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Frege's Performative Argument Against the Relativity of Truth

Dirk Greimann

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct Frege's argument against the relativity of truth contained in his posthumous writing *Logic* from 1897. Two points are made. The first is that the argument is a *performative* version of the common objection that truth relativism is incoherent: it is designed to show that the assertion of the relativity of truth involves a performative incoherence, because the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for making assertions. From a modern point of view, the central premise of the argument, that the successful making of assertions depends on the absoluteness of truth, is highly doubtful. The second point is that this premise can be made plausible within the framework of Frege's conception of truth and assertion: it can be derived from his thesis that in order to put something forward as true we do not need the word 'true', but only assertoric force.

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Introduction

According to truth relativism, nothing is true in itself, but only relative to one or more parameters as, for instance, conceptual schemes, cultures, perspectives, or contexts of assessment. The standard argument against truth relativism is that it is incoherent. If every truth is relative and truth relativism is true, then truth relativism itself is true only in a relative sense. Hence, truth absolutism is also true in a relative sense. But this consequence the truth relativist cannot accept; he wants to reject truth absolutism altogether. To this end, he must insist that truth relativism is true in an absolute sense. But, in this case he is inconsistent because he claims, on the one hand, that every truth is relative, and on the other, that this claim is an absolute truth.¹

In a posthumous text entitled 'Logic' from 1897, Frege presents the following version of this argument:

If anyone tried to contradict the statement that what is true is true independently of our recognizing it as such, he would by his very assertion contradict what he had asserted; he would be in a similar position to the Cretan who said that all Cretans are liars. To elaborate: if something were true only for him who held it to be true, ... [h]e would not be able to assert anything at all in the normal sense, and even if his utterances had the form of assertions, they would only have the status of interjections – of expressions of mental states or processes ...

And in that case his assertion that something was true only for us and through being recognized by us as such would have this status too. (1897, p. 144; 1979, p. 132-3; 1997, p. 232-33)

Anachronistically speaking, Frege's argument is that the assertion of the relativity of truth leads to a performative contradiction, because the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for making assertions. To assert successfully the relativity of truth, the truth relativist must claim that the content of his assertion is absolutely true, because otherwise his assertion would have the status of a merely expressive speech act. On the other hand, to be coherent, he must confine himself to the claim that the content of his assertion is only relatively true. Consequently, the truth relativist is on the horns of the following dilemma: if he claims for the content of his assertion only that it is relatively true, he does not make any assertion at all, and if he claims that it is absolutely true, he contradicts his claim that every truth is relative. Hence, it is impossible to assert the relativity of truth in both a successful and a coherent way. In what follows, my aim is to reconstruct this argument in detail.² In section 1, the version of truth relativism criticized by Frege is briefly described. The task of section 2 is then to make the structure of Frege's argument transparent. Section 3 focuses on the central premise of his argument, which is the claim that the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for making assertions.

1. Frege on the objectivity and absoluteness of truth

The broader context in which Frege criticizes relativism about truth is his critical discussion of the "psychological" or "idealist" foundation of logic suggested by the Neo-Kantian logicians of his time. The psychological foundation of logic is a reductionist pro-

gram whose aim is to construe logic as a branch of psychology. It divides into a conceptual and a doctrinal part. The conceptual part of the program consists in reducing the concepts of logic to psychological concepts, and the doctrinal part in reducing the logical laws to psychological ones.

Frege criticizes both parts in the preface to the first volume of *Grundgesetze* (1893). With regard to the conceptual part, he focuses on Benno Erdmann's attempt to reduce the concept of truth to the concept of holding something as true (belief). This reduction is criticized by Frege on the ground that it contradicts the "objectivity of truth", *i.e.*, the independence of being true from being taken as true:

... Benno Erdmann in the first volume of his *Logik* ... equates truth with general validity and bases this on the general certainty regarding the object of judgement, and this in turn on the general agreement amongst those who judge. So in the end, truth is reduced to the holding as true of individuals. In response I can only say: being true is quite different from being held as true, whether by one, or by many, or by all, and is in no way to be reduced to it. There is no contradiction in something being true which is held by everyone as false. ... If it is true that I am writing this in my room on 13 July 1893, whilst the wind howls outside, then it remains true even if everyone should later hold it as false. (1893, pp. XV f.; 1997, p. 203)

The laws of logic are traditionally understood as "laws of thought". It is important, according to Frege, to distinguish between normative and descriptive laws of thought. Normatively understood, the laws of thought tell us how to think *correctly*. They are prescriptions for judgement, assertion, and inference that tell us how we must think in order to achieve the goal of science, the discovery of truths. In a small fragment also entitled 'Logic',

written between 1879 and 1891, Frege describes the task and the nature of the laws of logic more closely:

To make a judgement because we are cognisant of other truths as providing a justification for it is known as *inferring*. There are laws governing this kind of justification, and to set up these laws of valid inference is the goal of logic. (Frege 1879–91, p. 3; 1979, p. 3)

The logical laws, so understood, are normative laws that explain the conditions under which we are entitled to acknowledge the truth of a thought ("to hold it as true") in virtue of the truth of other thoughts that have already been acknowledged as true. The law of conditionalization, for instance, may be considered as a normative law saying that we are entitled to assert (or "to hold as true") the conclusion 'If q , then p ' when we are entitled to assert the premise ' p '. Descriptively understood, the laws of logic are "laws of being true".³ It is, for instance, a descriptive law of truth that for all p : if p , then (if q , then p), which is the first axiom of the system in *Grundgesetze* (cf. 1893, § 18).⁴ This descriptive version of the law of conditionalization is more fundamental than the corresponding normative one. This is because the validity of the normative law depends on its accordance with the descriptive law (cf. 1897, p. 139; 1997, p. 228).

