



Are All Names of the Absolute Synonymous?

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Comments and Discussion

Bina Gupta and William C. Wilcox **Are all names of the Absolute synonymous?**

In one way different names of the Absolute may be synonymous, and in another way not synonymous. Using Frege's terminology, words may have the same reference but different "senses." Just as "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" are names of the same object, and in that mode have the same meaning, they have different "senses" (intensions, connotations, and so forth) and in that mode have differing meanings.¹ Assuming that one can adequately understand the notion of synonymy in the extensional mode, to begin with, one might argue that all such names of the Absolute are synonymous, that is to say, all such names are intersubstitutable, *salva veritate*. In the intensional mode, the names might very well not be intersubstitutable, and hence not synonymous; in this intensional mode, however, it is doubtful whether one could come up with any acceptable criterion of synonymy: that is, no two words would, or could, be synonymous. Whether, in fact, all names of the Absolute are names of some one thing is, of course, a factual question, just as the identity of the Evening Star and the Morning Star is an empirical fact.

For the sake of clarity, we have divided the article into three sections. In the first section, we will give a brief summary of Frege's distinction between sense and reference. In the second section, we will apply this distinction to the names in question. In the third, we will appraise a contemporary "analytic" criticism of the entire conception of synonymy and briefly consider what reasons we have for thinking that various names of the Absolute are synonymous, in whatever senses of synonymy seem allowed by the foregoing analysis.

While there are certainly other conceptions of synonymy than those found in Frege, it is interesting that his analysis enables us to deal with the seemingly paradoxical fact that people using differing words for the Absolute frequently seem to be talking about the same thing and about different things at the same time.

I

The distinction between sense and reference has occupied a central position in philosophical discussions from the very beginning of the twentieth century. It has been a focal point of controversy between opposing schools of philosophical enquiry, and it is one of the areas to which Frege made an impressive contribution. Frege is known to us either for his work on mathematical logic, which was later developed by Russell and Whitehead, or because of his work on the theory of meaning which influenced the philosophical foundation of such eminent philosophers as Wittgenstein and Quine. In this article, we are going to limit ourselves to Frege's semantic theory. More specifically, we are going

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to concentrate on the ideas dealt with in his essay entitled, "Sense and Reference,"² in which he first proposed a systematic distinction between sense and reference.

At the outset of his article "Sense and Reference" Frege asks, "is identity a relation?" If so, is it a "relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects?"³ If identity is a relation between objects then one is faced with the following paradox. It is obvious that the sentences "a = a" and "a = b" have different cognitive value, because the sentence "a = a" is a priori analytically true whereas the sentence "a = b" is a posteriori synthetic. However, if a and b are the same object, and identity is interpreted as a relation between this object and itself then it is impossible to explain how the two sentences "a = a" and "a = b" differ in cognitive content, which they obviously do.

To solve the preceding difficulty raised, Frege introduced the distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). He makes a distinction between to what the sign refers, the reference of the sign, or, possibly, thing named by the sign; and the sense of the sign, the mode of presentation of the sign. He states that the "regular connection between a sign, its sense, and its referent is of such a kind that to the sign there corresponds a definite sense and to that, in turn, a definite referent, while to a given referent (an object) there does not belong only a single sign."⁴ This, Frege maintains, gives a valuable understanding of identity sentences, because when identity is interpreted as a relation between names the referent of the name can stay unchanged while the sense of the name, the mode of presentation, can vary for different names. Let us explain it further.

