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Intentionality and Frege's Puzzle

Resumen: *¿Cuáles son las características absolutamente esenciales de la intencionalidad de nuestras creencias y deseos? Algunos filósofos desde Franz Brentano han propuesto al menos dos: i) los objetos intencionales de nuestros estados mentales pueden perfectamente no existir en la realidad. ii) Estos objetos intencionales no son suficientes para identificar nuestros estados intencionales respecto de ellos. Si aceptamos estas condiciones, entonces somos forzados a adoptar una distinción, esto es: la distinción entre contenido y objeto. Distinción que Frege propuso cuando sugirió que podría surgir un puzzle si no distinguiésemos el sentido de una expresión –por ejemplo, un término singular- y su referencia.*

En este artículo mostraré que el puzzle de Frege apunta hacia una teoría filosófica de la intencionalidad de nuestro pensamiento, la cual es, en algún sentido interesante, más satisfactoria que aquella que subyace bajo las así denominadas teorías de la referencia directa como, por ejemplo, la que presentó Salmon en su clásico libro de 1983. Pero, contrariamente a lo que pretenden otros adeptos de la referencia directa como Stavroula Glezakos, la teoría fregeana de la intencionalidad y la distinción de sentido y referencia son enteramente independientes del puzzle presentado al comienzo de "Über Sinn und Bedeutung".

Palabras claves: *Intencionalidad. Puzzle de Frege. Sentido y referencia. Referencia directa. Descriptivismo.*

Abstract: *What are the absolutely essential features of the intentionality of our beliefs and desires? Some philosophers since Franz Brentano have proposed at least two: i) the intentional objects of our mental states may well not exist in reality; ii) these intentional objects are not sufficient to identify our intentional states about them. If we accept these conditions, then a distinction is forced upon us, that is: the distinction between content and object, which is the one Frege proposed when he suggested a puzzle would arise if we did not distinguish the sense of an expression —for example, a singular term— and its reference.*

In this paper, I will show that Frege's puzzle points to a philosophical theory of the intentionality of our thought, which is, in some interesting sense, more satisfactory than the one underlying the so-called theories of direct reference like, for instance, Salmon's as presented in his classical 1983 book. But, contrary to what other adepts of direct reference like Stavroula Glezakos claim, the Fregean theory of intentionality and the sense-reference distinction is quite independent of the puzzle presented at the start of "Über Sinn und Bedeutung".

Key words: *Intentionality. Frege's puzzle. Sense and reference. Direct reference. Descriptivism.*

1. Introduction

According to Brentano, intentionality is the essential mark of mental phenomena such as beliefs and desires. But how did he further characterize intentionality? In a famous passage (Brentano, 1995, 88), he referred to the mental inexistence of an object, which is supposed to be

explained in terms of the surprising property of our thoughts of being directed towards objects that may in fact not exist. Thus, it was because Ponce de León wanted to find the fountain of youth that he set out to search for it. The trouble with Brentano's explanation is that the intentionality of our mental states —or their aboutness— seems to be a relation between the mind and a certain object. But a relation cannot exist if one of its *relata* does not exist. If the fountain of youth is not, then how can Ponce de Leon's mind be intentionally related to it? This is a well-known puzzle about intentionality.

Another puzzle associated with intentionality has to do with the fact that a subject might be related to an intentional object *a* by, for instance, believing that it possesses a certain property, although he or she does not believe that the object *b* has the property in question, when in fact *a* is identical with *b*. Thus, the ancient Babylonians believed about the morning star that it appeared at a certain location in the sky at a certain period of the year and at a certain time interval in the morning, but they did not believe that the evening star actually had this property. We know now that they did not have the second belief just because the Babylonians did not know that the morning star was identical with the evening star. Some philosophers[1] have opted for characterizing this puzzling feature of intentionality by saying that intentional phenomena exhibit intensionality. The idea is that the identity of an intentional state requires not only the identity of its respective intentional object but also a description of how it is presented to the mind. This amounts to the point that reports of intentional states generate what one might call an intensional context, that is: a context where Leibniz's principle of substitutivity of co-referential expressions *salva veritate* is violated.

