

Metaphysical Separatism and Epistemological Autonomy in Frege's Philosophy and Beyond

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[This draft is missing some improvements. For the best version, please see the British Journal for the History of Philosophy.]

There has been much interpretive controversy surrounding Frege's metaphysical views. With respect to the abstract objects he calls "thoughts," for example, the most prominent commentators have claimed to find sufficient evidence for attributing to him both *realism* and *idealism*, as well as a form of principled *quietism* that rejects both traditional views as misconceived. I think, however, that Frege's approach to metaphysics is different from—and perhaps more interesting than—any of these possibilities. The aim of this paper is to present a new account of this approach and start to explore its philosophical significance.

In the first section, I argue that Frege endorses neither realism, idealism, nor quietism when it comes to the metaphysical status of thoughts. I describe these views, review the reasons for attributing them to Frege, and explain why these reasons are unconvincing.

The second section explains why Frege does not endorse these views. He thinks that because his claims about thoughts belong to *logic*, their plausibility cannot depend on there being an acceptable account of the metaphysics of thoughts—so he does not *need* to endorse any of these views. Moreover, he thinks that it would promote serious confusion were he to endorse such views in a work of logic. I call this a "separatist" approach to metaphysical questions, and it relies on a strong form of the *epistemological autonomy* of logic from metaphysics.

In the final section, I describe the unusual conception of logic which makes this approach to metaphysics possible: a conception on which the claim that we grasp thoughts which exist as abstract objects belongs to *logic*, even though claims identifying how we grasp them and whether they are real or ideal do not. I also sketch how this conception allows for Frege's "elenctic" defence of the epistemological autonomy of logic, and how this approach may help with

analogous issues in contemporary metaethics.

1 Frege on Thoughts: Realism, Idealism, or Quietism?

Realism and Idealism

Frege claims that there exist “abstract”—that is, non-spatial and non-temporal—objects.¹ This *ontological* claim might tempt one toward a hasty attribution of *realism about abstract objects*, also known as “Platonism.” But this would be a mistake. A philosopher who believes that abstract objects exist might, for example, also believe that their existence depends on our thinking or experiencing—and these are paradigmatic *idealist* views, not realist ones.²

What is it, then, to be a “realist” about a certain range of objects? On the standard account, a realist not only believes that the relevant objects exist, but denies that their existence is *dependent on* or *explained by* anything about cognition: by facts about how anyone *does* judge, believe, experience, etc; or by facts about how anyone *could* do these things, or *would* do them under certain circumstances, etc.³ By contrast, to believe that there *is* such an explanation of their existence is *idealism* about them.

A bit more generally: realism about *something* adds to belief in *the relevant ontological claim* the denial that there is an explanation of *that claim holding* in

¹For example: “The number 4...is not a spatial object...Not every object is somewhere.” “Numbers...are outside of time.” (Frege 1884a, §61; Frege 1895, 74.)

²As Burge 1992 observes of Frege’s existence claims: “Carnap might have said at least some of these things...Kant might have said them.” (637). See §2 of Balaguer 2016 on ideal abstract objects.

³Miller 2019 identifies “Generic Realism” about a range of objects as the claim that they “exist, and the fact that they exist...is...independent of anyone’s beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on.” This standard account has well-known limitations. For example, when a carpenter makes a bed, the bed’s existence is partly explained by the carpenter’s beliefs; but this does not imply that idealism is true about it. We might refine the standard account along the lines of Shafer-Landau 2003, restricting the *sort* of cognition that is relevant: the bed is real iff its existence is not explained by cognition *affirming its existence*: by “ratification from within any given actual or hypothetical perspective.” (15) Alternatively, following Devitt 1997, we could refine it by holding that only certain *sorts* of explanatory/dependence relations are relevant: the bed is real iff its existence is not *constitutively* explained by cognition. Morton 2021 plausibly argues that “no one has developed a view of the distinction that avoids the problems,” but these subtleties do not affect the issues in this paper. Without much affecting the discussion, anyone who favours a particular refinement of the standard account should be able to, for example, replace every use of “explains” with “constitutively explains.”

terms of cognition. For realism about a range of *objects*, the relevant ontological claim is that they *exist*, so realism adds the denial that their existing is explained by cognition. For a range of *properties*—say, colour or moral properties—the relevant ontological claim is that that some things possess these properties; realism denies that *this* is to be explained by cognition. Realism about a range of *relations* denies that there is any cognitive explanation of things standing in these relations, etc. In each case, an idealist believes that there is such an explanation.

Quietism

Realism and idealism can seem like the only options available to one who claims that some objects exist. For someone who makes that claim surely *believes* that these objects exist; and if they exist, their existence is surely either explained by cognition or it is not; either idealism is true, or realism is.

But there are several reasons why one might claim that some objects exist, without being a realist or an idealist about them. Especially important for readers of Frege is that one might hold the *quietist* view that one *ought* neither believe nor deny that the relevant ontological matter is explained by cognition: one ought neither accept realism nor idealism. Rather than the traditional philosophical task of determining whether that explanatory claim is true or false, to be believed or denied, the quietist thinks we ought instead take on the very different philosophical task of establishing that this claim ought neither be believed nor denied.⁴

Why think that some claims ought to be neither believed nor denied? Again, there are several possible reasons, but especially important for readers of Frege is that quietism can rest on *non-cognitivism*. Non-cognitivism about a range of claims is the view that they are incapable of being either true or false. Here are two forms of non-cognitivism that could lead someone to both claim that some objects exist *and* hold the quietist view that we ought neither believe nor deny the explanatory claim that assigns them a metaphysical status.

1. Perhaps the ontological claim that the relevant objects exist is literally true, but no claims about an explanatory relationship between their existence and cognition can be true or false, for such claims are *nonsense*. If we see things that way, we will, with the quietist Carnap, make existence claims

⁴E.g., McDowell 2009: “Quietism does indeed urge us not to engage in certain supposed tasks, but precisely because it requires us to work at showing that they are not necessary...There is no question of quickly dismissing a range of philosophical activity from the outside.” (371)

and believe them to be literally true, while holding that “in the realism controversy, [we ought] take neither an affirmative nor a negative position since the question has no meaning.”⁵

2. Perhaps the ontological claim *itself* is neither true nor false, though making that claim nonetheless *does* something important, like *express* something; and the explanatory claim is accordingly also neither true nor false. If we see things this way, we will *make* the ontological claim without actually believing it to be true, and hold that we ought neither believe nor deny the explanatory claim.⁶ (Depending on whether or not we think making the explanatory claim also serves to *do* something important, we might or might not make that claim too—all the while neither believing nor denying it, and holding that one ought not do so.)

