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Can Frege Pose Frege's Puzzle?

Stavroula Glezakos

In "Afterthoughts," David Kaplan characterizes Gottlob Frege's "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" theory of proper names as "gossamer";¹ nonetheless, Kaplan affirms the commitment at the heart of that theory, writing: "...it is indisputable that distinct proper names have distinct cognitive values"².

Frege maintained that two name-containing identity sentences, represented schematically as $a=a$ and $a=b$, can both be made true by the same object's self-identity but nonetheless, puzzlingly, differ in their epistemic profiles. According to Frege, sentences of the form $a=a$ are knowable *a priori* and are uninformative; those of the form $a=b$ are often informative, and cannot always be known to be true *a priori*. Frege eventually resolved his puzzlement by locating the source of the purported epistemic difference between the identity sentences in a difference in the *Sinne*, or senses, expressed by the names that the sentences contain.

Thus, Frege portrayed himself as describing a puzzle that can be posed prior to and independently of any particular theoretical position regarding names, and then resolving that puzzle with his theory of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. In this paper, I will suggest that Frege's presentation is problematic. If attempt is made to characterize the epistemic status of true identity sentences without appeal to Frege's theoretical commitments, then what initially

¹ p. 598, footnote 70: "It is on the rock of distinct cognitive values for distinct names that Frege erected his gossamer theory."

² *Ibid.*, p. 598. Below I consider the issue of how, and whether, Frege can maintain the 'distinct names/distinct cognitive values' (and also, importantly, the 'same name/same cognitive value') position.

seemed puzzling largely dissolves. It turns out that, in order to generate puzzlement, Frege must invoke the theoretical account that he uses the puzzle to establish the purported necessity of.

My case depends on taking seriously a question that Kaplan poses in his paper “Words”: what *determines* a name-containing identity sentence’s form?³ If an identity sentence’s form is specifiable without appeal to something like the theoretical notion of *Sinn*, then Frege will not be able to maintain that sentences of the form $a=a$ are, in general, uninformative, or knowable to be true *a priori* (at least: no more so than sentences of the form $a=b$). If, instead, sameness or difference in *Sinne* expressed by the names in the sentence is what *determines* an identity sentence’s form, then the puzzle fails to hold as a general puzzle: it arises only if we assume a role for the very sorts of theoretical entities that Frege presents it as leading us to.

1. The forms of true identity sentences

Frege does not pose his puzzle via actual name-containing sentences, but rather, by using two schemas, $a=a$ and $a=b$, to represent the forms of name-containing identity sentences.⁴ Frege places sentences in one or the other category by listing the epistemic features that they do or do not possess, most prominently, *a priori*: sentences of the form $a=a$ “hold *a priori*”; true sentences of the form $a=b$ “cannot always be established *a priori*”.⁵ But the enumeration of sentences’

³ Kaplan asks: “What determines an utterance to have the form ‘ $a=a$ ’ as opposed to the form ‘ $a=b$?’” He goes on to write that “...this issue takes us directly to matters of word individuation” – a judgment with which, as will become apparent, I strongly agree. “Words,” p. 95.

⁴ “ $a=a$ and $a=b$ are obviously statements of differing cognitive value...” “On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*,” p. 151.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

epistemic features leaves a basic question unanswered: what makes it the case that an identity sentence is of the form $a=a$ as opposed to $a=b$?

An answer that would *not* be legitimate for Frege to give here is: “It is sameness or difference in sense that *determines* whether a given identity sentence has the form $a=a$ or $a=b$.” This would be illegitimate because Frege is supposedly presenting a puzzle which can be posed, and has its ‘puzzlingness’, independently of the particular solution that he will go on propose for it. We are supposed to first be puzzled, and *then* find ourselves in need of a resolution of our puzzlement. Thus, it must be possible for Frege to specify what gives a sentence one form rather than another without making use of the notion of sense – even if he then goes on to *attribute* the epistemic differences between sentences of different forms to the difference in senses expressed by the names that they contain.

The most natural account of what determines an identity sentence’s form involves the notion of *sameness of name*. Without making any theoretical commitments, we can say that a sentence has the form $a=a$ when the same name flanks the identity sign, and $a=b$ when distinct names flank the identity sign.⁶ Thus, posed neutrally, the (purported) puzzle is this: what is the source of the epistemic difference between true identity sentences that contain a single name twice, and those that contain two names?

Of course, this formulation immediately raises a further question: what makes for sameness of name?