In order to reduce the logical laws to psychological ones, the psychological logician considers the laws of thought as laws describing the empirical conditions under which we actually take thoughts as true. The law of conditionalization, for instance, considered as a psychological law, is an empirical generalization saying that most people take in general 'If q , then p ' as true when they take ' p ' as true.⁵

Frege makes basically two objections against the psychological conception of the logical laws. The first is that psychological

laws are not apt for the task of justifying conclusions. They do not explain the conditions under which we are entitled to take something as true, but only the conditions under which we actually take something to be true. The second objection refers to the validity of the logical laws. In Frege's view, the logical laws must be *eternally* and *universally* valid, that is, such laws must be valid for any person at any time without any restriction.⁶ On the psychological approach, on the other hand, the validity of the logical laws is neither eternal nor universal. Our dispositions for holding something to be true may change in the future, and there may be beings whose dispositions for holding something to be true are radically different from ours:

He [Erdmann] doubts their absolute, eternal validity [*Geltung*] and wants to restrict them to our thought as it is at present 'Our thought' can indeed only mean human thought as it is known to date. Accordingly, the possibility remains open of discovering humans or other beings who could make judgements that contradict our logical laws. What if this were to happen? Erdmann would say: here we see that these principles are not universally valid. ... But what if beings were even found whose laws of thought directly contradicted our own and therefore frequently led to contrary results in practise as well? The psychological logician could only simply acknowledge this and say: those laws are valid for them, these for us. I would say: here we have a hitherto unknown kind of madness. (1893, p. XVI; 1997, p. 203)

Suppose, for instance, that the thinking of the madmen is correctly described by the following logically invalid law of conditionalization: take 'If p , then q ' to be true when ' p ' is taken to be true. Our thinking, on the other hand, is correctly described by the valid law of conditionalization. Erdmann's conception of truth as 'the general agreement amongst those who judge' implies that we cannot

say which of the two laws is actually valid, but only that the first law is valid for the madmen and the second for human beings.

Recently, William Taschek has argued that Frege is claiming in the passage above that the laws of logic are *constitutive* laws of thought. The conclusion that Frege wishes to draw is that someone whose "thinking" is not described by those laws cannot be said to think at all.⁷ However, according to the lexical meaning of the word 'mad', a madman is someone who makes highly irrational ("mad") judgements and inferences (and decisions). This implies that someone who does not think at all cannot be said to be mad. Moreover, the madmen are characterized by Frege as beings whose *laws of thought* directly contradict our own. This characterization clearly presupposes that the madmen are capable of thinking; otherwise, there could be no laws of thought describing their thinking. It is hence doubtful that Frege really aims to show that the laws of logic are constitutive for thinking.⁸ Rather, his point seems to be that the relativist understanding of the validity of these laws is incompatible with the task of logic as telling us how we must think in order to think *correctly*, that is, which rules of inference are *sound*. This is because the relativist approach implies that any rule of inference is valid in a relative sense; even the madman can be said to think correctly in a relative sense.

Frege's main objection against this relativist conception of logical validity is that it contradicts the objectivity of truth: "[t]he sense of the word 'true' could not be more wickedly falsified than by incorporating a relation to those who judge" (1893, p. XVI; 1997, p. 203). Since truth is objective and absolute, the validity of the logical laws is objective and absolute as well (cf. 1983, p. XVI; 1997, p. 203).

In the text 'Logic' from 1897, which contains Frege's argument against relativism about truth, he explains the objectivity of truth

more closely, by contrasting truth with beauty. The essential difference is this:

... what is true is true independently of our recognizing it as such, but what is beautiful is beautiful only for him who experiences it as such. What is beautiful for one person is not necessarily beautiful for another. There is no disputing of tastes. Where truth is concerned, there is the possibility of error, but not where beauty is concerned. By the very fact that I consider something beautiful it is beautiful for me. But something does not have to be true because I consider it to be true, and, if it is not true in itself, it is not true for me either. Nothing is beautiful in itself: it is only beautiful for some being experiencing it and this is necessarily implicit in any aesthetic judgement (1897, p. 143; 1997, p. 232).

Frege takes the objectivity of truth to be a plain fact about the sense of 'true'. If anyone seriously and sincerely doubted this fact, he argues, "we should have no recourse but to assume that he was attaching a different sense to the word 'true'" (1897, p. 144; 1979, p. 133; 1997, p. 233).

