric sentences which can be either true or false. He thinks that only an assertoric sentence can express a thought proper or genuine thought. We must also remember that an assertion can be a genuine assertion only if it expresses such a genuine thought. From all this it is clear that there is a close connection between a sentence which is either true or false and a genuine assertion and also a genuine thought.

Frege says that there is a third kind of sentence which is neither true nor false. Logic is not concerned with such kind of sentences. Let
us see how a sentence might fail to be either true or false. Suppose I say “All of Mohan’s sons are asleep”. In case all sons of Mohan are really asleep such a sentence would be true. In case not all of them are asleep the sentence would be false. But in case Mohan has no sons at all, could we say that the sentence is true? Certainly not! Could we say that it is false? Not at all. So now see that in this case, where there is no reference of the expression “the sons of Mohan”, the sentence fails to have a truth value. Such a sentence for Frege will be expressing no thought proper. And if we were to assert such sentence, our assertion too would not be a genuine assertion. Let us take Frege’s own example:

A. Scylla has six heads
B. Scylla does not have six heads.

For Frege these sentences are of the third kind which are neither true nor false. Frege writes, “For [them] to be true the proper name ‘Scylla’ would have to designate something”⁴. What Frege wants to convey is that because the proper name ‘Scylla’ fails to designate something, that is, fails to have a reference, both A and B fail to have any truth value. Therefore ‘Scylla’ fails to make that contribution to the sentence which would make the sentence either true or false. Frege calls this kind of proper names ‘mock’ proper names. According to him “Names that fail to fulfill the usual role of a proper name, which is to name something, maybe called mock proper names.” ⁵

What we find problematic in this case is that Frege does concede that a proper name can have sense even though it does not have reference. How can we reconcile this with all that has been discussed above? Here we may take another example from Frege:

C: William Tell shot an apple off his son’s head.
D: William Tell did not shoot an apple off his son’s head.

Frege comments, t “Although..... ‘William Tell’ is a mock proper name, we cannot deny it a sense.... I do not say, however that the
sense is false either, but I characterize it as fictitious”6. One might ask what exactly does Frege mean by fictitious sense? From Frege’s writing it is suggested that there may be three approaches to mock proper names and fictitious nature of their sense. Here we shall be following R. M. Harnish’s article “Frege and Evans on Mock Proper Names”7. Let us now discuss these three approaches one by one:

1. **An Idealistic interpretation of Fictitious Sense**: Frege thinks that “[i]f the Idealist theory of knowledge is correct then all the sciences belong to the realm of fiction”8. This comment of Frege seems to suggest that to call a sense of a proper name fictitious is to regard it to be in the realm of ideas. For Frege then a sentence with such a proper name would be a sentence not about the world of physical objects but about the world of ideas. He says, “Indeed one might try to interpret all sentences in such a way that they are about ideas”9. It is, however, quite clear that this idealist interpretation will be favored by Frege. For Frege, sense is objective and hence cannot be in the realm of ideas.

2. **Not true or false**: One might take ‘fictitious’ to mean neither true nor false. Frege writes, “Instead of ‘fiction’ we could speak of ‘mock thoughts’ (Scheingedanken). Thus if the sense of an assertoric sentence is not true, it is either false or fictitious, and it will generally be the latter if it contains a mock proper name”10. We have to remember that a sentence with a fictitious or mock proper name is not devoid of sense. According to Frege, however, such a sentence is different from a sentence with a genuine proper name, because while the sentence with a genuine proper name expresses a thought which is either true or false, the sentence with a mock proper name does not express a thought which is either true or false. So a fictitious proper name is actually a name which has no reference and a fictitious thought is one which is neither true nor false.

3. **Not to be taken seriously**: Frege, as we noted at the very beginning, says that in logic we cannot have mock proper names, mock
assertions and mock thoughts. However, we may have them in fictions, but what is important to note is that while we take logic seriously, we cannot take assertions of fictions that seriously. It is because of this, if it is said in a film that the world is going to be destroyed in 2012, we do not take it seriously, whereas if the scientists were to say the same thing we would be taking them seriously. Frege claims that “[a]ssertions in fiction are not to be taken seriously: they are only mock assertions. Even the thoughts are not meant to be taken seriously as in the sciences: they are only mock thoughts .... a work of fiction is not meant to be taken seriously”¹¹. Here we might raise a question: What would happen to fiction about historical characters, like dramas about Julius Cesar or Alexander the Great? Frege answers, “Even the proper names in drama, though they correspond to names of historical personages, are mock proper names. They are not meant to be taken seriously in the work”¹². It seems that Frege here is no longer taking mock proper names to be proper names without reference because definitely ‘Cesar’ in a drama is a mock proper name and yet it refers to the great Roman emperor.