The possible real inexistence of the intentional objects is sometimes called the fallibility of their respective mental states. The human mind is fallible with respect to its intentional objects in the sense that it is essential to intentional phenomena that the objects towards which our minds direct themselves might at present not exist. It would perhaps be worth emphasizing these two essential properties of intentionality:

(i) fallibility;
(ii) intensionality.

With these two properties of intentional phenomena, we are ready to take another look at Frege's famous puzzle about the difference in cognitive significance between certain true statements of the form $a=b$ and those of the form $a=a$, where a and b are distinct proper names. Our purpose here will be to claim, first, that Frege's solution to the puzzle, his famous distinction between sense and reference, does a better job at clarifying the concept of the intentionality of our thoughts than the so-called theories of direct reference and, secondly, that the formulation of the puzzle does not presuppose the Fregean sense-reference distinction. By keeping these two claims apart —namely, (1) the claim that Frege's way out of his puzzle is better than that proposed by direct reference semanticists and (2) the claim that Frege's puzzle is not theoretically contaminated by his proposed solution to the puzzle— I hope to neutralize Stavroula Glezakos' argument against the sense-reference distinction. For, in order to defend (1) I shall argue that Frege's solution explains our intuitive conception of the intentionality of thought and language more adequately than does the theoretician of direct reference; whereas, in order to defend (2), I will insist that there was a pre-existing Kantian notion of information value, a close ancestor of Brentano's concept of intentionality, which allows for the puzzle's formulation while dispensing with the technical notion of sense.

2. Frege's puzzle

True informative statements of identity between two distinct singular terms which are not simply definitions had already seemed puzzling to Frege since 1879, when he wrote his *Begriffschrift*. At that time, he thought that these statements were peculiar in the sense that the signs in the left- and right-hand side of identity stood for themselves and not for their respective objects, as, for instance, in true and false simple statements composed of a proper name and an one-place

predicate. Thus, the statement to be conveyed by the sentence "29603+85390=114993" would be saying that both the first and the second name referred to the same object. A perhaps better Fregean example of true informative statement from the time of "Sinn und Bedeutung" (1892) is that which we might express with the following sentence: "the intersection of the first median (m_1) of a triangle (T) with the second (m_2) is identical with the intersection of m_1 with the third median (m_3) of T."

As compared with trivial, uninformative true statements normally expressed by sentences like "114993=114993" or "the intersection of m_1 and m_2 is identical with itself" the information value[2] of the non-trivial ones can be explained, according to the early Frege, by claiming that two different linguistic descriptions (two singular terms) are associated with the same object. Each one of these descriptions is in turn transparently linked with a different way of determining the object. This account of the cognitive value of certain true identity statements satisfied Frege when the examples were confined to mathematics.

At the time of "Sinn und Bedeutung", Frege began to suspect that his early account of the information potential of identity statements would not stand the test of examples outside the domain of mathematics. The astronomical discovery that the morning star was identical with the evening star or that Neptune —the planet which could be observed in such and such a position in the sky— was the cause of the disturbances in Uranus' orbit might equally be expressed by informative identity statements, although the difference in cognitive value from their respective trivial identity statements does not seem capable of being explained along the same lines. According to Frege, this is due to the fact that whereas mathematical definite descriptions lead us reliably to a method of determining the object under description, this is not usually the case outside of this precise domain. Outside of mathematics, it often happens that the connection between a proper name and its referred object is conventional,[3] and the name gives us no safe clue as to what method of identifying the object the speaker using it might have in mind.

If identity were a relation between the names siding it to the extent that they were signs of the same thing, then informative statements of this kind would merely convey knowledge of the linguistic conventions governing the use of proper names. Frege insists, however, that a more substantial type of knowledge is involved in our first acceptance of informative identity statements; his later self claims that the best explanation of their information potential requires thinking of identity as a relation between the different senses associated with two names flanking the identity sign. The later Frege conceives identity statements involving different proper names as normally expressing a relation between two distinct senses —modes of presentation— of objects, which says that these modes present the same object to the speaker/hearer. According to the author of "Sinn und Bedeutung", the sort of knowledge conveyed by true informative identity statements differs thus from regular knowledge of external or internal objects in that its objects —senses— are abstract. Senses or modes of presentation associated with sentences and other sub-sentential expressions belong to the special realm of objectivity generated by the existence of thought and language: the realm of the objective semantic contents of our judgments and assertions and their respective meaningful parts.

