

# FREGE AS CLICKBAIT AS CLICKBAIT

Susanne Bobzien

**This is a running commentary on a defamatory blogpost about me. Indented red is my commentary. Everything else is the blogpost.** (I note that I have never met the author of the blog nor had any contact with him. For reasons that can be found below, I became aware of the blogpost only long after it had been published.)

## Carnap Blog

### Frege as clickbait

**Concealed (!)** subtitle: A blogpost on S. Bobzien's 2021 essay "Frege plagiarized the Stoics" [<https://philpapers.org/rec/BOBFPT>]

Posted on [2021-04-30](#) by [awDr Carus](#)

Why would a respected historian of ancient philosophy, formerly a professor at Yale and now at All Souls, resort to claiming that Frege had "plagiarized" the Stoics?

First, I claim that Frege plagiarized the Stoics, not that Frege had "plagiarized" the Stoics. And the answer is: because I painstakingly show in c.30,000 words that Frege borrowed lavishly from the Stoics without acknowledging that he does so.

When you look at the paper more closely, you realize a number of things: (1) We're not talking about Frege the inventor of modern predicate logic (the author of the *Begriffsschrift* and *Grundgesetze*), nor even about Frege the philosopher of logic, logicism, and arithmetic (the author of *The Foundations of Arithmetic*); we're talking only about Frege the supposed "philosopher of language," the later Frege who wrote "On Sense and Reference" and related papers.

False. See in section II of the essay: "The many close similarities between [the Stoic] Chrysippus' *philosophical logic* and that of Gottlob Frege are especially striking" (my emphasis), and in section IV: "My focus in section III [The main section consisting of 25,000 words or so] has been exclusively on topics that fall within the category of philosophical logic, broadly understood."

It is correct that, in line with scholars such as Jamie Tappenden and Gabriel, Hülser and Schlotter, I believe that the main impact the Stoics had on Frege was when he wrote his later papers, as well as many of the related passages from his *Nachlass*. However, you don't have to "look at the paper more closely" to realize this. I say this, in fact, *in the first paragraph of the essay and in its abstract*.

(2) Even in the case of this Frege, a case is made only that he was influenced by the Stoics, not that he "plagiarized" them (as the author herself recognizes perfectly well, e.g. on pp. 202-4).

As Victor Caston, for example, has realized without problem the last paragraph is ironic.<sup>1</sup> A case is made that Frege plagiarized the Stoics, as is for example said clearly in the abstract of the paper. An Oxford dictionary definition of ‘plagiarism’ is given as ‘motto’, and with that general notion settled, it is shown that Frege plagiarized the Stoics.

(3) Most of her case rests on evidence of Frege’s borrowing from the Stoics that had previously been documented in some detail in a [2009 HPL paper by Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter](#), which she dismissively makes fun of in the beginning of her paper and claims to have refuted.

As any reader of the essay will note, both these claims are straightforwardly false.

First, the similarities that Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter provide between Frege and the Stoics are (with perhaps one exception) similarities that other scholars had already noted, and Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter do not claim that these are their discoveries. On the contrary, as one would expect from renowned scholars, they painstakingly note the authors that have noticed those similarities before them.

Second, the similarities that I offer in my essay include about eighty or so (a rough guess) that are not mentioned in Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter. And like Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter, I mention in footnotes the authors that have noted the remaining similarities before me.

Third, I do not make fun of Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter in any way. The first part and the last part of the essay were given as main part of the *Keeling Lecture in Ancient Philosophy*, and they provide in a light-hearted way an introduction to the somewhat tedious comparisons that follow, in a manner not unusual for named lectures. In any event, nobody who is alive is made fun of.

(4) Her supposed refutation of that paper concerns none of the details of the Stoics’ influence on Frege,

This is straightforwardly false. *Again*. As I said above, I offer over one hundred similarities. I direct the reader to section III of my essay.

but consists merely in showing — ostensibly — that Frege’s use of Stoic motifs derives not from Frege’s friendship with the scholar of ancient Stoicism Rudolf Hirzel (Frege’s tenant of an apartment in his house in Jena),

There is no evidence that Frege had a friendship with the Classical Philologist Rudolf Hirzel. Not even Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter go this far. All we know is that he was Frege’s tenant and that both were professors at Jena University.<sup>2</sup>

but from Frege’s own reading of Prantl’s history of logic.