Every linguistic unit has two components, or modes, to its meaning. In one mode, the meaning is the thing to which the expression refers; another mode of meaning is the sense of the expression. "Morning Star," "Evening Star" and "Venus," for examples, refer to the same entity. They are different ways of picking out that planet. The Morning Star is a heavenly body visible in the sky in the morning. The Evening Star is a heavenly body that is visible in the sky at a certain time in the evening. Venus is the second planet out from the sun. All of those happen to be the same object. Let us look at another example. The "sum of $1 + 1$ " refers to a number, and the "4th root of 16" refers to a number: operations and procedures involved in the cases differ and yet the number referred to is the same in each case. The reference in each case is the number 2; the senses of the expressions differ. Just as it is not obvious from a consideration of the names "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" that the Morning Star is the Evening Star, so it is not obvious that the sum of $1 + 1$ is the 4th root of 16. (If that is obvious then we can find a mathematical example that is not.) Frege extends this distinction from the discussion of substantives in such a way that it applies to all linguistic units: to predicates, or as he calls them concepts (*begriff*), which also have a sense and reference; and to complete sentences. The sense of a sentence is the thought expressed by the sentence, what in contemporary logic might be called the proposition expressed by the sentence, while the reference of the

sentence is its truth value. These extensions need not concern us here, for one might make the distinction with respect to substantives and not follow Frege in his extension to other linguistic entities. Nothing in his extension to these other entities is necessary in applying the distinction to substantives, and in some ways his extensions are much less plausible than the initial application. If the case can be made for the distinction at all, it can be made for the substantive; and, after all, it is substantives with which we are concerned in this article.

Keeping in mind the preceding distinction, the question about the synonymy of the names of the Absolute can be seen to have, perhaps, two answers. Just as the sentences “The Morning Star is Venus” and “The Evening Star is Venus” are in, one sense, synonymous; they are not so in another sense. Surely, a criterion for synonymy *might* be that any who would agree with a sentence would agree with any sentence synonymous to it. Surely, a criterion for synonymy would require that someone who assented to a sentence in which a property was ascribed to an entity, would agree to a sentence which ascribes that property to the same entity by means of a synonymous name. Yet, it is not clear that everyone who would assent to “The Evening Star is Venus” would assent to “The Morning Star is Venus.” Other examples illustrating this difficulty are not hard to find. On the other hand, the truth of each of the various sentences mentioned depends upon the same state of affairs. In other words, it depends upon, for example, “Morning Star,” “Evening Star,” and “Venus” each being names of the same planet. The same state of affairs which makes “The Morning Star is Venus” true also makes “The Evening Star is Venus” true. In this sense the sentences and/or names in question clearly could be claimed to be synonymous. What is needed are probably two criteria of synonymy related in whatever ways seem necessary, or possible. We need to explain the tension which results from conflicting intuitions. If synonymy is a matter of meaning, and Frege is right that sense and reference are two distinct, although related, modes of meaning, then it should not be surprising that our synonymy intuitions vary back and forth as the modes of meaning under consideration vary.

In the next section, we shall consider the senses of the names of the Absolute in question, in Frege’s sense of sense, and try to discover whether names with these diverse senses could be, if not must be, names with a common reference.

II

The first purpose of this section is to critically analyze different usages of the term “Brahman” to ascertain in what sense the different usages of the term may be said to be synonymous. This analysis is going to be done by (1) examining some of the passages where the term “Brahman” occurs; and (2) keeping in mind Frege’s sense and reference apparatus as explicated in the section I of our article.

One of the most important Upaniṣadic statements, which Advaitins regard as the very foundation of Advaita theory, is the statement *tat tvam asi* (“that thou art”) which occurs in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.⁵ Śaṅkara attaches great im-

portance to this Upaniṣadic text because it clearly and undoubtedly points to the oneness of ultimate reality. For the Advaitins, Brahman alone exists as the only reality from all points of view. To teach this truth, that is, the identity of *Ātman* and Brahman, is the aim of all the Upaniṣads. In this statement Upaniṣadic seers affirm that everything is Brahman; that there is no other reality than Brahman, although it can be known by different names: High Brahman, Low Brahman, *Ātman*, and so on.