The realm of senses is thus forced upon us as one among other strategies to explain the information potential of certain true synthetic identity statements involving different singular terms. Frege in his maturity took it to be the best metaphysical explanation of their informativeness; this latter was, according to him, a fact beyond any reasonable doubt. Of course, if this apparently intuitive fact is denied, then there is nothing to explain.[4]

But let us suppose for the moment that the existence of true informative identity statements is unquestionable; or to put it Frege's way: let us take it for granted that there are synthetic *a posteriori* true identity statements as well as analytic *a priori* ones. Frege's metaphysical distinction to account for the difference in modal status —both semantic and epistemic— between these sets of identity statements —statements of the forms $a=b$ and $a=a$— could be seen as a

way of preserving the second essential feature of the intentionality of thought mentioned in the introduction. The intensional context generated by reports of intentional states is due to the fact that these reports are about senses, rather than about the objects represented by them.

Hence, the sense-reference distinction —or in contemporary terminology: the content-object distinction— is the Fregean way of making sense of the intentionality of our thought and language. The same distinction serves to explain the fallibility of intentional states.[5] Our minds are able to direct themselves intentionally to non-existent objects because human thought represents these objects as well as existing ones by means of senses or conceptual contents. Thus, physicists at some stage thought about Vulcan — the planet responsible for the anomaly in the orbit of Mercury— in spite of the fact that it proved not to exist, just because they represented this possible non-existent object via the mentioned conceptual content.

The passage of "Sinn und Bedeutung" where Frege acknowledges the fallibility of our thought and talk and seeks to account for it by appealing to the sense-reference distinction is the following:

> To every expression belonging to a complete totality of signs, there should certainly correspond a definite sense; but natural languages often do not satisfy this condition, and one must be content if the same word has the same sense in the same context. It may perhaps be granted that every grammatically well-formed expression figuring as a proper name always has a sense. But this is not to say that to the sense there also corresponds a *reference*. The words 'the celestial body most distant from the Earth' have a sense, but it is very doubtful if they also have a *reference*. The expression 'the least rapidly convergent series' has a sense, but demonstrably there is no *reference*, since for every given convergent series, another convergent, but less rapidly convergent, series can be found. In grasping a sense, one is not thereby assured of a *reference* (Beaney, 1997, 153).[6]

If we accept the Fregean version of the distinction between content and object —the sense-reference distinction—, then the puzzle about the intentional relation between a thinking mind and its intentional objects disappears. If we insist on taking intentionality to be a relation, then it is now open to us to claim that its *relata* are, on the one hand, the thinking mind and, on the other, a propositional content, which corresponds to the sense of a declarative sentence.[7] Frege called this complex conceptual content a thought (*Gedanke*) and conceived it as the compositional result of the senses of its respective semantically relevant expressions (proper names, predicates, logical constants, quantifiers, etc.).

It is worth noting that Frege's proposal about intentionality and the account of our reference to objects that issues from it can be safely classified as a theory of indirect reference. The reason for this is obvious; for him, we never refer to or think directly of objects but only by means of one mode of presentation or another. Those who claim that propositional attitudes do succeed in relating minds directly to intentional objects will have to face Frege's puzzle. An example of a contemporary of Frege who adopted a theory of direct reference was John Stuart Mill. He took a special group of expressions —proper names— to be expressions of direct reference or, in other words: expressions which refer to their respective objects without the intermediation of a sense, mode of presentation, connotation or descriptive content. The idea behind direct reference is simply that descriptive or conceptual content does not play a role in our ways of determining the reference of genuine proper names by using and understanding these expressions in concrete situations. Let us focus now on how the fan of direct reference deals with intentionality and Frege's puzzle.

3. Direct reference and Frege's puzzle

Dissatisfaction with Frege's account of intentionality —also known in the literature as a sort of descriptivism because it separates the objects of aboutness from the descriptive content which picks them out— has focused upon our current use of ordinary proper names and what

the critics see as an uneliminable indeterminacy of their respective senses. Let us illustrate the problem with the following example. Suppose that a philosophy student —Jack— believes about Aristotle that he wrote many philosophy books. The belief in question, supposing it *de dicto*, can be reported in English by the sentence:

(1) Jack believes that Aristotle authored many philosophy books.