These, then, are two non-cognitivist sources of quietism about the explanatory claim, which might lead someone to make the ontological claim that a range of objects exist while neither believing nor denying the explanatory claim that assigns them a metaphysical status.

Frege on Thoughts

We now turn to Frege, focussing on perhaps his most widely-discussed ontological claim: that “thoughts” exist and are abstract objects, “timeless, eternal, unchanging,” and not in “the outer [i.e.: spatial] world.”⁷

Given that he calls them “thoughts,” one naturally wonders whether Frege thinks the existence of these objects is explained by some sort of cognition—in particular, some kind of *thinking*. And one kind of thinking is an obvious explanatory candidate. Frege links the existence of thoughts closely to what we can call “objective thinking”: the sort that admits of significant agreement and disagreement between two thinkers. He claims, for example, that anyone who thinks objectively (in this sense) *grasps* or *thinks* some relevant thought—so that whenever a subject allows for the sort of thinking that admits of significant

⁵Carnap 1929, §9.

⁶As Joyce 2021 describes, for certain classical non-cognitivists in ethics, “one of the major attractions of noncognitivism [about first-order moral claims] is that it is a means of sidestepping a number of thorny puzzles,” including metaphysical questions: for if the ontological claim that a thing has a certain property is not literally true, then any claims purporting to *explain* the thing’s having the property are plausibly also neither true nor false.

⁷Frege 1918–1919a, 75–76; see Frege 1884a (§61) for the reading of “outer” in a “spatial sense.”

agreement and disagreement, there are thoughts concerning that subject.⁸ His discussion also suggests that whenever there are thoughts concerning some subject, these thoughts can be grasped and the subject allows for the sort of thinking which admits of significant agreement and disagreement.⁹ Since thoughts and objective thinking are so closely connected, a more specific form of the metaphysical question becomes especially salient: does *objective thinking* explain the existence of thoughts?

We now consider the best arguments that Frege gives realist, idealist, and quietist responses to the metaphysical question about thoughts.

Realist Evidence

Tyler Burge claims that when it comes to thoughts, “Frege’s Platonism [i.e. realism about abstract objects] shows itself in two ways. One is that he never enters the commentary that an idealist...would enter on his claims about non-spatio-temporal entities, or about their objectivity...The other is that he claims...that the assumption of the relevant entities explains the inter-subjective objectivity of science and communication.”¹⁰

Let us take the second point first. According to Burge, Frege directly claims that the existence of thoughts *explains* how there can be objective thinking. Burge’s idea is that given the usual strictures against circular explanations, objective thinking cannot then *also* explain the existence of thoughts—and since this is the only salient sort of cognition which might explain the existence of thoughts, this commits Frege to realism.¹¹ But Burge’s textual claim is wrong: Frege never *does* claim that the existence of thoughts explains objective think-

⁸Frege 1918–1919a (69) claims that “disputing about the truth” and there being “a science...on which many [can] work together” involves the grasping of thoughts.

⁹See e.g., Skiba 2017 on Frege’s “principle...[that] every thought can be grasped,” (2) and Heck and May 2008 (23) on why Frege thinks all thoughts are “possible contents of propositional attitudes,” and that “we must recognize in [cognitive] episodes something...that may be...affirmed by one person and denied by another.” Frege 1918–1919a introduces a notorious complication: thoughts that can only be grasped by one person. Perhaps someone who grasps such a thought still engages in the *sort* of thinking which admits of significant agreement and disagreement, even if for special reasons nobody else can agree or disagree; or perhaps Frege simply falls into inconsistency here along lines described by Skiba.

¹⁰Burge 1992, 638.

¹¹A commitment to an ontology-to-cognition direction of explanation is such a common route to realism that it is sometimes built into (non-standard) definitions of realism itself, like that of Reck 2007 (153). On such non-standard definitions, views on which a third factor explains both ontology *and* cognition are non-realist, while by our standard definition, they are realist.

ing. As Burge quotes, Frege says things like “if every thought needs a bearer to whose consciousness it belongs, then it is the thought of this bearer alone; and there is no common science on which many could work.”¹² This means that if there were no thoughts as Frege conceives of them—outside of space and time, and so not borne by anyone’s consciousness—then there would be no objective thinking. But that is not the explanatory claim. (No circular explanation is involved in affirming both that if there were no A, there would be no B *and* that if there were no B, there would be no A.)

Burge’s first point is that certain passages either directly commit Frege to realism, or at least imply that were he *not* a realist, he would qualify them with some “commentary.” In these passages, which are also highlighted by Michael Dummett, Frege straightforwardly claims that whether or not anyone thinks objectively about a subject—thereby grasping or thinking the relevant thoughts—does not affect the existence or nature of those thoughts: a thought is “totally independent...of whether I think it,” and when many of us think objectively, the thoughts themselves are nonetheless “totally independent of our thinking.”¹³ But as Joan Weiner points out, such claims do not fully commit Frege to realism, because every such passage clearly concerns “actual, not possible, mental activities. Frege never suggests that the fact that it *can be* [grasped] is inessential to the nature of the thought.”¹⁴ She is right: these passages show only that *if* Frege is an idealist, he must hold that it is something about how someone *could* think that explains the existence of thoughts, not anything about how anyone *actually* does, did, or will. (One might wonder: couldn’t Frege have simply never considered such modal possibilities, or not taken them seriously? If so, his attitude toward the forms of idealism he explicitly rejects might represent his general attitude toward idealism. But this line of thought fails; for as we will see in a moment, Frege *does* explicitly consider, and take very seriously, just such modal forms of idealism.)

It is presumably because Burge notices this gap between Frege’s assertions and realism that he talks of entering “commentary”: Burge’s point is that having made these claims, if Frege himself believed (or even saw as a live possibility) that thoughts are “dependent on human conceptualization or human language, judgment, or inference (actual or possible), he would have said so.”¹⁵ But why

¹²Frege 1918–1919a, 69. On Frege’s reasons for this claim, see §1 of Ricketts 1986.

¹³Frege 1918–1919a, 74 and Frege 1897, 145; these passages are cited by Burge 1992, 639–64, and by Dummett 1981 to rule out certain idealist views (514).

¹⁴Weiner 1995 369.

¹⁵Dummett also does not think these remarks fully commit Frege to realism about thoughts,

would he have said so? His point in the relevant passages is just what he says: thoughts' existence is independent of our *actual* thinking—so, for example, we cannot change them by changing the way we think.