The non-objectivity of beauty implies immediately the relativity of beauty: since nothing is beautiful in itself, but only by being taken as beautiful, and since what is beautiful for one individual need not be beautiful for another, we must construe beauty as a relational property that refers to individuals. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that this rose is beautiful, but only that this rose is beautiful for the individual x . Consequently, with regard to a sentence containing an aesthetical judgement, like 'This rose is beautiful', "the identity of the speaker is essential to the sense", as Frege stresses (cf. 1897, p. 146; 1997, p. 235). That is, the sense of 'This rose is beautiful' contains an indexical element referring to the

speaker that is made explicit by the paraphrase 'This rose is beautiful for me.'⁹

The psychologistic logician reduces being true to being taken as true. In his view, nothing is true in itself, but only by being taken as true. This conception implies that truth must be relativized in the same way as beauty. We can define the corresponding relativist notion of truth as follows: The thought T is true relative to the individual x (or ' T is true for x ') if and only if x holds T as true. The thesis of the relativity of truth says, accordingly, that no thought T is true in itself, but only relative to an individual that takes T to be true.

It is, however, highly questionable that Erdmann and his followers are really committed to this bizarre view. It is perfectly possible to explicate truth in terms of belief without committing oneself to the view that truth is relative. Frege presupposes that Erdmann's reduction of being true to being taken as true aims at an analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being true in factual and counterfactual situations. On this reading, Erdmann's reduction does indeed involve the claim that being (generally) taken as true ("general agreement amongst those who judge") is a sufficient condition for being true. But, it seems to be more plausible to read Erdmann's reduction as a conceptual explication in the sense of the procedure proposed by Carnap and Quine.¹⁰ The task of such explications is not to analyze the satisfaction conditions of concepts, but to replace concepts playing an important role in a given theory with similar concepts of a privileged kind that have approximately the same extension and that are apt to take over their role. In the case of the psychological foundation of logic, the aim is to replace the logical notion of truth by a similar psychological notion that can be used to define other logical notions like, for instance, logical inference. Arguably, Erd-

mann's notion of "general agreement amongst those who judge" satisfies this criterion. This is already sufficient to justify the material adequacy of his reduction. The relativistic claim that nothing is true by itself, but only by being taken as true, is neither presupposed nor implied by it.

Moreover, the version of truth relativism discussed by Frege is, if not absurd, then at least extremely problematic, because it relativizes truth to individual beliefs without any epistemic constraints like logical consistency, empirical adequacy, justified assertability, coherence with other beliefs, and so on. Even contradictory beliefs expressed by sentences of the form "p and not p" are considered to be true relative to individuals that take them as true. The more plausible versions of truth relativism claim that truth is relative only in the case of beliefs that are logically inconsistent (they cannot both be true in the absolute sense) but epistemically equally correct (or "faultless").¹¹ The parameter of truth is, in this case, not being taken as true, but being *faultlessly* taken as true. Examples of such beliefs may be the aesthetic judgements mentioned by Frege.

2. The structure of the argument

As far as I can tell, the posthumous text entitled 'Logic' from 1897 is the only place where Frege presents his performative argument against relativism about truth. The main text is prefixed with a synopsis of the main theses and arguments, in which Frege gives the following short version of the argument:

Anyone who asserts that it is only our recognizing a thing as true that makes it so, would, by so doing, contradict the content of his own assertion. In reality he could assert nothing. Every opinion would then

be unjustified; there would be no science. The independence of being recognized by us is integral to the sense of the word 'true'. (1897, p. 138; 1979, p. 126–7)

The full version of the argument reads:

If anyone tried to contradict the statement that what is true is true independently of our recognizing it as such, he would by his very assertion contradict what he had asserted; he would be in a similar position to the Cretan who said that all Cretans are liars. To elaborate: if something were true only for him who held it to be true, there would be no contradiction between the opinions of different people. So to be consistent, anyone holding this view would have no right whatever to contradict the opposite view; he would have to espouse the principle: *non disputandum est*. He would not be able to assert anything at all in the normal sense, and even if his utterances had the form of assertions, they would only have the status [*Wert*] of interjections—of expressions of mental states or processes, between which and such states and processes in another person there could be no contradiction. And in that case his assertion that something was true only for us and through being recognized by us as such would have this status [*Wert*] too. If this view were true, it would be impossible to claim that any of his own opinions was more justified in the eyes of others than the opposite opinion. A view that made such a claim would be unjustified; this would mean, however, that every opinion would be unjustified in the usual sense of the word, and so also those opinions to which we were opposed. There would be no science, no error and no correction of error; properly speaking, there would be nothing true in the normal sense of the word. For this is so closely bound up with that independence of being recognized as true, which we are emphasizing here, that it cannot be separated from it. If anyone seriously and sincerely defended the view we are here attacking, we should have no recourse but to assume that he was attaching a different sense to the word 'true'. (1897, p. 144; 1979, p. 132–3; 1997, p. 232–33)

The main thesis defended by Frege here is the objectivity of truth: the independence of being true from being taken to be true. His argument has the structure of a Kantian “transcendental argument”. Such arguments are based on the method of establishing that something is a fact by showing that it is a “condition of the possibility” of some other facts that are taken for granted. In Frege’s case, the facts taken for granted are the existence of such things as successful assertion and contradiction, successful justification and genuine science. His argument aims to show that the objectivity of truth is a condition of the possibility of these facts. From this he finally concludes that the objectivity of truth is also a fact.