⁶ Kaplan, in “Afterthoughts,” writes: “Note that Frege’s initial argument makes use only of the uninterpreted forms ‘ $a=a$ ’ and ‘ $a=b$ ’. The distinction between *repetition of a single name* and *the use of two distinct names* is already sufficient to make the points about cognition even before any examples (or even the notion of *Sinn*) are introduced.” (p. 598, fn. 70). As will become clear, I do not agree with Kaplan’s assertion that Frege’s “points about cognition” (that a single name repeated preserves its cognitive value, and that distinct coreferential names differ in cognitive value) can be maintained without invoking the notion of *Sinn*.

Frege's answer to this question in "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" seems to be that we have the same name whenever we have the same sign/referent combination. That this is Frege's view is strongly suggested by his well-known footnote B, where he makes use of the notion of "*the actual proper name 'Aristotle'*", and writes that, since "opinions as to the *Sinn* may differ", we can "tolerate" variations in *Sinn* assignment among users of *that* name, "so long as the *Bedeutung* remains the same."⁷ This passage allows us to get a grip on what, according to Frege, makes for the *same* name, and then invites us to consider a question that arises within Frege's theoretical framework – whether *the same name* can be associated with different *Sinne* – and receive an answer from Frege: yes, it can.

Now, why should we follow Frege in being puzzled, given this account of name individuation and sentence form? I suggest that we should not: if an identity sentence's form is determined by sameness or difference in the names that it contains, then there will be no in-principle epistemic divide between sentences of the form $a=a$ and $a=b$.

It is clear that someone may encounter the same name twice and go on to deny the truth of an identity sentence containing that single name, or learn only after empirical investigation that an identity sentence containing that single name twice is indeed true.⁸ There is nothing involved in the notion 'sameness of name' that ensures that language users – even the most

⁷ "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*," p. 153, italics mine.

⁸ We seem to have such a case in Saul Kripke's discussion of "Paderewski" in "A Puzzle About Belief". Kripke's example involves Peter, who comes across the single name "Paderewski" on two separate occasions; as Kaplan describes the case in "Words": "Peter first heard Paderewski's name in connection with his musical accomplishments and later heard the name used in connection with Paderewski's political accomplishments and then concluded that there were two different [names] 'Paderewski'." ("Words," p. 94) Peter may well go on to deny the truth of the sentence "Paderewski is Paderewski" – a sentence containing the same name twice, and thus, of the form $a=a$. Given such a denial, we must acknowledge that Peter does not know the truth of "Paderewski is identical to Paderewski" *a priori*.

competent – will be able to identify and re-identify names when they encounter them, or take them into their vocabularies.

Of course, if a speaker uses or encounters the name “Aristotle” on one occasion, uses or encounters “Aristotle” on a later occasion, and recognizes that the name is the *same* name on both occasions, then (given the characterization of name as a sign/referent combination) she can immediately know that “Aristotle=Aristotle” is true. But notice that the ability to recognize that the name is the same seems to involve the ability to recognize that the *referent* is the same. If this is the case, then an identity sentence of the form $a=a$ is not, in principle, recognizable as true in a way that differs from a true sentence of the form $a=b$. In both cases: once one knows that the referent is the same, one knows that the sentence is true. If one does *not* know this, or believes the referents to be different, then, whether the sentence is of the form $a=a$ or $a=b$, one does not know (let alone know *a priori*) that the sentence is true.

Frege himself more or less acknowledges this latter point in his “Aristotle” footnote, albeit by invoking his notions of sense and reference. There he points out that *the* name “Aristotle” may be assigned different senses by different users. This is a very short step away from recognizing that the *same* user could assign different senses to a single name. Though these senses determine the same referent, this person may remain unaware of that fact. If he says “Aristotle was wise,” thinking about the teacher of Alexander, and “Aristotle was Greek,” thinking about the Stagirite philosopher, he is in no way situated to immediately recognize the truth of “Aristotle=Aristotle” – at least, no more so than someone who has associated these distinct senses with two *different* names (for example, “Aristotle” and “Ari”).

In sum, we ought not accept Frege's initial, supposedly 'puzzlement-inducing' claim: that sentences of the form $a=a$ and $a=b$ have distinct epistemic profiles. The truth of a sentence of either form can be denied by a perfectly competent language user; furthermore, for each sentence, recognition of its truth involves recognition that the names – either a twice, or a and b – have the same referent. Even after invocation of Frege's framework, the purported puzzle fares no better. This is because Frege links the epistemic status of a name-containing identity sentence to the *Sinne* expressed by the names in the sentence. But sentence form is determined by name identity, and names are *not* (at least, not in "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*") individuated by assigned sense. Thus, it turns out that there is no principled reason to ascribe a special epistemic status to sentences of the $a=a$ form – and thus, there is no 'puzzle' about the epistemic divide between true identity sentences of different forms.