Max Muller in his *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy* states that

we can well understand that when the same word Brahman was applied in two such different senses, as the High and as the Low Brahman, as an unconditioned and as a conditioned being, there must have been great danger of frequent misunderstandings. . . .⁶

And, to clarify these misunderstandings, Śaṅkara states that

when Brahman is described in the Upanishads by negative words only, after excluding all differences of name and form, due to Nescience—that is the Higher. But when he is described by such terms as (Khānda. III. 14, 2), the intelligent whose body consists of spirit, whose body is light, being distinguished by some special name and form, for the sake of worship only, that is the other, the lower Brahman.⁷

High Brahman in the Upaniṣads is described by negative words only, *neti neti*: not-this, not-this! However, Low Brahman can be described: it is Brahman as interpreted and affirmed by the mind from a limited standpoint; it is that Brahman about which something can be said. “In reality the two Brahman are one and the same Brahman—the one conceivable, the other inconceivable; the one phenomenal, the other absolutely real.”⁸ And it is at this point that we can see the value of applying a Fregean analysis to this pair of names. We can form an identity statement which is like Frege’s identity statement “The Morning Star is identical to the Evening Star.” We can say that “High Brahman is identical to Low Brahman.” To put it differently, we can state that High Brahman and Low Brahman have the same referent though different senses; that is, the mode of presentation of the senses varies.

Thus, the simple yet paradoxical truth, conveyed by the teachings of Advaita is that Brahman is the only reality, although the senses of the term vary. Though the meanings of words are different, Brahman is not affected by this plurality. It is spoken of as Pure Brahman, Indeterminate Brahman, Qualified Brahman, Determinate Brahman but in reality Brahman as true self is not affected by *upādhis* (conditions). Nescience, which clouds us for a time, ipso facto appears to cloud Brahman also; however, *Ātman* and *Brahman* are substantially one. The very same point is reiterated in the four *mahavākāyas*, the Four Great Teachings: *tat tvam asi*, “that thou art”; *aham Brahma asmi*, “I am Brahman”; *ayam ātmā Brahma*, “This Ātman is Brahman”; and *prajñānam Brahma*, “Consciousness is Brahman.”⁹ All four statements reiterate the same point: the identity of *Ātman* and Brahman. All denote one and the same reality: Brahman. Brahman may

be described *via negativa* as *neti neti*, or *via positiva* as *sat*, *cit*, and *ananda*, as qualified Brahman. However, each expresses an approach to Brahman: modes of approach are different but each is identical with Brahman substantially if not conceptually. Brahman and *Ātman* are substantially one.

If the qualified Brahman makes us, we, the qualified *Atman*, make Brahman, as our maker. Only we must never forget that all this is illusion, so that in truth we can predicate nothing of Brahman, as our maker. But Na, na, i.e. No, no; he is not this, he is not that. He is—that is all we can say, and is more than everything else.¹⁰

By “that thou art,” the Advaitin asserts the nondual character of reality. What is asserted is that *Ātman* is Brahman; the self is Brahman which could be expressed as $x = x$, which is, of course, a tautology. However, what is meant by *Ātman* for the individual is different from what is meant by Brahman for the very same individual, so what is meant is $A = B$ which is not a tautology. The discovery which is prompted by *tat tvam asi* is again like Frege’s Morning Star and Evening Star: the two different meanings having the same referent. The referent in each case is Brahman; the sense of the expressions varies. Just as it is not obvious from a consideration of the names “Morning Star” and “Evening Star” that the Morning Star is the Evening Star, it is not obvious from a consideration of the names “*Ātman*” and “*Brahman*” that *Ātman* is Brahman. Through scripture, analogy, and experience we may come to realize that *Ātman* is Brahman. “Remove Nescience and there is light, and in that light the human self and the Divine Self shine forth in their eternal oneness. From this point of view of the highest reality, there is no difference between the highest Brahman and the individual Self or Atman. . . .”¹¹

Second, consider the European rationalist philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza talks of God, substance, and Nature, offering the following definitions of the first two. “By *substance*, I mean that which is in itself, and is conceived through itself: in other words, that of which a conception can be formed independently of any other conception.”¹² He defines God as “a being absolutely infinite—that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.”¹³