Idealist Evidence

Frege certainly does not ignore the modal idealist view left open by the remarks just considered: that the existence of thoughts depends on *possible* objective thinking. Rather, he himself claims that “one might understand as the being of a thought: that different thinkers could grasp the thought as the same.” Regarding this passage, Weiner comments that “Frege certainly seems to be saying that the existence (being) of a thought is dependent on something linguistic or communal.”¹⁶

But Weiner goes too far; Frege does not even *seem* to say that. What he literally says is that someone *might understand* the being of a thought in that way, not that he himself does.¹⁷ Of course, in some contexts, that form of words can express one's own view—and it is striking that Frege never explicitly rejects the

thought for a very different reason. Dummett employs a non-standard account of what realism is, according to which “the antithesis between realism and idealism...[is] an opposition between two accounts of what...an understanding of our language consists in,” where “realism is...the acceptance of a truth-conditional theory of meaning resting on an unmodified two-valued semantic theory.” (Dummett 1973, 684; Dummett 1981, 442-443.) Dummett sees that this apparently has “little to do with traditional disputes concerning realism”: for on this account, it is “highly dubious whether a classical phenomenalist can properly be described as having held an anti-realist view”; and “a Dedekindian who maintained that mathematical objects are free creations of the human mind...[could] be a species of realist” about them; and even “Berkeley...ends up in a position describable as a sophisticated realism about the material world.” (Dummett 1996, 465-467; Dummett 1982 84; Dummett 1981 462.) Since these views are idealist in the standard sense, realism in Dummett's sense does not imply realism in the standard sense. Since our concern is whether Frege is a realist in the standard sense, then, we need not pursue Dummett's case for Frege's realism in his sense. (Dummett himself holds that conceiving of “realism” in terms of dependence or explanation is confused, and that his account captures what is most interesting about traditional discussions using the term—though as Miller 2019 reports, “few have been convinced” by either claim. See Miller 2003 for discussion.)

¹⁶Frege 1918–1919b, 146; Weiner 1995, 369.

¹⁷Something similar applies when, after denying that logic concerns “minds and contents of consciousness whose bearer is an individual person,” Frege says that “one might perhaps see [logic's] task as the investigation of the mind.” (In this case though, even endorsing that characterization of logic's task would not imply idealism about thoughts, since an “investigation of the mind” might require describing things which are independent of the mind but to which it stands in important relations.)

view. But the context of Frege's remark makes clear that he is not endorsing it, either. Having just made a point about thoughts, Frege mentions that one *might* hold this idealist view about thoughts, and then goes on to draw out consequences of his point for that idealist view: "*in that case* the fact that a thought had no being *would* consist in several thinkers each associating with the sentence a sense of his own; this sense *would in that case* be..." (My italics.) It is quite striking: Frege works out these consequences without ever indicating his own agreement or disagreement with the idealist view he is considering.¹⁸

Other passages have also been taken to show Frege's idealism about thoughts. For example: after claiming that numbers are "objective"—something he says about thoughts as well—Frege goes on to explain that "what is objective is what is subject to laws, what can be conceived and judged, what is expressible in words"; and that he "I understand by *objectivity* an independence from our sensation, intuition, and imagination, and from the appearance of inner pictures out of memories of earlier sensations, but not an independence from reason; because to answer the question what things are like independent of reason would be to judge without judging, to wash the fur without making it wet."¹⁹ Since what is not independent of reason is surely dependent on it, readers like Michael Resnik find "the case for Frege's...idealism [about objective things]...most persuasive."²⁰ But in these somewhat cryptic remarks, Frege never actually *says* that all objective things are not independent of reason. The first passage simply says that objective things are expressible, that they can be conceived and judged, etc.; not that their existence depends on or is explained by this fact about them. The second simply says that when he calls something objective, he means to ascribe it

¹⁸One might wonder: how can Frege take this modal idealist view as an open possibility, having written §4 of Frege 1879? For according to that passage, one who says that P is possible "either...abstains from judgement [of P]...or he says that the generalization of the negation [of P] is false...[making] a *particular affirmative judgement*"; and if so, to claim that a thought's existence depends on the fact that it *can* be grasped is presumably to say that it depends on someone *actually* grasping it—which view Frege of course rejects. The answer, I think, is that Frege no longer holds that dismissive view of modal talk. For he never mentions it outside of that single passage in 1879, and he himself makes significant philosophical use of modal talk that cannot be understood along those lines. (E.g.: two sentences express different senses when someone "could hold the one...to be true, the other false"; and the same sense when "anyone who recognizes the content of [one] as true must also immediately recognize the content of [the other] as true." (Frege 1892b, 32; Frege 1906, 213.))

¹⁹Frege 1884a, §26

²⁰Resnik 1979, 351-352: Resnik also cites the similar §60 of Frege 1884a, in which Frege says what he does *not* mean by "self-subsistence."

certain features, and does not mean to ascribe it others, with independence from reason being among the latter. Both remarks are certainly consistent with quietism, and probably with realism. (I believe that though there are objects that I will never think about, I ought not try to provide any examples; Frege may along similar lines see good reasons not to try to say what things are like independent of reason, while nonetheless believing some things to be independent of it.)

Quietist Evidence

Quietist readings begin by noting that Frege holds certain expressions to be *defective*. For example: he distinguishes functions from objects, and holds that “it can never be said of an object what is...said of a [function]...It is impossible, it is senseless.”²¹ Any expressions which purport to enable us to say such things are defective, which is reflected in Frege’s artificial language *Begriffsschrift*: it does not permit any predicates which sometimes combine with expressions referring to objects and sometimes with those referring to functions. Frege admits that this renders much of what he himself says “senseless.” (This includes, perhaps, his use of the relational expression “ x means [*bedeutet*] y ,” where the “ y ” place is filled sometimes by an expression that stands for an object and sometimes by one that stands for a function.)²² Since Frege says these things anyway, he evidently thinks one can do something important by saying certain senseless things²³—but he does not think one can make claims that are literally *true* (or false). This constitutes *non-cognitivism* about claims involving defective expressions: a key step toward quietism.

Weiner claims that as a result of defective expressions, Frege is committed to non-cognitivism about the key explanatory claim, and hence to quietism about the metaphysical status of thoughts. She holds that “the existence of thoughts does not really have the status of a scientific claim,” and “such terms as ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are...precluded from playing a role in a theory.” This makes it “impossible to state...the sort of theory that...makes [one] a Platonist,” or an idealist: for two separate reasons, the claim that *objective* thinking explains *the existence of thoughts* is neither true nor false, to be neither affirmed nor denied.²⁴

²¹Frege 1892a, 200. Frege says “concept” here, but his point applies to functions more broadly.