2. "Dr. Lauben"

Frege revisits the issue of what makes for sameness of name in his later paper "Thought," where he considers a situation in which two friends are discussing the travails of a third man.

Frege writes:

Suppose...that Herbert Garner knows that Dr. Gustav Lauben was born on 13 September 1857 in NN and this is not true of anyone else; suppose, however, that he does not know where Dr. Lauben now lives nor indeed anything else about him. On the other hand, suppose that Leo Peter does not know that Dr. Lauben was born on 13 September... Then as far as the proper name "Dr. Gustav Lauben" is concerned, Herbert Garner and Leo Peter do not speak the same language, although they do in fact designate the same man with this name; for they do not know that they are doing so.⁹

⁹"Thought," p. 333, italics mine.

Here Frege seems to be pulled in two directions. On the one hand, echoing his “Aristotle” footnote, he writes of *the* proper name “Dr. Gustav Lauben”, specifiable as a single name independently of sense assignment. On the other hand, he clearly finds the fact that Peter and Garner do not believe themselves to be using one and the same proper name problematic. Frege goes on to suggest that the problem should be stipulated away; we can “...avoid the awkwardness...” if we “...*suppose* that Leo Peter uses the proper name ‘Dr. Lauben’ and Herbert Garner uses the proper name ‘Gustav Lauben.’”¹⁰ That is: Frege wants it to be the case that Garner and Peter are using different names – and he wants this fact to appear ‘on the surface’, so to speak.

But of course, we cannot simply ‘suppose’ what Frege invites us to suppose. After all, he has just described a case in which the men both use “Dr. Lauben”; surely, we want to understand what is going on in exactly such a case, in which two speakers using “Dr. Lauben” apparently diverge in their beliefs to a degree sufficient to prevent them from recognizing that they are speaking of the same man.

Frege attempts to resolve his worry with the claim that Garner and Peter “...do not speak the same language”. This seems tantamount to the position that “Dr. Lauben” (in Garner’s mouth) and “Dr. Lauben” (in Peter’s mouth) are distinct names. Frege offers as sole support for this position the fact that Garner and Peter have distinct beliefs about Dr. Lauben (as well as, perhaps, the fact that neither recognizes that the beliefs are about the same man). In essence, this is to hold that Garner and Peters’ association of distinct *Sinne* with “Dr. Lauben” results in there being two different names “Dr. Lauben”. Name identity, on this view, is (at least in part) determined by associated sense.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 333, italics mine.

If this is Frege's position, then we must revisit the puzzle, and inquire: *could* Frege really present us with a genuine puzzle, given that he would need to make use of the theoretical apparatus central to his solution in order to generate puzzlement? The puzzle is posed in terms of sentence form, which is determined by name identity: if *this* is (in part) determined by sense assignment, then, to be puzzled, we must at the outset be committed to the existence of senses and their role in determining name identity. If we resist this latter move, the puzzle dissolves.

3. Conclusion

Though Frege's discussion of true identity sentences in the opening sentences of "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" has been thought to present a problem for all who theorize about language, it in fact does not present a puzzle for anyone.

As we have seen, in a non-Fregean framework, in which *Sinne* are *not* invoked as name-individuators, it seems that identification of the referent will be necessary for identification of the name – and thus, all identity sentences will be on an epistemic par. Furthermore, even within Frege's framework, if different senses can be assigned to the constituents of a sentence of the form $a=a$, and the same sense can be assigned to the names in a sentence of the form $a=b$, then Frege himself should not hold that there are in-principle epistemic differences between true identity sentences of different forms.

On the other hand: if the true Fregean position is that a name-containing identity sentence's form is determined by an individual language user's assignment of sense(s) to the name(s) in the sentence, then what emerges is that his 'puzzle' and his solution are in fact of a piece. Only one who holds that senses, or name user/interpreter assigned cognitive values, play a role in determining a name's identity can maintain that $a=a$ sentences are knowable *a priori* and

uninformative, while $a=b$ sentences lack these features. But in what way is this puzzling? The very same feature both determines the identity of the names in the identity sentence, and hence the sentence's form, and the sentence's epistemic status.

The end result is that non-Fregeans should not be puzzled about true identity sentences, for they have no reason to accept that there is an epistemic divide between identity sentences of different forms. Nor, as we have seen, should Fregeans be puzzled: for it is their framework that both generates the divide, and explains it.¹¹

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