In the elaboration of his argument, Frege focuses on the thesis of the relativity of truth (“if something were true only for him”). The core of his argument is the claim that the truth relativist cannot consistently “assert anything at all in the normal sense”. When he utters an assertoric sentence like ‘Snow is white’, then his utterance does not have the status of a genuine assertion, but of an expressive speech act like ‘Ouch!’ The reason is that, by asserting ‘Snow is white’, the relativist cannot consistently claim that the content of his assertion is true in the normal, absolute sense, but only that he takes this content to be true. Consequently, by uttering ‘Snow is white’, he simply expresses that he believes that snow is white, just as by shouting ‘Ouch!’, he expresses that he is in pain. The only difference is that, in the first case, he expresses a propositional mental state, while in the second case he expresses a non-propositional one.

From this Frege infers that the thesis of truth relativism cannot be consistently asserted: “And in that case [when he is consistent] his assertion that something was true only for us and through being recognized by us as such would have this status [of a merely

expressive speech act] too”. It is hence incoherent to assert that truth is relative. The problem is that the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for assertions in the normal sense. For, to assert a given propositional content, we must present it as true. Since the “independence of being recognized by us” is integral to the sense of the word ‘true’, to assert the content in the normal sense we must present it as true in the normal sense, that is, as being true independently of being recognized as true by us. This implies that the truth relativist cannot consistently make any assertion in the normal sense; for he denies that anything is true independently of being recognized by us.

Strictly speaking, the truth relativist cannot even have a belief in the sense of a mental state that may contradict a belief of another person. For, to form such a belief, we must recognize a thought as true in the normal sense of ‘true’, that is, as being true independently of being recognized as true. The absoluteness of truth is hence not only a success condition for assertion, but also for such cognitive acts as the formation of a belief (judgement). Consequently, when the consistent truth relativist utters an assertoric sentence, he does not even express a belief in the normal sense, but only a belief-like mental state that cannot contradict the belief-like mental states of other persons.

Clearly, the kind of incoherence that Frege attributes to the truth relativist is not semantic, but performative incoherence. A semantic incoherence arises when we assert two sentences with conflicting truth conditions. Thus, we cannot coherently assert the sentences ‘It is raining’ and ‘It is not raining’, because they cannot both be true. The sentences

- (1) It is raining

and

(1') I do not believe that it is raining,

on the other hand, can both be true. Nevertheless, by asserting the "Moorean" sentence

(1'') It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining,

which is the conjunction of (1) and (1'), the speaker contradicts himself in a performative sense. For, by asserting (1), he expresses that he believes that it is raining. This belief is not expressed by the propositional content of (1), but by the act of asserting (1). Consequently, when we assert (1), we cannot coherently assert also (1'). There is, in this case, a conflict between the success conditions of asserting (1) and the success conditions of asserting (1'). To assert (1) successfully, we must not simultaneously assert (1'), and *vice versa*. When we assert the "Moorean" sentence (1''), we are hence contradicting ourselves, because we are expressing that we believe and not believe that it is raining.¹²

Obviously, the assertion of the thesis of truth relativism,

(2) Every truth is relative,

does not contain any semantic contradiction. When (2) is true, then (2) itself is a relative truth. But from this we cannot derive any contradiction; in particular, we cannot derive that (2) is an absolute truth. Hence, the assertion of (2) is semantically coherent. Nevertheless, the assertion of (2) leads to a performative contradiction. To assert (2) successfully, it does not suffice to claim that its content is relatively true; it is necessary to claim that it is true in the normal, absolute sense of being true. For, when we restrict ourselves to the claim that the content of (2) is true for us, we are

not really making an assertion, but we are merely expressing the belief-like mental state of taking as true for us that every truth is relative. Consequently, when we assert (2) in the normal sense of asserting something as absolutely true, we are contradicting ourselves, because we are claiming, on the one hand, that every truth is relative, and on the other hand that this claim is absolutely true. To be consistent, we must hence confine ourselves to the claim that (2) is relatively true. In this case, however, we do not succeed in making any genuine assertion at all. The truth relativist is thus confronted with the dilemma that the assertion of his thesis is either inconsistent or unsuccessful. To stay consistent, he must resist asserting his thesis, and to assert his thesis, he must give up its content.

Since Frege compares the relativist's position with the position of the Cretan who said that all Cretans are liars, one might object that the incoherence he wishes to attribute to the relativist is a semantic one after all. The reason is that the liar paradox is normally considered a semantic paradox. Note, however, that this paradox has also a performative reading. The liar asserts

(2') All my assertions (including this one) are lies.

The assertion of (2') is semantically incoherent because the truth conditions of (2') cannot be satisfied: when (2') is true, then (2') itself is a lie and hence false. Nevertheless, the assertion of (2') is also performatively incoherent because, to assert (2') successfully, the liar must present (2') as a truth, not as a lie. He asserts something like 'All my assertions are lies, but this is a lie', which is equivalent to the "Moorean" assertion 'All my assertions are lies, but I do not believe this'. In both cases, the liar does not succeed in making a genuine assertion, because he expresses both that he

believes and that he does not believe that all his assertions are lies. By *asserting* that all his assertions are lies, he expresses that he believes the content of his assertion, and, by asserting that *all his assertions are lies*, he expresses that he does not believe this content. This is because a lie is an assertion, the content of which the speaker knows to be false.