What is the sense associated by him with 'Aristotle'? Frege himself admitted that there most probably is a variation in the senses that different speakers connect with the name of the great ancient philosopher, but as long as its reference remains the same this sort of fluctuation across the linguistic community should not be worrying. The fact is, however, that wide fluctuation would threaten one of the roles Frege reserved for the notion of sense, which was to explain successful linguistic communication. If speaker and hearer each associate a different sense in their heads with the utterance of a sentence containing a name, then what would they share when the first manages to be understood by the second? Attempts were made by descriptivists to solve the problem of the indeterminacy of the meaning of names[8] but their rivals —the anti-descriptivists— thought the solution required something more radical, namely: the adoption of a theory of direct reference.

Friends of direct reference are fond of the Russellian distinction between singular and general propositions and the related distinction between genuine proper names and definite descriptions. In order to illustrate the distinction, let us suppose that Jack also believes that Aristotle was the last great ancient philosopher and hence has the belief expressed by the following sentence:

(2) Jack believes that the last great ancient philosopher authored many philosophy books.

If we suppose, with defenders of direct reference, that 'Aristotle' is a genuine proper name then, according to Russell's analysis of definite descriptions, the difference between the beliefs expressed by (1) and (2) is that while in (1) Jack is intentionally related with a proposition containing a concrete particular in (2) his mind is directed towards a general proposition, that is: a proposition constituted exclusively by universals (properties and relations). Now, it should be emphasized that the Russellian notion of proposition differs substantially from the Fregean notion of thought (*Gedanke*). The latter is the complex conceptual content associated with the assertion of a declarative sentence. For example, the two following:

(3) Aristotle authored many philosophy books.

(4) The last great ancient philosopher authored many philosophy books.

Russell, in turn, conceived a proposition as a structured complex of particulars, properties and relations. Thus, supposing for the sake of simplicity that he took 'Aristotle' to be a proper name,[9] then the intentional content of (3) is a singular proposition composed of Aristotle himself and the property of having written many philosophy books. By contrast, (4) expresses a general proposition composed of various universals, including logical ones like material implication, identity, existence and universality.

The supposition by the direct reference theoretician that there are singular and general propositions makes it possible to dispense with senses or modes of presentation. Remember that for Frege there can never be particulars at the level of the semantic content of our intentional states and speech acts; all of its constituents are general conceptual representations. For the friend of direct reference, our minds manage to direct themselves to mundane objects by having them directly —not a representation of them— in the propositional content of their thoughts, when such a semantic content is expressed by sentences containing proper names.

Let us turn now to the account of intentionality to be extracted from theories of direct reference. I shall focus here on Salmon's account as a solid representative of direct reference. According to Salmon, an intentional state or propositional attitude is characterized as a relation between a

subject, a proposition and a third element, which remains partially obscure, but which is definitely not part of the semantic information expressed by declarative sentences. This is what he says about it:

> But I have given at most only a vague sketch of what this relation *BEL* may be, suggesting as one candidate the relation of assenting inwardly, or being disposed to assent inwardly, to a proposition when taking it in a certain way. The account remains incomplete until more is said about this. […] What exactly is the ternary relation *BEL*, and what is the nature of the sort of thing that serves as its third relatum? […] Is it a way of taking the proposition? Is it a mode of presentation of the proposition? Is it perhaps another proposition, or a sentence in the language of thought? Is it a "mental file"? What sort of thing is it, and how are such things individuated? (Salmon, 1983, 119-120).

Salmon flirts with various candidates for the third element of the three-place intentional relation of believing (*BEL*) without finally deciding for any. For the purpose of this presentation, I will side with Perry's choice[10] of linguistic representations —sentences and sub-sentential expressions in an appropriate linguistic medium—, although fully aware that this does not accurately correspond to Salmon's view. If we leave aside sentences with indexicals and concentrate exclusively on those containing proper names then the belief expressed by (1) relates Jack, the proposition composed of Aristotle himself and the property of having authored many philosophy books and perhaps the English sentence (3) that he would be disposed to accept or assert —supposing he was a competent monolingual English speaker, in some suitable context.[11] The relevant idea is that a propositional attitude consists of three-place relation between a person, a Russellian proposition —general or singular— and a sentence, whose role is to indicate a way of apprehending the proposition in question. The sentence of a language the subject of the attitude masters would be the guise under which the propositional content of the attitude presents itself to him.

