

**Conceivability and Possibility Studies in Frege and Kripke**

M.A. Thesis Proposal

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In my thesis, I propose to explore two topics in analytic philosophy and relate them to the more general philosophical topic of conceivability and possibility. The first topic is the possibility of illogical thought in the work of Gottlob Frege. The second is Saul Kripke's claim that there are truths that are both necessary and *a posteriori*. I propose to outline what I perceive to be the problems with each philosopher's view and examine those problems against the traditional view that conceivability reduces to possibility. A more detailed outline of what I hope to achieve follows.

## **SECTION I**

**1.1 – Explanation of Frege's claim that illogical thought is possible, and a preliminary analysis of the problem.**

**1.2 – Comparison of Frege's views in "On Sense and Meaning" to views in his other works, as well as to the views of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*.**

**1.3 – Analysis of these issues in the light of problems related to general issues in conceivability and possibility.**

*1.1.* The problem of illogical thought arises for Frege in his argument for the existence of senses in "On Sense and Meaning". There Frege claims that "It may perhaps be granted that every grammatically well-formed expression figuring as a proper name always has a sense" (58). In other words, Frege appears to take the stance that all definite descriptions have a sense. I believe that this stance causes significant problems for him. I also contend that by allowing for illogical thought, Frege is claiming that the impossible is conceivable. I argue that this claim is false, and that conceivability instead

reduces to possibility. That is, I contend that the scope of what is conceivable is identical to the scope of what is possible.

I distinguish between two classes of unfulfilled definite descriptions – those that *could* have been fulfilled (‘the present king of France’), and those that *could not* have been fulfilled (‘the least rapidly convergent series’). Frege says that *all* definite descriptions have senses. I argue that saying that members of the latter class have senses leads to problems for Frege. Frege says that people must be capable of “grasping” a sense. What exactly Frege means when he says that one “grasps” the sense of a definite description is unclear, but it would seem that at a minimum it means that one can understand sentences in which the definite description occurs.

As I shall try to show, in this context understanding a sentence means knowing its truth conditions. But sentences containing necessarily unfulfilled definite descriptions have no truth conditions, and thus really cannot be understood. There are no conditions which could ever be met that would make ‘the least convergent series’ fulfilled; so it does not seem that one can conceive of ‘the least convergent series exists’ as being true.

Frege, however, claims that we can grasp the sense of ‘the least rapidly convergent’ series. So even though it is impossible for the statement ‘The least rapidly convergent series exists’ to be true, it is conceivable. Thus, Frege’s argument leads him to the position that conceivability does not reduce to possibility. In 1.3, I will argue against this position.

1.2. Here I will further explore the issue of the possibility of illogical thought in Frege’s work and compare Frege’s treatment of that issue to Wittgenstein’s in the

*Tractatus*. In the Preface to his *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Frege answers the challenge of psychologism that logical laws are merely descriptive, empirical laws. Frege argues that if this were true, then it is possible that beings could exist that make judgments violating our laws of logic; thus, they would have what we would call illogical thoughts.

Throughout the Preface, it is clear that Frege is uncomfortable with the notion that illogical thought is possible. He wants to prohibit illogical thought by showing that it is simply not possible. That is, he would like to show that there cannot be beings that make judgements and yet do not hold to the laws of logic as we understand them. But he cannot establish such a denial; in fact, by the end of the Preface, Frege has to admit that illogical thought is a genuine possibility. By comparison, Wittgenstein flatly denies that the existence of beings that have illogical thoughts is a genuine possibility.

My aim in this section will be first to show that the issue of illogical thought was one that Frege had considered elsewhere. Frege's allowing for the possibility of illogical thought in the Preface definitely carries over to "On Sense and Meaning". Secondly, I argue that the main reason why Frege could not arrive at the conclusion he wanted is because he did not want to accept the principle that the laws of logic are not themselves true. However, Wittgenstein did accept this principle: "Propositions show what they say: tautologies and contradictions show that they say nothing. A tautology has no truth-conditions, since it is unconditionally true: and a contradiction is true on no condition. Tautologies and contradictions lack sense" (*Tractatus* 4.461). Finally, I want to argue that Wittgenstein was right in accepting what Frege refused to accept, and that Wittgenstein was right to deny the possibility of illogical thought. My views in this

section are heavily indebted to David R. Cerbone's "How to Do Things With Wood: Wittgenstein, Frege, and the Problem of Illogical Thought."

*1.3* In this final part of Section I, I stretch the topics raised in 1.1 and 1.2 to more general issues. In 1.1, I will have discussed the ability to grasp the sense of a definite description such as 'the least rapidly convergent series'. In 1.2, I will have discussed the possibility of illogical thought. So in 1.3, I will relate Frege's conception of sense to general issues of conceivability and possibility. The relationships between conceivability and possibility are hot topics in contemporary philosophy. The principle issue is whether conceivability is reducible to possibility, or whether or not the scope of that which is conceivable is identical to the scope of that which is possible. As I have shown in 1.1, for Frege conceivability does not reduce to possibility, since for him, while it is not possible for 'the least rapidly convergent series' to be fulfilled, it is in some way conceivable, inasmuch as it does have a sense.