According to Frege, the relativity of truth has, moreover, the following four disastrous consequences. First, there can be no contradiction between the opinions of different people. Suppose, for instance, that the truth relativist wants to contradict the common opinion that snow is white. To this end, he asserts the sentence 'Snow is not white'. To stay consistent, he must confine himself to expressing that he takes snow's not being white as true for him. For this reason, he does not really succeed in contradicting this opinion. The same holds for any other opinion the truth relativist wants to contradict. Consequently, it is impossible, for him, to engage in any scientific debate. With regard to any disputed issue, he must espouse the principle: *non disputandum est*. Second, every opinion would be unjustified. When we want to justify a given opinion in the usual sense of this word, we must show that it is more plausible than the opposite opinion. But, the relativity of truth implies the principle: *non disputandum est*. Third, there would be no error. If to be taken to be true is a sufficient condition for being true (in the relative sense), then every judgement verifies itself (in the relative sense). Just as an object becomes beautiful by being taken as beautiful, so too a propositional content becomes true (in the relative sense) by being taken as true. It is hence impossible to form a "belief" that is wrong. Because of these consequences, the truth relativist faces the additional problems that he cannot successfully justify his thesis or defend it in the context of a

scientific debate. To stay consistent, he must remain silent in any debate about truth relativism.

The fourth and perhaps most bizarre consequence is that, properly speaking, "there would be nothing true in the normal sense of the word." That snow is white, for instance, would be neither true nor false in the normal sense of these words, but true for one person and false for another. There would hence be no proper thoughts, considered as truth bearers in the normal sense, and no facts, considered as true thoughts.

These consequences are considered by Frege to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that truth is relative. The conclusion he finally draws from this is that truth is absolute.

3. Frege on the role of truth in making judgements and assertions

The central premise of Frege's argument is that the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for assertion. Regarded from the viewpoint of the current discussion about truth, this claim seems to be plainly wrong, because the speech act of assertion *per se* does not involve the application of the concept of truth.¹³ Thus, in order to assert that snow is white, we do not need to claim that the thought that snow is white is true, but only that snow is white. We assert something about snow, and not about the thought that snow is white. Hence, successful assertion does not depend on the properties of truth at all. The truth relativist can assert successfully that snow is white without committing any kind of incoherence.

Frege's argument seems to presuppose that an assertion or judgement consists in the predication of truth. This view is indeed suggested by a passage in the early *Begriffsschrift* from 1879.¹⁴ In §

3, he gives the following general description of the syntactical structure of the formal language:

Imagine a language in which the sentence [*Satz*] 'Archimedes was killed at the capture of Syracuse' is expressed in the following way: 'The violent death of Archimedes at the capture of Syracuse is a fact'. Even here, if one wants, subject and predicate can be distinguished, but the subject contains the whole content, and the predicate serves only to present it as a judgement. *Such a language would have only one predicate for all judgements, namely, 'is a fact'. [...] Our Begriffsschrift is such a language and the symbol \vdash is its common predicate for all judgements.* (cf. § 3, partly my translation)

The language we are supposed to imagine is a fragment of English that we may call "Nominalized English". It contains only a single predicate, 'is a fact'. All other expressions are either proper names, variables, or names for functions. The sentence 'Romeo loves Juliet' can be translated into Nominalized English as 'The love of Romeo for Juliet is a fact', and the sentence 'Everything is identical to itself' as 'The identity of x with x for all arguments x is a fact', and so on.¹⁵

According to this translation, which is supposed to make the logical structure of our judgements and assertions explicit, the general logical form of assertoric sentences is ' $\vdash \Delta$ ', which may be read as 'The circumstance Δ is a fact'. This analysis strongly suggests the view that assertion and judgement consist in the predication of truth of a circumstance (or propositional content): to assert (or to judge) that snow is white is to predicate truth of the whiteness of snow. This analysis implies immediately that the success of assertions and judgements actually depends on the properties of truth. Given the relativist notion of truth (or fact), by asserting ' $\vdash \Delta$ ', we are merely claiming that the circumstance Δ is a fact for

us. We are not really making an assertion, but we are only expressing a certain belief-like mental state. The assertion of ' $\vdash \Delta$ ' is always a pseudo-assertion.

There can, however, be no doubt that Frege rejects this conception at least in his mature period, to which also the posthumous writing containing the argument against relativism about truth belongs. In "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*" (1892), for instance, he stresses that the predication of 'true' is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for making an assertion (cf. Frege 1892, p. 150; 1997, p. 158). To take this into account, Frege construes the judgement stroke, in the system of *Grundgesetze* (1893), not as a predicate, but as a sign *sui generis* that has neither a sense nor a *Bedeutung*. Its counterpart, in natural language, is not the predicate 'is true' (or 'is a fact'), but "the form of the assertoric sentence".