The point of introducing a third parameter in the intentional relation is that of allowing for the possibility that a subject might recognize a proposition under a certain guise while not under a different one. Let us illustrate the account in question with an example from Kripke. Take the following two identity statements involving the famous Roman philosopher and orator, Cicero, who was also known as Tully:

(5) Cicero is Tully.

(6) Cicero is Cicero.

The average well-educated English speaker might believe that Cicero was a famous Roman orator but fail to believe that he was Tully and as a result fail to believe that Tully was a famous Roman orator. The fans of direct reference would say that (5) and (6) express the same proposition, namely: the self-identity of Cicero. Suppose our Jack does not believe that Cicero is Tully. But since he knows that Cicero is identical with himself, how can he not also believe that Cicero is Tully? The theoretician of direct reference would explain the apparent conflict in Jack's web of beliefs by saying that he does not recognize the proposition involving the self-identity of Cicero in the guise of sentence (5).

This sort of anti-descriptivist is then in a position to account for the second feature of intentionality mentioned above. If belief is better described as a relation between a mind, a Russellian proposition and a sentence, then the same proposition may be accepted as true by a believer under one linguistic guise while not so under another. The trouble is to explain the fallibility of intentional states. Thus, physicists at the beginning of the 20th century believed that Vulcan was the planet responsible for the anomaly in the orbit of Mercury. Here, the anti-descriptivist has at least two options available to him: either a) he says that there is no singular proposition with which the minds of the physicists were intentionally related; or b) he maintains that they related to a singular proposition one of whose constituents is a non-existent object. If he decides for the second alternative then apart from universals he will be forced to accept a

super-inflated ontology populated by non-existent objects; this is the Meinongian alternative already dismissed by Russell on the grounds that existence is a univocal concept. The first alternative leaves him with an equally implausible view, according to which thought about what does not exist is analogous to perception of non-existent objects, namely: hallucinatory perception; a thought about what does not exist would be like an illusion of thought.

Apart from the problem with the fallibility of thought, the anti-descriptivist faces the objection that his account of intentionality appears very distant from common sense. The way we think of belief and desire in ordinary discourse is not as a three-place relation between minds, Russellian propositions and sentences (or any other third element that we might select to substitute sentences as ways of apprehending Russellian propositions). Normally, we picture them as the mind's directedness towards objects. The anti-descriptivist theory of human intentionality renders it more complex than necessary and such a complexity ends up not providing a good theory for our pre-theoretical concept of intentionality.

4. Stavroula Glezakos' move to eliminate Frege's puzzle

I have insisted on the connection between the puzzle that bears Frege's name and an essential feature of the intentionality of human mental states, namely: their intensionality. The point was to render more plausible the thesis that the puzzle sets up a challenge for the various theories —no matter whether descriptivist or anti-descriptivist— about the intentional content of judgments and utterances when these aim at truth. Some anti-descriptivist philosophers, however, have opted for dismissing the puzzle on the grounds that its formulation presupposes the very distinction Frege was at pains to establish, that is: the sense-reference distinction.

Thus, Stavroula Glezakos[12] complains that in order to establish the difference in cognitive value between true identities between proper names of the form $a=a$ and $a=b$ to the effect

that normally the first are known *a priori* while many of the second kind in science and ordinary discourse are known *a posteriori*, one is forced to appeal to the identity or distinction of the senses of the proper names involved; otherwise the distinction would merely be a matter of the shape of the symbols. According to Glezakos, Frege requires senses to provide a criterion of identity or difference for names.