²²Sluga 1997 (§5) points out that it is hard to see how someone who regards such expressions as senseless could allow for the possibility of a substantive theory of meaning.

²³See Weiner 2001 for discussion of what he might be doing.

²⁴Weiner 1990, 214; Weiner 1995, 364, 376. As we saw, Weiner also makes observations that can support an idealist reading. Her position could be put this way: if Frege holds *any* traditional

Why does Weiner think the relevant expressions are defective? She seems to think that any sentence stating that thoughts exist is neither true nor false because “no combination of Frege’s logical symbols can be viewed as expressing the claim that thoughts exist.” It is true that Frege has no symbol corresponding to the predicate “...is a thought”. But this is also true of the predicate “...is a star”, and Frege certainly thinks it is literally true that stars exist. This is, then, not a reason to think that Frege sees the thought-predicate as defective; it may simply be unnecessary in the axiomatic system of logic.²⁵ (While every expression that Frege sees as defective has no parallel in *Begriffsschrift*, not every expression with no parallel in *Begriffsschrift* is seen by Frege as defective.) As for “objective”, Weiner claims it is defective because Frege says that both functions and objects are “objective,” while what can be said about an object cannot be said about a function.²⁶ But Frege need not, and usually does not, use the word “objective” to describe the relevant sort of thinking: he talks instead of thinking which admits of significant agreement and disagreement. The salient explanatory claim is something like: “the existence of thoughts is explained by the possibility of the sort of thinking that admits of significant agreement and disagreement”—which has no terms that Weiner shows to be applied to both objects and functions.

Weiner argues that Frege sees other terms, including “object” and “objecthood,” as defective.²⁷ But though relevant to other issues, these terms do not appear in the claims that matter for our purposes. (For example, Frege does not need the word “object” to claim that there are abstract objects, since the first-level quantifier serves: “There exists something which is not in space and time.”)

metaphysical theory, his idealist-sounding passages indicate that it would be idealism; but since he ultimately holds such claims to be neither true nor false, he is a quietist instead. (This non-cognitivist route to quietism fits with the second example given above.)

²⁵Weiner 1990, 214. Though Ricketts 1996 finds his thinking “very much indebted to Joan Weiner,” (128) he sees that she is not to be followed here: “The judgment of the existential generalization that there are Fregean thoughts has the objective status of all our judgments.” (140) Attributing three additional views to Frege may explain what Weiner has in mind: that *if* the claim that thoughts exist is literally true, then it must be part of some scientific system; that *if* it is part of any system, it must be part of the axiomatic logical system; and that *if* it is part of the axiomatic logical system, it must be expressible in *Begriffsschrift* as it stands. We will later see that the second assumption, at least, is false.

²⁶Weiner 1995, 375-376

²⁷On these terms, see Weiner 2001 and Ricketts 1986.

A Surprising Result

Despite decades of sustained effort on the part of interpreters, then, no one has found a good reason to attribute to Frege realism, idealism, or quietism when it comes to the metaphysical status of thoughts. It seems that he simply does not take a position on whether or not cognition explains their existence—and nor does he claim that one ought not take such a position.

This is surprising for a few reasons. The simplest is that we have seen that Frege takes the time to explicitly reject certain forms of idealism, and to carefully work out the consequences of his claims for others. The metaphysical question is on his mind, and he knows that it is on our minds. So why *not* tell us what he thinks about it, even as an aside?

Frege's silence is not just odd: it is potentially problematic. Recall that in general, idealism affirms a cognitive explanation of some ontological matter, and realism denies it. Why is it interesting or important to take either position? Typically, the interest of affirming or rejecting a cognition-to-ontology explanation derives from the fact that there is a striking *correlation* between cognition and ontology: a correlation that leads us to expect *some* explanatory relation between them. (Contemporary debates surrounding realism about colour and moral properties, for example, are driven by the correlation constituted by the *reliability* of our judgements about a certain range of properties: again and again, when we judge that properties are instantiated in a certain way, they in fact are.)²⁸ And we have already seen Frege identify a striking correlation between objective thinking and the existence of thoughts: whenever a subject admits of objective thinking, there are thoughts concerning that subject, and (perhaps) vice versa. This correlation calls out for *some* kind of explanatory relation between objective thinking and the existence of thoughts. If thinking explains thoughts, that is idealism; and if thoughts explain thinking, then as Burge points out, realism follows given a few reasonable assumptions.

Given that such correlations call out for explanation, it would not just be *natural* for Frege to tell us what he thinks: it looks like part of a satisfactory defence of his claim that the existence of abstract thoughts is correlated with objective

²⁸Some classic sources are Chapter 2 of Hardin 1988, Harman 1977, and Street 2006. There is a very general point about correlations and explanatory claims here. Nearly every time we find smoke, we find fire: this regularity leads us to expect some kind of explanatory relation between the two. Affirming that fire explains smoke is interesting because it provides the explanatory relation we are looking for; denying it is interesting because it means that we have to keep looking.

thinking. After all, it can be difficult to find an explanatory connection between two apparently correlated phenomena—and in particular, it is notoriously difficult to find explanatory relations involving *abstract objects*, which cannot enter into standard sorts of causal relationships. But when we cannot find any explanatory connection, we often start to doubt that the correlation itself holds at all. (When difficulties arise finding an explanatory connection with respect to our reliability about colour and moral properties, for example, philosophers start to consider extreme positions that reject the correlation, like colour eliminativism or “a thoroughgoing moral skepticism—a logically coherent position that contains about zero appeal.”²⁹) Indeed, the difficulty of accounting for the relevant correlation is a major reason readers reject Frege’s claims about abstract objects. All of this suggests that Frege ought to assure us that that there is an explanatory connection to be found by at least *sketching* a plausible form of realism or idealism—or, with the quietist, explaining why the failure to find an explanatory connection ought not concern us, because we ought not look for one.

So why doesn’t he do these things?

2 Why Doesn’t Frege Answer The Metaphysical Question?

The question now is: why would Frege refuse to say whether or not cognition explains the existence of thoughts? In this section, I compare this refusal with Frege’s closely related treatment of psychological questions. This points us to the reason: he thinks that logic’s *epistemological autonomy* from metaphysics implies that he *need* not answer the metaphysical question in a work of logic; and that given the state of logical discussions at the time, this epistemological autonomy also implies that he *ought* not.