Given Frege's thesis that assertion does not consist in the predication of truth, the question arises: why, in his view, is the absoluteness of truth a condition for successful assertion? There are basically two options to be analyzed. According to the first, this condition results from the propositional content of assertions, and according to the second it results from the act of making an assertion.

3.1. The omnipresence of the sense of the word 'true'

We saw that Frege's claim that the absoluteness of truth is a success condition for assertion appears to be wrong, because most assertions do not involve the concept of truth at all. However, Frege's deflationist analysis of 'true' implies that every assertion actually contains the claim that something is true. When, for instance, we assert that sea-water is salty, we are asserting that it is true that sea-water is salty. To see this, consider sentence pairs like

(3) Sea-water is salty.

(3') It is true that sea-water is salty.

According to Frege, (3) and (3') express exactly the same sense. The identity of these senses suggests that the word 'true' does not have any sense at all. This would imply that, neither by asserting (3) nor by asserting (3'), we claim that something is true. But Frege explicitly rejects the view that 'true' does not have any sense at all. The reason seems to be that this view conflicts with the principle of compositionality. He argues as follows:

This may lead us to think that the word 'true' has no sense at all. But in that case a sentence in which 'true' occurred as a predicate would have no sense either. All one can say is: the word 'true' has a sense that contributes nothing to the sense of the whole sentence in which it occurs as predicate. (1915, p. 271–72; 1997, p. 323)

Since the sense of 'true' is part of the sense of 'It is true that p ', and since ' p ' and 'It is true that p ' always express the same sense, the sense of 'true' is a part of the sense of any sentence whatever. Note that this thesis, which has come to be known as the thesis of the "omnipresence" of the sense of the word 'true', presupposes that a sense S may be a part of the thought T although there are sentences expressing T that do not contain a part that expresses S .¹⁶ Thus, the sense of 'true' is also part of the thought expressed by (3), although this sentence does not contain the word 'true'. This is a direct logical consequence of the assumptions that the sense of 'true' is a part of the thought expressed by (3') and that (3) and (3') express the same thought.

According to the relativist conception, the sense of the expression 'it is true that p ' is expressed in a logically more correct way by the relational predicate 'it is true for x that p ', because truth is a

relational property of thoughts that depends on individuals. To take the indexical character of sentences containing this relational predicate into account, we must read (3') as

(3'') It is true for me that sea-water is salty.

Therefore, the relativist conception implies that sentence pairs like (3') and (3'') always express the same sense. When we combine this conception with Frege's deflationist analysis of 'true', we get a relativist version of the deflationist analysis of 'true' according to which also sentence pairs like

(3) Sea-water is salty.

(3'') It is true for me that sea-water is salty.

always express exactly the same sense. When I assert (3), I am asserting that it is *true for me* that sea-water is salty, or – what comes to the same thing – that sea-water is *salty for me*. Just as when I assert that this rose is beautiful, I am asserting that this rose is beautiful for me, so too when I assert that any other object x has any other property F , I am asserting that x is F for me.

Evidently, this *indexical* version of truth relativism implies immediately that error is impossible. Every judgement verifies itself (in a relative sense), because the truth maker of the judgement that p is the act of judging that p . By taking (3) to be true, (3) becomes (relatively) true. Furthermore, the indexical version also implies that it is impossible to contradict the opinion of another person or to justify one's own opinion. For, given that the sense of 'true' is a part of any thought, the indexicality of the sense of 'true' rules out that different speakers express the same thought. It is hence impossible that one speaker denies what another speaker

affirms. The truth relativist must consequently espouse the principle: *non disputandum est*.

However, the indexical version does not imply that successful assertion is also impossible. When the sense of 'true' is relative, the contents of assertions are also relative, but this does not imply that these contents cannot be asserted in a successful way. As a matter of fact, we do succeed, after all, in asserting sentences containing indexicals like 'I believe that sea-water is salty'.

3.2. Assertion as the advancement from a thought to a truth value

In his mature system, which is characterized by the distinction of sense and *Bedeutung*, Frege rejects the conception of assertion and judgement as the predication of truth to a thought. In 'On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*', he construes assertoric sentences as proper names of a truth value. The sense of such a name is a thought, and its *Bedeutung* is the truth value of this thought. With regard to the relation between the sense and the *Bedeutung* of an assertoric sentence, he writes:

One might be tempted to regard the relation of the thought to the True not as that of sense to *Bedeutung*, but rather as that of subject to predicate. One can, indeed, say: 'The thought, that 5 is a prime number, is true'. But closer examination shows that nothing more has been said than in the simple sentence '5 is a prime number'. The truth claim arises in each case from the form of the assertoric sentence, and when the latter lacks its usual force, e.g., in the mouth of an actor upon stage, even the sentence 'The thought that 5 is a prime number is true' contains only a thought, and indeed the same thought as the simple '5 is a prime number'. It follows that the relation of the thought to the True may not be compared with that of subject and predicate. Subject and predicate (understood in the logical sense) are just elements of thoughts; they stand on the same level for

knowledge. By combining subject and predicate, one reaches only a thought, never passes from a sense to its *Bedeutung*, never from thought to its truth-value. One moves at the same level but never advances from one level to the next. (Frege 1892, p. 150; 1997, p. 158).