We may finally say that Frege is replacing “Not to be taken seriously” by “Not being used to refer”. What I want to say here is that in fictions, though names are used there, they are not used in order to genuinely refer to something. It is as though we are playing a game of as if referring!

**Declarative Sentences**

In the case of a declarative sentence, Frege thinks that the reference of a proper name will be its truth value. Frege says, “So far we have considered the sense and reference only of such expressions, words, or signs as we have called proper names. We now inquire concerning the sense and reference for an entire declarative sentence. Such a sentence contains a thought”. 
Though, Frege thinks that the thought is the possessor of truth value in a particular context and the existence of a thought is totally independent to our abilities of how we express it or grasp it, Dummett explains that “Truth and Falsity are not — or, at least are not merely — properties of thoughts on Frege’s view: they are related to thoughts as the referent of any expression is to its sense.” 14 To put it in another way, when we are thinking about a proposition, the truth value takes a relevant part. There the truth value of this proposition is its co-reference. It is so much interesting to note that once Hilary Putnam claimed that “classifying a sentence as deviant can often be the most useful first step in analyzing it in terms of what it deviates from and how and why.” 15

In the case of a declarative sentence, I think the deviation part is its reference. Now I am trying to sketch my thinking on the basis of the Fregean account. Actually Frege wants to show a distinction between direct and indirect context. In the case of direct context if we replace a co-referential word in the place of the subject term, the truth value of this proposition remains unchanged. But in the case of indirect context, co-referential term is misleading us to know the exact meaning of the subject term. Now let me try to clarify what is at issue by which Frege wants to grasp the theory of sense and refute the traditional theory of meaning (the theory of reference).

In Frege’s opinion, while understanding the meaning (both sense and reference) of a term we have to attend to the context in which the term is used. There are different kinds of contexts for the use of a term. This context plays a crucial role in the determination of the meaning of a term. Let us take an example: the proper name ‘Rama’, we may have a context of the use of the term ‘Rama’ where it is used in a sentence like: ‘Rama was the son of Dasharatha’. We have to remember that a term might have two kinds of occurrences in a sentence or a context. When it is used to refer to its usual referent, it is a direct
use of the term or more specifically a use of the term in a context which is direct. But we may have a different kind of context of the use of the term ‘Rama’. For example the sentence: Tapas believes that Ram is the son of Dasharatha.

In this case, we are not talking about the person Rama by using the name ‘Rama’, directly. We are talking about Rama indirectly because we are talking about Rama only within the context of what Tapas believes. This change in context is significant for us because this change also indicates a change in the meaning of the proper name ‘Rama’ in this particular context. The reason why the context is important is this: In order to determine the meaning of the term ‘Rama’ in the context of the sentence ‘Tapas believes that Rama is the son of Dasharatha’, we need to consider what Tapas believes. Whatever meaning we assign to ‘Rama’ in this context has to be in consonance with whatever Tapas believes. If we fail to do so, we actually fail to understand the meaning of the term ‘Rama’.

It is in the case of the occurrence of a term in an indirect context that Leibniz’s law of substitutivity of co-referentials *salva veritate* fails to apply. Let us direct our attention to an asymmetric treatment of the two following sentences:

a) Sree Krishna is an *avatara*.

b) Lalon believes that the beloved of Radha is an *avatara*.

We can apply Leibniz’s law in (a) but not in (b). ‘Sree Krishna’ and ‘The beloved of Radha’ are two co-referential terms. We can substitute ‘Sree Krishna’ for ‘The beloved of Radha’ in the case of (a) without changing the truth value of (a). But if we substitute ‘Sree Krishna’ by ‘The beloved of Radha’ in the case of (b) there may be a change in the truth value of (b). This is so because Lalon might not know that ‘Sree Krishna’ and ‘The beloved of Radha’ refer to the same
person. So it would be wrong to claim that he believes that the beloved of Radha is an *avatāra*.

Now I want to consider an example, — an example where the sub-ordinate clause may be true but the main clause is false. For instance, Copernicus believed that Uranus moves around the sun. Though the sub-ordinate clause “Uranus moves around the sun” is a true sentence but the whole sentence is wrong because in ‘Copernicus’ age this was an unknown matter. So ‘Copernicus believed that Uranus moves around the sun’ — this main clause is an absolutely wrong statement. Frege argues that when we are discussing about one’s beliefs, the role of the customary reference or truth value takes an unimportant role. One could of course ask what is relevant here then?