Psychological and Metaphysical Separatism

Throughout his works, Frege rails against “psychological approaches” that have “penetrated into logic”: the “ruinous incursion of psychology into logic.”³⁰ He himself denies that the subject-matter of logical laws concerns paradigmatic psychological phenomena like ideas and “muscular sensations”, and denies even that “psychology...can contribute anything to the justification” of logical claims: accordingly, logic must “refuse all assistance” from psychology, and “all psycho-

²⁹Shafer-Landau 2012, 1.

³⁰Quotes in this paragraph from Frege 1884a, xvii-xxii and Frege 1893, xix-xxiii.

logical considerations, which now swell our logic texts...prove to be pointless.” These reflections lead him to a famous resolution: to “separate sharply the psychological from the logical” in his work.

It is not immediately clear what this *psychological separatist* policy involves—beyond, obviously, not attempting to justify logical claims by psychological ones. Two examples illustrate a less obvious aspect.

1. During a discussion of what is distinctive about logical laws, the question arises whether or not it is *possible for anyone to reject a law of logic*. Frege writes that “stepping outside logic, one can say: our nature and external circumstances force us to judge, and when we judge we cannot discard this law...but have to acknowledge it...I neither want to dispute nor to endorse this opinion, but merely note that what we have here is not a logical conclusion.”³¹ He identifies this question as belonging to a different discipline—presumably psychology—and refuses to take a position on it.
2. Frege’s claim that we grasp thoughts when we think objectively raises the question how this grasping takes place: a question whose “difficulty” he thinks is “still barely recognized,” concerning a “process” that is “perhaps the most mysterious of all.” (The difficulty, presumably, derives partly from the fact that thoughts are abstract objects, and is not yet recognized because few hold that they are.) Still, Frege claims that “because it is mental, we do not need to concern ourselves with [the process of grasping] in logic. It is enough for us [logicians] that we grasp thoughts...how this happens is a separate question in itself.” In a later discussion, he claims that it is to be “assigned to psychology.”³² Again: he identifies a question as belonging to psychology and refuses to take a position on it.

One thing to note about these passages is that it is for the *logician* to acknowledge that we grasp thoughts, though not to explain how; and to switch from Frege’s own claims about logical laws to answer the question whether it is possible to

³¹Frege 1893, xvii. This passage clarifies §14 of Frege 1884a, whose rhetorical questions can give the impression that he commits to an answer: “Would not all fall into confusion, if one tried to deny one of these? Would thinking then still be possible?” (This impression is strengthened by the standard English translation, Frege 1884b, which puts Frege’s questions—“Stürzt nicht alles in Verwirrung, wenn man einen von diesen leugnen wollte? Wäre dann noch Denken möglich?”—into declarative form: “We have only to try denying any one of them, and complete confusion ensues. Even to think at all seems no longer possible.”)

³²Frege 1897, 157; Frege 1919, 273.

reject a logical law is to “step[] outside logic.” Frege evidently takes his own claims about what is distinctive of logical laws and his claims about grasping thoughts to belong to *logic*—even though they do not appear in the axiomatic system canonically expressed in his *Begriffsschrift*, and could not be stated in *Begriffsschrift* as it stands.³³

These passages also show Frege refusing to opine on questions that (he thinks) are psychological when they arise in connection with his (logical) claims, apparently *because* they are psychological. This aspect of the “separatist” policy is surprising. Having raised these questions and noted their difficulty, it would certainly be *natural* for him to express an opinion about them. So why not do so, even if this would be, strictly speaking, a brief departure from logic? What is more, this aspect is potentially problematic. For the acceptability of his own (logical) claims about thoughts seems to depend on there being adequate answers to the questions they raise. (If his claims about thoughts make the process of grasping so “mysterious” as to be unintelligible, this would seem to cast doubt on those claims.³⁴) So it seems that he really ought to at least sketch how this process might work.

Of course, this all sounds familiar: this refusal to answer psychological questions is surprising and troubling for the same reasons as the refusal to answer the *metaphysical* question that concerns us. Might that refusal, then, belong to a general policy of “metaphysical separatism”? Indeed it does. While “psychological logicians” are his main targets in the passages discussed above, Frege *also* criticizes, in the same ways, logicians whose approach “entangles [them] in metaphysics.” He lumps psychology and metaphysics together in claiming that logicians must not “rely on metaphysics and psychology,” thereby getting “enmired in the psychologico-metaphysical bog.” He also gives at least one important reason, to which we will later return, why *both* metaphysics and psychology cannot be relevant to the justification of logical claims: “metaphysics and psychology [are] sciences which themselves have need of logical principles.”

³³Also, before the passage on thoughts, Frege defends his “attaching an unusual sense to the word ‘thought’,” on the grounds that “it is allowed in logic to coin technical terms.” (147-148) He evidently thinks that his technical term “thought,” is used in logic, even though no corresponding term figures in the *Begriffsschrift* expression of the axiomatic science.

³⁴Dummett 1991b (286) accordingly criticizes Frege for “relegat[ing] to psychology” this question. While Conant 1991 and others have sought to uncover Fregean commitments to answers to these psychological questions, what matters here is that finding such commitments would show only that Frege failed to adhere to his expressed intention not to opine.

Separatism and Epistemological Autonomy

We are currently asking: why doesn't Frege answer the metaphysical question about thoughts? We have now seen that this is an aspect of a policy of metaphysical and psychological separatism: in general, he refuses to answer questions belonging to these disciplines when they are raised by his own claims, which he takes to belong to logic. But why adopt such a policy? A two-part reason can be found in the passages quoted above.

First: Frege thinks that answering these questions could not contribute to, let alone be required for, an adequate defence of his logical claims. I have suggested that if Frege's logical claims raise psychological and metaphysical questions that do not admit of good answers, this can give us reason to doubt or reject those logical claims. But this is to suggest that logical claims can be called into question or refuted when they fail to allow for a satisfactory metaphysical or psychological theory. And if that were so, we could justify our acceptance of one logical theory over another by seeing which one fits with what we (take ourselves to) know about the relevant discipline—and Frege clearly thinks this is impossible: *claims belonging to these disciplines can never be relevant to the justification of logical claims*. This is the *epistemological autonomy* of logic from psychology and metaphysics: anyone who would reject Frege's logical claims about thoughts because she sees no satisfactory answers to the questions they raise for metaphysics or psychology has failed to appreciate this autonomy. This explains why Frege thinks he *need* not answer the metaphysical and psychological questions that his claims raise.