Unfortunately, Frege never elaborated a positive account of judgement and assertion, one which tells us what we are positively doing when we are making a judgement or assertion. We are only told that we are "advancing" from the level of sense to the level of *Bedeutung*. This step is not effected by the predication of 'true', but by the assertoric force with which we commonly utter assertoric sentences. For this reason, Frege considers the "form of the assertoric sentence" as the primary and effective linguistic means of putting something forward as true. In the manuscript 'Logic' (1897), he explicitly says that

... it is really by using the form of the assertoric sentence that we express truth [*womit wir die Wahrheit aussagen*], and to do this we do not need the word 'true'. Indeed, we can say that even where we use the locution 'it is true that ...' the essential thing is really the form of the assertoric sentence. (Frege 1897, p. 140; 1997, p. 229, partly my translation)

Anachronistically speaking, this form is the *type* of assertoric sentences, that is, the syntactic pattern that distinguishes assertoric sentences from imperative and interrogative ones. It is syntactically realized by such features as word order, punctuation, and the mood of the verb. Whereas, for instance, in 'Is snow white?' the auxiliary verb 'is' occurs before the subject 'snow', in 'Snow is white' the subject occurs before the auxiliary verb.

Frege is aware that, properly speaking, the effective means in natural language of asserting something as true is not this form, but the *assertoric force* with which assertoric sentences are normally

uttered. This is because there are contexts in which we utter assertoric sentences without claiming truth for their content (as, for instance, on stage). He takes this into account when he writes: ¹⁷

In order to put something forward as true, we do not need a special predicate: we need only the assertoric force with which the sentence is uttered. (1914, p. 251–52; 1976, p. 233)

What exactly are we doing when we are asserting or judging a thought as true? What must we do in order to “advance” from a thought to a truth value? The answer suggested by Frege’s theory of sense and *Bedeutung* is that we must determine the values of the corresponding functions for the corresponding objects as arguments. Thus, to assert or judge that snow is white, we must advance from the thought that snow is white to a truth value, and to do that we must determine the value of the function $\text{White}(x)$ for the snow as argument. By asserting that snow is white, we are hence identifying the value $\text{White}(\text{snow})$ with the True. Generalizing this, we can say that to assert a sentence is to identify the truth value denoted by that sentence with the True.

This reconstruction is strongly suggested by Frege’s description of the linguistic function of the judgement-stroke, which is the formal counterpart of the form of the assertoric sentence.¹⁸ In *Function and Concept* (1891), he writes: ¹⁹

[B]y writing

$$\vdash 2+3=5$$

we assert that $2+3=5$. Thus we are not just writing down a truth-value, as in

$$2+3=5,$$

but also at the same time saying that it is the True. (Frege 1891, pp. 136–7; 1997, p. 142)

Frege is almost explicitly saying here that, by asserting that $2+3=5$, we are identifying the truth value $2+3=5$ with the True. In § 5 of *Grundgesetze*, Frege explains the linguistic function of the judgement stroke in exactly the same way:

We have already said above that nothing at all is asserted in a mere equation; ‘ $2+3=5$ ’ simply designates a truth-value, without saying which of the two it is. ... We therefore need another special sign to be able to assert something as true. For this purpose I place before the name of the truth-value the sign ‘ \vdash ’ ... (Frege 1997, p. 215)

This description also implies that, to assert a sentence as true, we must identify the truth value denoted by the sentence with the True. Similarly, in ‘*On Sinn and Bedeutung*’, Frege claims that the act of judging consists in the “distinction” of parts within a truth value:

Judgements can be regarded as advances from a thought to a truth-value. ... One might also say that judgements are distinctions of parts within truth-values. Such distinction occurs by a return to the thought. To every sense attaching to a truth-value would correspond its own manner of analysis. (1892, p. 150; 1997, p. 159)

For instance, by judging that snow is white, we decompose the True into the function $\text{White}(x)$ and the object snow. By judging that sea-water is salty, we decompose the True into the function $\text{Salty}(x)$ and the object sea-water, and so on. The act of judging is here not described in terms of the identification of a truth value with the True, but in terms of the “distinction” of parts within truth values. But the basic idea is again that by judging that sea-

water is salty, we are determining the value of the function Salty(x) with sea-water as argument. To distinguish sea-water and Salty(x) as parts within Salty(sea-water) is to consider Salty(sea-water) as the value of Salty(x) with sea-water as argument.

The version of truth relativism suggested by this conception of judgement maintains that the structure of the truth values depends on the way we are decomposing them, that is, on our judgements. Whether, for instance, the value of Black(snow) is the True, depends on our acknowledgement of Black(snow) as the True. By acknowledging Black(snow) as the True, Black(snow) becomes true (in the relative sense). Hence, the structure of the True, its composition of functions and objects, depends on how we slice up the True by means of our judgements.