By the time Spinoza has reached Proposition XI, early in the work, he is using the terms “God” and “substance” interchangeably. He says that “God or substance, consisting of infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality, necessarily exists.”¹⁴ A similar assimilation takes place later in the work in respect to the term “Nature.” In the Scholium to Proposition XXIX he says “. . . by *natura naturans* we are to understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself . . . that is to say . . . God. . . .”¹⁵ “Individual things cannot exist apart from Nature and they are thus all caused by Nature. But this is not to say that they cannot be accounted for in terms of particular connections, provided that we remember that *natura naturata* is not a substance distinct from *natura naturans*. There is one infinite system; but it can be looked at from

different points of view.”¹⁶ Thus, God, Nature, and substance are all differing modes of presentation of one ultimate existing thing. They are all names with different senses as can be seen by the fact, given the preceding definitions, “God is identical to substance” is not a tautology, but Spinoza clearly assumes and believes to have proven that God and substance are names of one and the same thing. This thing is the ultimate reality or being itself, that of which all existing things are qualifications.

It would require considerable more exegesis, both of Spinoza and of Śāṅkara, to establish conclusively that Spinoza’s God is Brahman, but this cursory examination surely indicates that the one eternal, unique, substance is like the Brahman of Advaitism. Like the Brahman of Advaitism, for Spinoza, whatever is, is substance, though the appearances are many. No mode has an independent existence, but is substance. It is the whole that not only includes but transcends all parts. The names and forms may change but substance remains the same. Knowing the substance implies knowing everything.

III

Before we go any further, it would seem worthwhile to consider at least one objection to the “sense-reference” distinction. The criticism in question is that of the American philosopher W. V. Quine. It is even more relevant to our undertaking since it is not primarily aimed at a sense-reference distinction, but uses the vulnerability of that distinction as a tool for attacking the very notion of synonymy.

Quine’s basic thesis is this: the terms “synonymous,” “analytic,” “necessary,” and some few others form a group that, while all can be defined in terms of each other, all require a definition involving at least one of the others. There is no way of breaking out of the circle and tying those words down to the ultimate source of all meaning: the publicly observable behavior of people who teach us, and share with us, our language. There are no meanings other than those which can be discovered in a person’s behavior. Even if there are mental entities, meanings included amongst them, they can play no role in our learning of language or in our using a language to communicate. This does not quite amount to saying that all there are references with no senses, but very nearly amounts to that. The notion of synonymy, whether of words or sentences, must be formulable in terms of peoples’ dispositions to respond, verbally or otherwise, to certain stimulations. Quine argues that this mechanism is not strong enough to justify any but the most “rough and ready” intuition of synonymy.

The effect of this attack, if accepted, will be twofold. On the one hand, the attack upon meanings as mental entities would surely vitiate the sense-reference distinction: senses are assuredly mental entities, albeit public, objective, mental entities. Second, the rejection of synonymy would reject the very question with which we are working in this article, that is, the question of the synonymy of the names of the absolute. A third point is whether the empirical behavioral

requirements that Quine places upon languages would even allow us to talk about the Absolute. This last point is not quite fair to Quine. He would allow the word "God," or "Brahman," as theoretical words, on a par with "electron," "neutrino," and, possibly, "motive," and allow them significance to whatever extent they "simplified theory." The very generality of the names of the Absolute, however, would surely make it difficult for him to allow them a role in his theory of the world.

This last point of course constitutes one of the major objections that could be brought against Quinean analysis. One could attack it from the point of its internal, systematic flaws, but, more to the point, one could argue that it cannot be an adequate analysis of language because it does not allow us to say the things which we do in fact say.

Let us let this suffice for the time being. This is one of the strongest attacks upon the sense-reference distinctions, and, as we have seen, if it did succeed it would force us to conclude, not that the names of the Absolute are not synonymous, but that the very question is not significant.