It does not fully explain, however, why Frege *does* not answer these questions. Why not just give us his opinion, even if it is irrelevant to justifying his logical claims? A reason is found in his sociological observations about the state of logical works: such observations take up so much space in the discussions surrounding his separatist pronouncements because they are part of the *reason* for them. Frege's contemporaries fail to recognize the epistemological autonomy of logic, taking up psychological and metaphysical questions in their logical works because they think it is relevant to the justification of logical claims if they fit well with metaphysics and psychology. If Frege *himself* were to make it plausible that his logical claims fit with psychology and metaphysics by opining about psychological or metaphysical matters in his logical works—*particularly* by answering questions that are raised and made difficult by those claims—he would look to be doing the same thing. By contrast, it will emphasize the epistemological autonomy of logic if he pointedly refuses to answer psychological or metaphysical

questions when they arise—and sometimes explicitly explains that he is not going to give an answer because, since he is talking about logic, he does not have to. So, he thinks, this is what he ought to do. (Note how this differs from quietism. The quietist thinks, in general, that one ought not answer the metaphysical question. Frege thinks only that *in* works of logic, *given* the current state of logical discussions, we ought not answer it. He never denies that the question makes sense, or even that it is pressing and important. Instead, we have seen him call metaphysics a “science” in its own right, alongside psychology; an answer to the metaphysical question about thoughts may well appear in that science.)

The question of this section is: why doesn’t Frege tell us whether cognition explains the existence of thoughts? The answer is: he thinks he *need* not answer this glaring question because it belongs to metaphysics while his own claims about thoughts belong to the epistemologically autonomous subject of logic; and since this epistemological autonomy is not widely recognized, he *ought* to emphasize that autonomy by leaving this question unanswered in his logical works.

3 Frege on Logic and Epistemological Autonomy

We first saw *that* Frege does not take a realist, idealist, or quietist position on thoughts; next, we saw *why*. But there are strange aspects of Frege’s position.

There is nothing strange about his separatist policy itself, given that his own claims belong to logic, that logic is epistemologically autonomous from metaphysics, and that this is not widely recognized. (Refusing to answer glaring metaphysical questions raised by logical theorizing seems like a reasonable way to emphasize one’s point that there is no *need* to do so in the course of such theorizing.)

But it is strange that Frege thinks that his claims about thoughts belong to *logic*, while closely related claims instead belong to other subjects. (How could it fall to logic to claim both that thoughts exist and that their existence does not depend on any actual thinking, unless it also fell to logic to say whether or not their existence depends on *possible* thinking? How could it fall to logic to say *that* we grasp thoughts, but not to say *how*?) Moreover: even if some conception of logic has these results, it is not clear why Frege thinks this subject would be epistemologically autonomous from metaphysics and psychology. (Why *wouldn’t* it cast doubt on the logical claim that we grasp abstract thoughts if it raises metaphysical and psychological questions without good answers—or if our metaphysical theorizing simply implies that there are no abstract objects?)

These questions touch on some of the most difficult and interesting aspects of Frege's philosophy. Though a full discussion would require a great deal more space than I have, I will here at least sketch the conception of logic that I think guides Frege's claims, the way that this conception enables him to give an significant defence of the epistemological autonomy of logic, and the significance of these points for recent discussions of epistemological autonomy.

Frege on the Boundaries of Logic

To see why Frege thinks "logic" encompasses the relevant claims about thoughts, we turn to his most explicit characterizations of that subject.³⁵

These characterizations invoke a central task: "the task of logic [is] the investigation of the laws of thought." Or again, "the task we assign logic is...that of indicating what holds...for all regions of thinking." This makes logic sound like a kind of psychology, but only because talk of "laws" and of "what holds" is ambiguous. Frege disambiguates: "in one sense [a law] says what is; in the other it prescribes what ought to be." His statements of logic's task use the *normative* sense of "law", so that logic investigates what "holds" for thinking in a normative sense. This, however, makes it hard to see how the laws that he puts forward as logical qualify: after all, his go-to example, "everything is self-identical," seems to say "what is" rather than prescribe "what ought to be." But, he explains, such laws *do* prescribe what ought to be: since *thinking* has "the goal [of] truth", "any law asserting what is...prescrib[es] that one ought to think in conformity with it." And though the laws of every discipline prescribe in this sort of way, logic still has a distinctive task, because only *logical* laws prescribe how to think in "all regions of thinking"—only they "prescrib[e] how to think wherever there is thinking at all." This gives them "more right to the title 'laws of thought'."

On this picture, at the heart of logic is an axiomatic system containing the law that everything is self-identical and others saying "what is". But to understand what such descriptive laws have to do with the prescriptions whose investigation is logic's task, we presumably must also recognize that thinking has the goal of truth. Frege's making this claim in a "logical" discussion suggests that he thinks logic "investigates" these prescriptions by making the claims that we need to *un-*

³⁵Quotes in the next paragraph are from Frege 1879–1891, 4; Frege 1897, 139; and Frege 1893, xv. While the essentials of the interpretation in this paragraph are increasingly widely accepted, they leave open several controversial issues—including what exactly these prescriptions are, and what it means for them to hold "for all regions of thinking." For some variations, details and defence, see especially MacFarlane 2002, Taschek 2008, Steinberger 2017, and Hutchinson 2020.

derstand how it is that the relevant prescriptions hold for all thinking; to make it *intelligible* that they do. On this picture, logic will include both the laws systematized in the axiomatic science *and* the fact that thinking has the goal of truth, as well as—if Frege is right—the fact that we grasp abstract thoughts, without which these prescriptions would not hold: “every opinion would be unjustified...there would be no error, no correction of error,” etc.³⁶

Now: it might seem that logic, so conceived, must encompass too much. For if the fact that we grasp abstract thoughts helps to make the holding of these prescriptions intelligible, then why not the fact that thoughts can only be grasped by thus-and-such a process, or their existence only explained, say, by the possibility of objective thinking? It can look like all such necessary conditions on our grasping abstract thoughts will contribute to this intelligibility, so that stating that these conditions hold will be part of *logic*, contrary to Frege’s claim. And there is no telling where it will end. Whole rationalist world-systems have been deduced in this sort of way.

But in the natural sense I have in mind, some necessary conditions on a prescription holding are irrelevant to its *intelligibility*. Suppose one does not understand how it is that, say, one ought to see Leo McCarey’s classic film “An Affair to Remember.” There are various general necessary conditions on such a prescription holding, including, say, the physical and psychological laws which enable us to perceive films in the way we do, and the fact that appreciating good art is an important part of life. Moreover, since it presumably could not be that one ought to see *this* film in particular if it did not exist, its having each of the features that make up its identity are plausibly necessary conditions on that prescription holding: including, say, the intriguing onscreen chemistry between Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr and the annoying children’s chorus scene that mars the second half. But in the intuitive sense I have in mind, the role of art in life and the onscreen chemistry help to make the holding of the prescription *intelligible*, while the annoying chorus and physical laws do not.