In contrast to the relativity of the sense of 'true', the relativity of the truth values does not refer to the level of sense, but of *Bedeutung*. According to the indexical version of truth relativism, the truth of thoughts is relative, whereas, according to the present version, the "facts" are relative. Since Frege considers the concepts and relations denoted by predicates as functions whose value is always a truth value, to say that White(snow) is the True is the same as to say that snow is white.²⁰ The relativity of the truth values is hence a kind of ontological relativity. When the truth value of White(snow) is relative, the whiteness of snow is relative as well. Snow is white only insofar as it is taken as white; just as a rose becomes beautiful by being taken as beautiful, so too snow becomes white by being taken as white.

Obviously, this *ontological* version of truth relativism implies that nothing is true in the normal sense. Given Frege's conception of assertion as the advancement from a thought to a truth value, it also implies that successful assertion is impossible. For, to make a successful assertion, the speaker must claim that the content of his

assertion is true in the normal sense. But given the relativity of the truth values, by advancing from a thought to the True he does not claim that the thought is true in the normal, absolute sense, but only that it is true for him. The relativity of his claim does not derive this time from the propositional content of assertions – the omnipresence of the sense of 'true' –, but from the speech act of asserting a propositional content *as true*. From this we can finally derive Frege's thesis that the assertion of truth relativism is incoherent.²¹

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Notes

¹ In Hales 1997, this argument is thoroughly analyzed. For an overview of the current discussion about truth relativism, see the collection García-Carpintero/Kölbel 2008.

² As far as I can tell, the argument has not been analyzed until now. Rosenkranz 2008 treats a related but different topic.

³ See Frege 1893, p. XVI; 1997, p. 202, and also Frege 1918, p. 343; 1997, p. 326.

⁴ I am simplifying here. In the example given, ‘p’ and ‘q’ are sentential variables. Thanks to the treatment of sentences as proper names, Frege instead uses individual variables and the Horizontal to formulate axiom I. For more details, see Weiner 2005, especially pp. 334 ff.

⁵ Frege uses as an example the law of identity. Considered as a law of truth, it says that every object is identical to itself. Considered as a psychological law, on the other hand, it says that it is impossible for people of our time to recognize an object as different from itself (cf. Frege 1893, p. XVII; 1997, p. 204).

⁶ The eternity of the logical laws is also stressed in Frege 1897, pp. 159 f.; 1997, pp. 249 f.

⁷ See Taschek 2008, pp. 384 ff.

⁸ For a more thorough discussion of Tascheck’s claim, see Greimann 2014.

⁹ I am presupposing here that, in Frege’s view, aesthetic judgements can be reduced to theoretical ones: to judge an object as beautiful is to judge the thought that this object is beautiful for the judging subject as true. This reading is suggested by Frege’s claim that “the identity of the speaker is essential to the sense” of a sentence containing an aesthetic judgement. On an alternative reading, Frege construes aesthetic judgements as judgements *sui generis*: judging something as beautiful cannot be reduced to judging something as true. In this case, the role of beauty in aesthetic judgements corresponds to the role of truth in theoretical judgements. Beauty is not a part of the propositional content of aesthetic judgements, but the measure applied in such judgement.

¹⁰ See Quine 1960, § 53.

¹¹ For a discussion of some of these versions, see the collection García-Carpintero/Kölbel 2008.

¹² There are, of course, alternative explications of the paradoxical character of asserting (1’); see, for instance, Vanderveken 1980, p. 257. But the explication given here best suits the reconstruction of Frege’s argument.

¹³ See, for instance, Alston 2007, pp. 11 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. Frege 1983, p. 11.

¹⁵ For a detailed reconstruction of the syntax, the semantics, and the pragmatics of Frege's first and also his second system, see Greimann 2000 and 2008.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Burge 1986, p. 145 and Künne 2008, p. 22.

¹⁷ Frege also makes this claim in 'On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*' (1892, p. 150; 1997, p. 158), in 'Logic' (1897, p. 140; 1997, p. 229), and in 'Thought' (1918, pp. 346–7; 1997, pp. 329–30).

¹⁸ In Textor (2010), a different reconstruction is given according to which the acknowledgement of the truth of a thought is a non-propositional attitude like seeing an object. This reconstruction ignores Frege's description of the linguistic function of the judgement stroke, however. For the same reason, the standard interpretation of Frege's notion of assertion, according to which to assert is merely to express the inner acknowledgement of the truth of a thought, is inadequate I think. For a detailed reconstruction of Frege's notion of assertion, see Greimann 2012.

¹⁹ A parallel explanation is to be found in § 32 of *Grundgesetze*.

²⁰ This equivalence is stated by Frege in § 4 of *Grundgesetze* (1893; 1997, pp. 214–15): "We say that the object Γ stands in the relation $\Psi(\xi, \zeta)$ to the object Δ if $\Psi(\Gamma, \Delta)$ is the True, just as we say that the object Δ falls under the concept $\Phi(\xi)$ if $\Phi(\Delta)$ is the True."

²¹ I am grateful to two anonymous referees for this journal and to Rodrigo Cezar Medeiros Moreira for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to Ryan Hickerson for correcting my English.

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Note: In the text I have given two sets of references to Frege's writings: the first refer to the German texts and the second to the English translations. The former, however, do not refer to the original publications, but to the reprints, which are more widely used.

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