But, does Frege really need senses to identify or distinguish proper names in setting up his famous challenge? Let us examine this in detail. It is true that Frege intends to convince us that the difference between the two types of true identities between singular terms is not just syntactic, that is: it is not solely a difference between two graphic shape types. For him, the difference, when it is plausible to maintain there is such, has to do with informativeness; while identities of the first type usually express trivial, analytic, uninformative statements, identities of the second type might be used to express synthetic *a posteriori*, informative judgments of the sort science often gives us. All of these claims are compatible with there being cases of informative true $a=a$ identities[13] as well as cases of uninformative true $a=b$ identities.[14]

Now, does the distinction between informative and trivial claims presuppose the notion of sense? No; all we need is a pre-theoretical notion of the information value of a judgment and assertion, according to which some judgments of the form $a=a$ are *analytic* while some others of the form $a=b$ are *synthetic a posteriori*; this pre-theoretical notion was clearly available in the late 18th and early and middle 19th century Kantian tradition. Now, Frege's point is that if we take information value to be just the reference of the names flanking the identities in question, then we will not be able to explain their difference in cognitive value —that is: the fact that the first are analytic while the second are synthetic *a posteriori*—. He also thought that it could not be reduced to a mere difference in linguistic information. Moreover, he came to think in 1892 that such a difference in information value is much more puzzling in empirical science and ordinary discourse than in mathematics.

In my opinion, to reject Frege's way of dissolving his puzzle is a more plausible way of

engaging with the descriptivist; the vast majority of anti-descriptivists tried to come up with an alternative theory of intentionality to dissolve the puzzle. To put it in a different way: a much better dialectic with the Fregean account of intentionality of the attitudes is to devise a new direct reference proposal concerning their aboutness.

5. Conclusion

We have reviewed here two strategies against Frege's account of the intentionality of propositional attitudes, namely: the one exemplified by something like Salmon's anti-descriptivist alternative and the proposal by Glezakos of attacking Frege's puzzle by claiming that it is fatally contaminated by his descriptivism about their intentionality. If the interpretation of the puzzle offered here is correct in that it sets up a challenge involving the concept of intentionality, then the sense-reference distinction might be seen as a better philosophical explanation for dissolving the puzzle than the one proposed by the anti-descriptivist. In my opinion, the best argumentative strategy against Frege's theoretical account of the intentionality of the attitudes and hence against the sense-reference distinction is not that of dismissing the challenge as viciously circular but that of engaging with Frege's puzzle and offering a better account of the irreducible intentional character of our mentality. After all, contrary to what some critics claim, the puzzle can be stated without the Fregean theoretical apparatus. As to the anti-descriptivist theories of intentionality, it is far from settled that they replaced descriptivism as a better explanation of this central feature of our minds. But the task of providing a full-fledged discussion of their shortcomings I will leave for another occasion.

Notes

1. For instance, (García-Carpintero, 1996, chap. III, section 1).
2. This is meant to be equivalent to the Fregean notion of cognitive value. Other formulations employed here of the same concept are: 'information potential', 'informativeness' and 'information content'.
3. For instance, the connection between 'Hesperus' or 'Phosphorus' and the planet Venus.
4. Two sections below, we will discuss an attempt to deny the difference in cognitive value between classes of true identity statements.
5. One might be tempted to find a similar intimate connection between the fallibility of the propositional attitudes and Russell's puzzle concerning meaningful negative existential statements involving proper names (Russell, 1905) like the one expressed, for example, by the sentence "Vulcan does not exist". If the semantic content of statements of this sort involved only the referent of its respective name, then no content would be associated with the thought in question, and yet here we seem to be entertaining a thought with a well-determined content.
6. I have deliberately modified Michael Beaney's translation of Frege's paper by substituting an italicized 'reference' for his equally italicized '*Bedeutung*' throughout. My aim here is not to dispute his decision not to translate the German word '*Bedeutung*', but to report perhaps the best English version of the Fregean dichotomy.
7. That is, a sentence which expresses the semantic content in question.
8. See, for example, (Searle, 1958).
9. It is well known that after he discovered the theory of descriptions, Russell began to treat ordinary proper names as disguised definite descriptions. See, for example, (Russell 1910-1911).
10. See, for example, (Perry, 1994) and also (Perry, 1979).
11. The problem with identifying natural language sentences with ways of apprehending Russellian propositions is discussed, for example, in (Perry, 1994). For the purpose of the discussion I propose here, it has no relevance.
12. Some remarks by Howard Wettstein could also be read as suggesting something similar. See, for example, (Wettstein, 1989).
13. Like Kripke's Paderewski cases proposed in (Kripke, 1979).
14. Cases of stipulative definitions.

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