Frege, I think, takes logic to “investigate” the relevant prescriptions by making them intelligible in this sense.³⁷ And he reasonably thinks that even if thoughts

³⁶See, e.g., Frege 1897, 144 and surrounding discussion; see also Ricketts 1986 on connections between thoughts and normativity.

³⁷The present issue is the core of the so-called “logical question” that occupied 19th century German philosophy: how to characterize logic without winding up with the extravagant “metaphysical understanding of logic developed by Hegel.” (See, e.g., Peckhaus 2009, 4.) Frege’s remarks place him in the tradition that characterizes logic in terms of its normativity and ultimately invokes a distinction like this one among kinds of intelligibility. (See, e.g., the distinction

cannot be grasped except by particular psychological processes, or only exist because of possible objective thinking, these facts would—like the physical and psychological laws that enable film-watching—be irrelevant to such intelligibility. By contrast, he reasonably sees as relevant the descriptive logical truths themselves, thinking’s goal of truth, the objectivity of thinking, the existence of abstract thoughts, etc. On thoughts in particular: it is traditional and reasonable—though obviously not necessarily correct—to think that it helps to make prescriptions for our conduct intelligible if we are responsible not only to the flux of physical objects and to other fallible thinkers, but to something incorruptible, outside of space and time: “timeless, eternal, unchanging.”

Why Can’t Logical Claims be Refuted by Metaphysics?

Even on this conception of logic, it can still seem like a reason to doubt the (logical) claim that we grasp abstract thoughts if it raises questions for metaphysics and psychology with no acceptable answers. More direct conflicts would also seem to provide such reasons—as, for example, if our best metaphysical theory were to simply imply that there are no abstract objects. These are “external” challenges to logical claims: challenges that do not require engaging with logic’s central questions and methods. (To object like this, at no point must a metaphysician seek to make the prescriptions that hold for all thinking intelligible.) Why, then, does Frege think logic is epistemologically autonomous from metaphysics and psychology—and in particular, that there cannot be successful external challenges from these subjects?

As quoted above, Frege claims that metaphysics and psychology “themselves have need of logical principles”; accordingly, he claims that an external challenger “undermines...the foundations of his own structure,” and even that if such a metaphysician “hears from me the opinion [that thoughts exist], he could not

between *goal-directed* necessity and other kinds in the Introduction to Lotze 1843 and the distinction drawn by Kroner 1909 in response to the argument of Husserl’s discussed in footnote 42 below. See also Hutchinson 2021 for a discussion of the role given by Neo-Kantians to this sort of necessity in justifying logical axioms.) Of course, a full account of this conception of logic must characterize this distinction more exactly than can be done here. I will add, however, that something can plausibly be made intelligible in this sense partly by its consequences: things which it *explains* or *causes*. If so, this conception of logic does not rule out “third-factor” metaphysical views that give values or norms—including logical ones—explanatory primacy over cognition and ontology: views which, with Lotze 1879, find “in that which should be the ground of that which is.” (Volume III, Conclusion).

dispute it.”³⁸ Such talk signals the attempt to repel a challenge by showing that it somehow presupposes what it challenges: the “elenctic” variety of “transcendental” argument. This sort of defence has been a mainstay of logical epistemology at least since Aristotle, but the usual variations prove unavailable to Frege. For example, some such arguments rely on the idea that the challenged logical claim is *necessarily accepted* by every thinker (or necessarily not rejected, etc.)³⁹ But we have seen that Frege takes no position on such matters. Other such arguments rely on showing that the objector’s reasoning itself appeals to the logical point being challenged, as *premise* or as *inference-rule*.⁴⁰ But surely Frege’s claims about thoughts need be neither premises nor inference-rules in a metaphysical case against abstract objects. How, then, could such challenges undermine themselves?

Let me first bring out the structure of Frege’s point with an analogy.

Suppose a certain astronomical object Q has never been seen through a telescope. Calculations assure us, however, that it exists, and that if it is *more* than a light-year away, it will *never* be seen through a telescope in our lifetime. Based on some indirect evidence, you believe that it is less than a light-year away; which is why you respond with interest when Smith claims to have gotten Q into his telescopic sight. While perusing Smith’s published results, however, you encounter an argument, from premises supplied by the telescope, that Q is five light-years away. Even before considering it in detail, you reflect that this argument must fail, for it undermines its own foundations: though Smith may not realize it, calculations show that if Q is five light-years away, we *cannot* see it by telescope. The only question is whether the flaw is with the reasoning, in which case the telescope might still be pointed at Q, or whether Smith has simply got his telescope pointed at the wrong object, in which case the argument might successfully establish something about *that* object, but can have no relevance for your views about Q.

Like Smith, the metaphysician has not challenged—and may be unaware of—

³⁸Frege 1893, xix-xxiii; Frege 1918–1919a, 71, 69.

³⁹The claim that “it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be” is key to the elenctic defence of the principle of non-contradiction in $\Gamma 4$ of Aristotle [Meta].

⁴⁰See, for example, the defence of *modus ponens* in Hale 2002, on the grounds that its “reliability must...be assumed in any demonstration we can give of the...unsoundness...of any...rules,” since it is employed in any such demonstration (297). See also Kripke’s discussion in Berger 2011.

Frege's reasons why *if* abstract thoughts do not exist, significant agreement and disagreement is impossible. But just as only if Q is near can Smith's observations can be relevant to your views about Q, only if abstract objects exist can the metaphysician "dispute" Frege's claim at all: only then can the metaphysician's claims be relevant to Frege's own views, rather than to (say) the private contents of the metaphysician's mind. So the argument must fail—the only question is what kind of mistake the metaphysician has made.

Now: Smith might protest that his argument undermines itself *only if* the calculations are correct, and they *could* they be wrong—indeed, the telescope's results are good reason to think they are. Despite the "undermining" structure, Smith might urge you to see this as an ordinary case of two plausible but incompatible arguments; so that the right response is surely not for either participant to uphold a commitment to one argument and dismiss the other outright, but to suspend commitment to both arguments and evaluate their *comparative* plausibility anew. Similarly, the metaphysician might reply that since Frege could be wrong about the role of thoughts with respect to objective thinking—and indeed, the argument against abstract objects provides reason to think he is—commitments to both arguments should be suspended, and their comparative plausibility evaluated.