In this section, I argue that conceivability does reduce to possibility. To this end, I will develop David Chalmers' argument in "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility" that conceivability reduces to possibility. I will explore Frege's position and the problems that come with it in the light of Chalmers' argument, and ultimately conclude that a critique of Frege such as my own would necessarily lead to the reduction of conceivability to possibility.

**Section II – An analysis of Kripke’s arguments for the necessary *a posteriori*, and whether or not conceivability reduces to possibility for Kripke.**

In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke argues that there are necessary *a posteriori* truths. Kripke argues that *a posteriori* identity statements between names such as ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ are necessary, as are statements expressing scientific discoveries, such as ‘Water is H<sub>2</sub>O’. In this section, I examine the following issue: If there are *a posteriori* statements that are necessarily true, then it would seem that there also *a posteriori* statements that are necessarily *false*; but does that mean that the truth of such statements is also inconceivable? For example, if ‘Water is H<sub>2</sub>O’ is necessarily true, then it would follow that ‘Water is H<sub>2</sub>Fe’ is necessarily false; water cannot be both H<sub>2</sub>O and H<sub>2</sub>Fe, so if water is necessarily one it cannot ever be the other. But if this so, is it also inconceivable that water is H<sub>2</sub>Fe? In this section, I will argue that Kripke faces the same problem that Frege does, by allowing for something to be both conceivable and impossible.

Kripke did not specifically address the topic of conceivability in *Naming and Necessity*. However, in his work *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Scott Soames interprets Kripke as arguing that ‘Water is H<sub>2</sub>Fe’ is in fact conceivable. If that is true, conceivability is no longer reducible to possibility, since the scope of what is conceivable is not identical to the scope of what is possible. However, I contend that this conclusion is incorrect – that is, I still maintain that conceivability *does* reduce to possibility. I aim to show that Soames’ claim that conceivability does *not* reduce to

possibility turns on a false identification. A brief explanation of how I argue for this conclusion follows.

To explore Soames' claim that conceivability does not reduce to possibility, I will have to dig deeper into the notion of possibility. There are in fact two kinds of possibility in play here. Usually when talking about possibility, we are talking about metaphysical possibility, which is merely how things might have been. However, there is also epistemic possibility, which is "defined relative to some subject in terms of some body of knowledge or evidence available" (Gendler and Hawthorne 3). There are multiple versions of how exactly epistemic possibility differs from metaphysical possibility, but the simplest version is the following: "P is epistemically possible for S just in case S does not know that not-P" (Gendler & Hawthorne 4). In other words, even though P may be metaphysically impossible, P is still epistemically possible for me if I do not *know* that P is not the case. This distinction between epistemic and possibility is admittedly a questionable one, but there is an even weaker premise for Soames' conclusion that conceivability does not reduce to possibility. This second premise is that conceivability and epistemic possibility are the same thing; it is this premise that I will target.

For Chalmers, conceivability reduces to both epistemic and metaphysical possibility. But Soames argues that for Kripke epistemic possibility does not reduce to metaphysical possibility. Soames argues that Kripke's posit of the necessary *a posteriori* means that epistemic possibility and metaphysical possibility no longer have the same scope. For Kripke, it is not metaphysically possible that water be composed of hydrogen and iron, but it is epistemically possible – that is, before I conduct a scientific

investigation into the chemical properties of water, it is possible *for me* that water could be composed of hydrogen and iron, since I do not have the knowledge or evidence to show otherwise. Soames then claims that conceivability and epistemic possibility are one and the same; and since epistemic possibility is not reducible to metaphysical possibility, neither does conceivability reduce to metaphysical possibility.

It is clear, then, that the entire argument that conceivability does not reduce to possibility turns on whether or not one identifies conceivability with epistemic possibility. But I argue that it is obvious that this identification is a false one. For example, if I know that the cat is on the mat, then it is not epistemically possible that the cat is *not* on the mat. But it is easy for me to conceive a case where the cat is on the mat (Gendler and Hawthorne 4)

The distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility is a dubious one at best; but even if it the distinction were a valid one, it just seems patently false that conceivability and epistemic possibility are the same. Therefore, Soames' claim that conceivability does not reduce to metaphysical possibility is also false. Having shown Soames' interpretation of Kripke to be flawed, I will conclude by exploring whether or not Kripke's posit of the necessary *a posteriori* can in any way be salvaged while still holding to the notion that conceivability does reduce to possibility.



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