Frege answers that only thought is relevant here. In the case of sub-ordinate clause the reference of a sentence is its customary sense. Now the concept of co-referential theory has been reduced in the concept of having the same sense. So Leibniz’s Law fails to apply in the indirect context. Though one could also argue that here the principle of extensionality (X is the same as Y, and F(x), we may infer F(y)) is normally hampered. But Frege claims that an attempt to define such a relation, we just make a reference shift which helps us to map over the whole indirect quotation. According to Frege, a reference of an indirect context is its customary sense. We may apply a substitute word having the same sense which formalizes the reference shift without making a refutation of the principle of extensionality. Another question rises — “What will be the sense of the customary sense?” If in an indirect context we admit that customary sense is designated as a reference, what will be the sense of this indirect quotation?

And the second objection is how the two terms may be having the same sense? Michael Dummett offers a right answer of the first question from the Fregean point of view. He thinks that the expression
of customary sense seems to regard as an indirect sense. Here the second question remains unanswered in Frege’s writing, through McDowell tries to utilize this idea from a different angle. He argues that the concept of having the same sense depends on the mode of the presentation of ontic-entity. But this assumption is not epistemologically a satisfactory reply.

**Begriff**

Frege also believes that the reference of a predicate is a concept or a notion (Begriff). As the predicate is an incomplete expression, it’s reference will be also incomplete. Now we can infer that the sense of this concept will be incomplete too. Peter Geach points out that in this situation, Frege argued that the realm of sense of a notion will be its function. We may also say that the sense of a predicate term will be its function. They argue that an incomplete sense of a planet (Venus) mingled with a sense of name (morning star) makes a complete sentence “The morning star is the planet Venus” through reforming its sense.

Though Frege’s rationalism actually tells us that the knowledge of logic and mathematics is fundamentally a priori, he does not believe that sense is like an image. It is relevant to make a distinction between image and sense or reference. One could argue that a specific world has been an image in our mind, but it does not follow that it must have some connection with sense. Frege believes that image is actually a subjective content which may change with time and situation. The image of a person may be changed lots of time because it is his subjective matter. Frege argues that “[t]he same sense is not always connected, even in the same man, with the same idea. The idea is subjective: one man’s idea is not that of another. These result, as a matter of course, is a variety of differences in the ideas associated with the same sense.”16
The issue comes down to this: let us suppose that I have an image of Gandhiji in my mind. It is just a personal matter which we may call subjective. Another person may have a different image. Even my own image may be changed on the basis of my own thinking. To get some idea of the difficulties, Frege takes an example from our daily life. Let us imagine that a person observes the ‘moon’ through his telescope. Frege here compares the ‘moon’ itself to the referent, which is an object of the particular observation. The object of this observation which, mediated by the glass of the telescope, may be compared with the sense. Because it is a real image which is objectively given to every observer’s glance. An image is something where the reflection of the moon comes through retina and it follows that several persons are looking at the moon from different point of view, any change in their point of view makes some change in the way of their looking; because an image is an immediate experience which is totally a subjective matter. Dummett says, “No image can portray the role of the word in the sentence: In more Wittgensteinian fashion, we might put it by saying that the image can not show how it is to be applied; and it does not contain within itself the sense of the word.”

Many interpreters of the Fregean philosophy define the concept of sense, from different angles:

1. Sense is the mode of presentation of the reference. McDowell and Evans accept this point of view.

2. Sense is something which determines the reference.

3. Sense is the route of reference.

4. Sense is the criterion for identifying reference. Dummett’s interpretation on Frege’s philosophical thinking is based on this particular point of view.

5. Sense is the meaning of a sign or names.

6. Sense is the content of thought.
7. Sense is the cognitive content.
8. Sense is the logical concept, its truth value remain unchanged in the two having the same logical propositions.