Let us for now assume that the sense-reference distinction, in approximately the form presented by Frege, can survive its critics' attacks. There are significant gains in following Frege, not the least of which is the light that he casts upon difficult problems concerning identity and logical truth. Frege's effort, although not specifically directed to a clarification of ordinary language (he was really more interested in regimenting that language into a more exact form for scientific purposes) does enable us to more clearly understand many of the usages to which ordinary languages are put. This is a significant gain and not to be lightly foresworn.

In an article of this length we can do no more than suggest the direction that the required analysis of the words in question would take. There is apparently no readily available experiment that could be used to determine that there is only one Absolute.

The apparent inability of different people to communicate with each other, especially when talking about God or Brahman or the Absolute, may very well be based upon nonessential, or even provincial, characteristics of the senses of these names and thus obscure whatever commonality they possess. It would seem quite plausible that there can be only one Absolute, only one universe, only one God, only one infinite Being. When one tries to understand talk using these words, one inevitably feels that they are all searching for something which cannot be expressed or described in terms of the language used in this finite, limited, relative world. They are all trying to get beyond the bounds of language. It would be no wonder then if these attempts, made by different people at different times, appear to be about different things. Any effort to describe the indescribable will be distortive, and each of us distorts our vision of the Absolute in our own way. The proper fulfillment of this article would require demonstration that any of the names of the Absolute are, when purged of local variations,

still capable of applying to the Absolute. The task would be basically a negative one: showing that some name could not be the name of, could not have as a reference, what some other name did have as a reference. It would be necessary to show that the senses of the words “God” and “Brahman,” for example, could not have the same reference: that they would not be synonymous. The task would be to show that the senses of these words were such as to preclude their having the same reference. If this cannot be done, then the seemingly plausible claim that there is only one Absolute would allow us to draw the conclusion, although it would not force us to do so, that all of these names were synonymous.

Finally, this article presupposes, following Frege, that proper names do have meanings. There are those who would deny that a proper name has meanings in any sense other than the reference, even though they would admit that words other than proper names might have both a sense and a reference. Mill, for example, seems to hold this position. Common nouns have both a sense and a reference: an intension and an extension. Proper names have only an extension or a reference, there being no need to establish a set of common properties, or whatever, commonly possessed by each of the bearers of these names since there is only one such bearer. Frege’s distinction, however, begins with proper names and is extended to other linguistic terms. It is intended to solve certain problems that arise with respect to proper names and, particularly, problems that arise when these names are used in identity statements. Hence, to deny a sense to proper names would be to deny Frege’s very reason for making the distinction. That, and the inherent plausibility of applying the distinction to all linguistic forms, surely justifies our acceptance of the position, however tentatively, for the purposes of this investigation. Whatever success we have in this enterprise gives us even more reason for accepting the Fregean distinction. If the problem with which we started can be successfully analyzed from this point of view, then that counts as evidence in favor of this point of view.

NOTES

1. The expression “mode of meaning” is not a particularly happy one. It would probably be better to talk about the different senses of meaning, but this leads one into the position where one talks about meaning “in the sense of sense” where the second sense is an instance of Frege’s sense of sense. Any effort to make the exposition just a little clear makes sense to us.
2. Gottlob Frege, “Sense and Reference” in *Contemporary Philosophic Logic*, I. M. Copi and J. A. Gould, eds., (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.
5. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI. viii. 3.
6. Max Muller, *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901), pp. 132–133.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

9. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI. viii. 3; *Bṛhad-āraṇya Upaniṣad*, I. iv. 10; II. v. 19; and *Chandogya Upaniṣad*, III. xiv. I.
10. Max Muller, *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), p. 169.
11. *Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy*, p. 134.
12. R. H. M. Elwes, ed. and trans., *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 45.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 51 (emphasis mine).
15. John Wild, ed. and trans., *Spinoza Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 126.
16. Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. IV (New York: Image Books, 1963), p. 228.