But if elenctic defences have power, it derives not from the undermining structure *alone*, which permits this reply. It derives also from the way that the issues under discussion interact with the dynamics of reasoning to preclude this reply.⁴¹ The intuitive force of Frege's argument, in particular, comes from the idea that someone with a reflective account of what makes it intelligible that opponents' arguments are relevant to her own views *cannot* reasonably "suspend" her commitment to that account in order to engage with such an argument; for that account is part of her *reason* for engaging with any opponent's argument.

We cannot decide here whether this intuitive force translates to real epistemological significance. But Frege thinks this sort of point will arise for any claims that make intelligible the prescriptions that hold for all thinking; and since the task of logic is to make such claims, this defence extends to all logical claims. If successful, then, this removes a major threat to logic's epistemological autonomy: the possibility of external challenges. The remaining alternative is an *internal* challenge: to take up the logician's questions and provide a *com-*

⁴¹Attention to what Stern 2007 (§2) calls the "dialectical situation" between challenger—often a "skeptic"—and defender has characterized discussions of such arguments in the wake of famous criticisms from, e.g., Stroud 1968.

peting account of what makes the relevant prescriptions intelligible, appealing to a metaphysical or psychological theory along the way. But it is hard to see how claims belonging to psychology or metaphysics *could* be relevant to the intelligibility of these prescriptions, rather than merely to the sorts of necessary conditions distinguished above;⁴² and in any case, since this is to engage the logician on her own terms, a defence against external challenges is an important contribution to establishing logic's autonomy.⁴³

Epistemological Autonomy Today

Obviously, these sketches of a conception of logic and a defence of its autonomy require clarification, elaboration and evaluation—but I think they are promising enough to deserve such attention. Let me conclude with a reason this may reward us aside from our interest in history and logic.

Many “elenctic” arguments have no plausibility outside logic. (Few would attempt to rebut challenges to nonlogical claims on the grounds that it is literally impossible to disbelieve them.) But some have noticed affinities between Frege's discussions and the liveliest recent discussions of epistemological autonomy from metaphysics and psychology: those concerning the justification of *ethical* claims.⁴⁴ I think Frege has at least two things to offer these discussions.

First: a pivotal issue for defenders of the epistemological autonomy of ethics is how to identify the *boundaries* of the supposedly autonomous discipline. Some

⁴²Husserl 1900 (§§19-20) influentially argues that we cannot “base a sharp [epistemological] separation of [logic and psychology] on...the normative character of logic”, because psychological claims *must* be relevant to whatever normative matters logic is concerned with: *internal* challenges must be possible. But Husserl's key claim is that psychological truths can help to establish *necessary conditions* on, for example, doing what a prescription says to do; and some such necessary conditions are irrelevant to such normative matters as making the prescriptions *intelligible*. Kroner 1909 makes a version of this response to Husserl.

⁴³Compare the attempt of Dworkin 1996 to show that “non-moral discoveries cannot undermine or structurally change morality without morality's help.” (127-128)

⁴⁴McGuire 2017, who notes the similarity with Frege, argues that while various theses have been discussed under the heading of the “autonomy” of ethics, “the real motivation for [these theses] arises from the importance of an epistemological thesis”: that “non-ethical propositions”—especially those of metaphysics and psychology—“are irrelevant to the justification of...ethical propositions.” (431-432, 437.) By contrast, the closest lively logical discussions concern “exceptionalism,” and as Hjortland 2017 notes, “the central exceptionalist claim is that the justification of logical theories is *a priori*.” Even if exceptionalism is true, then, presumably an *a priori* metaphysics or psychology would remain potentially relevant to the justification of logical claims. (On exceptionalism, see, e.g., Field 1996, Field 2000, Maddy 2002, and Williamson 2007.)

assert the autonomy of ethics conceived *narrowly*, to include only paradigmatic first-order ethical claims. This, however, rules out the possibility of justifying first-order claims by, say, identifying the property of rightness with another property, or deriving ethical principles from the nature of agency, or relying on any other claims typically thought to belong to *metaethics*. Others hope to leave space for such methods of justification by asserting the autonomy of ethics conceived *broadly*, including both first-order claims *and* metaethical theory. But it is very hard to see how metaethical theory could proceed without input from general metaphysical theory—especially since, as Tristram McPherson puts it, a “central task of metaethics is to explain how morality fits with the other elements of our broader conception of the world.”⁴⁵ Frege suggests another option: an ethicist need not choose between including or excluding all of “metaethical theory,” so understood. The analogous question in logic would be whether or not the autonomous discipline includes, in addition to paradigmatic logical laws, a “meta-logical” theory among whose central tasks is to determine how logically central properties, objects, and cognition fit with the other elements in our broader conception of the world. This would force the logician to either say nothing at all about thoughts or to identify their metaphysical status and how they are grasped. Frege reminds us that—and perhaps shows us how—we can characterize the autonomous ethical discipline so as to go beyond paradigmatic first-order claims without including a whole “meta-” theory.

Second: questions about the epistemological autonomy of ethics get much of their urgency from the possibility of external challenges, including some well-known “debunking” arguments from evolutionary psychology.⁴⁶ Frege’s discussion suggests a response to such challenges that becomes available on some conceptions of ethics. An over-simple possibility will quickly illustrate the point. Suppose that the task of ethics is to make intelligible those prescriptions that make things in general *worth doing*. If so, of course, an ethicist must then be prepared to show how paradigmatic first-order ethical claims satisfy this task. But if this could be done, an external challenge to any such ethical claim would undermine itself in the same way as an external challenge to the existence of thoughts. For since the ethicist will think that without the claim’s truth, things in general will not be worth doing, the metaphysician’s argument can have no significance for her: either it is mistaken, or reflecting on it cannot be worth doing.⁴⁷

⁴⁵See McPherson 2008 (1-3) for an introduction to the issues along the lines given here.

⁴⁶See, for example, Street 2006.

⁴⁷Oddly enough, this paper is mainly indebted to an anonymous reviewer for a different jour-

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nal, commenting on a different paper of mine. That reviewer—while generally disparaging the paper—singled out for praise its brief discussion of Frege’s metaphysical separatism, and claimed (in effect) that he or she would have much preferred to have read a paper entirely about that topic, instead of the boring paper to which he or she had actually been subjected. On reflection, this struck me as pretty reasonable: the bit about separatism was the most interesting thing in that other paper. When it came to actually writing this one, I owe the most to some uncommonly helpful comments from two anonymous reviewers and an editor at this journal, and to discussions with Richard Lawrence, Kirsten Pickering, Gurpreet Rattan, and Yuan Wu. Working through Pickering 2020, a doctoral dissertation about metaethics, also had a great influence.

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