Recently the Fregean theory of sense has got a new life in the hands of Gareth Evans and John McDowell. They assume the official definition of sense from a different perspective. In his paper, “The Sense and Reference of a Proper Name”, McDowell wants to show that Frege’s theory of sense is an “austere view of sense”, which has not any relation with Mill’s view of denotation or Russell’s theory of descriptions. His main purpose was to utilize the idea of proper name as the mode of presentation of the reference. Evans and McDowell also believe that Frege wants to avoid the ontological notion in his theory of sense, though epistemology has taken a great role in his thinking. The theory of sense is a kind of knowledge which constitutes our linguistic communication. Two speakers who belong to the same community are able to grasp the propositional attitude of their language which helps them understand other’s expression. For example, let us take the example of “The morning star is the planet Venus”; a person who has this kind of knowledge also has the concept that “The evening star is also the planet Venus.” Because the person is able to grasp the propositional attitude of this sentence from his linguistic community. Evans considers that “Frege said little enough about the idea of a mode of presentation, or a way of thinking of an object in general. He did, however, link them to notions employed in ordinary propositional attitude psychology . . .” He also assumes that the relation of the notion of sense with the ordinary prepositional attitude psychology does not lead to any kind of psychologism at all. Our linguistic expressions indicate the common conventions which establish the linguistic use. Evans thinks that when a speaker says “a is f”, the following condition need to be fulfilled:
The speaker will have to designate the reference of terms “a” and “is f” in the same particular as how the other persons designate these terms in their community.

We may find a solution to such a condition in the notion of a sociolinguistic hypothesis. What I want to focus on is the argument of “Division of Linguistic Labor” recently propounded by Hilary Putnam in his article “The Meaning of ‘Meaning’. He takes the example of gold, a precious and also a monetary metal. Now he requests us to consider our community as a ‘factory’, where some people have the ‘job’ of wearing gold wedding rings, others have the job of selling and telling whether or not something is really gold. It is not necessary for a person to know everything (wearing/selling/telling) about gold. Let us imagine that the idea of selling and wearing fake gold is an uncommon fact. So a buyer who has the need to buy gold as a wedding ring can easily consult an expert. It is not necessary for him to recognize the gold. Wearing gold, recognizing gold, all these criteria are activities in our linguistic community. But there is a division of ‘linguistic labor’ in the community. Therefore the meaning of ‘gold’ can be considered from different angles. An expert and a common man both have some knowledge about ‘gold’. But only an expert knows that the atomic number of ‘gold’ is 79. This kind of knowledge is totally ignored by the common people. The common man does not have any knowledge about its atomic structure. Now Putnam likes to propose the following hypothesis in the favor of his argument of ‘Division of Linguistic Labor’. He writes, “HYPOTHESIS OF THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE DIVISION OF LINGUISTIC LABOR: Every linguistic community exemplifies the sort of division of linguistic labor just described: that is, possesses at least some terms whose associated criteria’ known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by the other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and the speakers in the relevant subset.”
Here we might face some problems. Frege's theory of sense is usually seen as a kind of internalist semantics. And classically it is believed that Putnam's Twin Earth thought experiment was conceived only to overturn such an internalist semantics. Frege is regarded by most philosophers as a descriptivist. It is classically believed that descriptivism is reflected in Frege and Russell's treatment of empty terms and that their belief that such terms have associated with them a description which is not satisfied by anything in the world. Hence contents of thoughts whose expression make a use of such terms are to be seen in terms of narrow content. They also concluded that we may also see other terms in the same way. Hence the Descriptivist Tradition in Semantics and Philosophy of Mind was born. John McDowell writes that Frege believed in the "idea that thought [and speech] relates to objects with an essential indirectness: by way of a blueprint or specification which, if formulated, would be expressed in purely general terms. Whether the object exists or not would then be incidental to the availability of thought. Underlying that idea is the following line of argument. When we mention an object in describing a thought we are giving only an extrinsic characterization of the thought (since the mention of the object takes us outside the subject's mind); but there must be an intrinsic characterization available (one which does not take us outside the subject's mind), and that characterization would have succeeded in specifying the essential core of thought even if extra-mental reality had not obliged by containing the object."²⁰ If indeed the Fregean theory of sense is to be understood in these lines, then the relation between meaning and the external world (or social world) would not be the kind of relation that is required by Putnam's theory. To this extent there is a serious asymmetry between Frege's thesis and Putnam's theory. We may however mention here that Gareth Evans and John McDowell have given a somewhat externalist interpretation of Fregean sense, in which sense is seen as the *mode of*
presentation of reference. Under this interpretation of sense we cannot speak of senses without references, as senses being modes of presentation of reference would fail to exist when there is no reference much as they would fail to be modes of presentation of anything. If we take this interpretation of Frege, we might be able to show that Frege’s theory is not so asymmetric to Putnam’s theory of meaning after all.

[This paper is dedicated to the revered memory of Professor P.K.Sen and for my inspiration Professor Hilary Putnam.]

Notes
4. Ibid., p. 129.
5. Ibid., p. 130.
6. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
14. Frege’s Philosophy of Language, Chap. 12, p. 401.
16. Frege’s Philosophy of Language, Chap. 16, p. 543.
17. Frege’s *Philosophy of Language*, Chap. 6, p. 158.