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<sup>1</sup>See Victor Caston, ‘Reply to Bobzien’,

[http://www.academia.edu/68744093/Comment\\_on\\_S\\_Bobzien\\_Frege\\_Plagiarized\\_the\\_Stoics](http://www.academia.edu/68744093/Comment_on_S_Bobzien_Frege_Plagiarized_the_Stoics) .

<sup>2</sup> See also my ‘Frege, Hirzel, and Stoic logic’, in Erich Reck (ed.), *Frege’s Place in the History of Logic*, Special Issue, *History and Philosophy of Logic* (forthcoming, expected 2023).

“ostensibly”: I make a compelling case for this, as for example Ed Zalta, Victor Caston, Jamie Tappenden, Marcus Rossberg, Ian Rumfitt, Peter Simons, Josh Dever, John Perry, and others note either in publications or private correspondence.

Her case here remains (as she admits) circumstantial and far from clear-cut.

False. The fact that evidence is circumstantial does not prevent it from being clear-cut. In the USA, for example, someone can be given the death penalty on circumstantial evidence. The evidence just must be compelling. My evidence is compelling (see above or perhaps read the essay).<sup>3</sup>

False. I do not admit that my case is far from clear-cut. I am quite certain that it is clear-cut.

Why then does she (as she puts it, p. 202) “bumptiously” accuse Frege of plagiarism?

False. I do not *accuse* Frege of plagiarism. I make this quite clear on the first page of the essay. I just show that he plagiarized the Stoics.

Why does she give her paper the obnoxiously agit-prop title “Frege plagiarized the Stoics”?

The title is *descriptive*, as is mentioned in the first paragraph of the essay and in the abstract.

One could be forgiven for suspecting it was a strategic feint to distract attention from her own plagiarism of Gabriel & Co — given that she could confidently assume no one would have read them since their paper was in German.

Here Dr Dr Carus implies that I plagiarise Gabriel, Hülser, and Schlotter. This is a grave and untruthful accusation. I do not plagiarize them in any way whatsoever. I fully acknowledge their work and present their work accurately.

Dr Dr Carus’ accusations are more sinister than simple plagiarism. Dr Dr Carus insinuates that I plagiarized not just simply, but *with evil design*; that I ruthlessly made use of the assumed fact that nobody knows German, which would prevent people from discovering that – alleged– plagiarism of which Dr Dr Carus accuses me. Let me just point out here *that in a footnote of my essay I direct the reader without German to a very useful widely available English summary of Gabriel et al.’s paper*, so that even without knowledge of German they know what I am writing about in the relevant part of section II of my essay and can check this against their paper.

But I won’t go there,

Accusing a philosopher of malicious plagiarism without giving any evidence, and to add ‘but I won’t go there’ adds insult to injury.

especially since it seems that the more obvious motive was simply to grab some attention.

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<sup>3</sup> I do not say that I support the US law on this point.

This is another grave and untruthful accusation.

Her title (whose “bumptious” claim she relativizes and essentially takes back at the end of the paper)

False. As Victor Caston has correctly noted (in print), the last paragraph of the paper is ironic.<sup>4</sup> Anyone who carefully reads the entire will see that it can only be ironic.

is, in other words, clickbait.

False. It is a descriptive title, with the relevant definition of plagiarism given immediately beneath the title, as epigraph. There is also a note in the abstract that the title is intended to be descriptive, and the title is followed 30,000 words in which I back up the statement in the title.

Why would someone who has arrived at the pinnacle of her profession — an FBA and Fellow of All Souls — stoop to such cheap tricks?

False. As the title is descriptive, there is neither stooping nor cheap tricks.

Because evidently the respect and attention of the (ever-shrinking) classics profession wasn't enough; she apparently wanted to diversify into the somewhat larger pool of analytic philosophers, among whom Frege counts as a major hero, so much so that even the revelation of his politically proto-Nazi proclivities in personal diaries did little to dent his reputation.

False.

1. Dr Dr Carus implies that I am a classicist. Straightforwardly false. I never set a foot in any classics department until I was in my 30s.<sup>5</sup> The only classics seminar I have ever taken was in 1988 with Peter Parsons, since I needed to learn how to read papyri, and there was no better expert than he. (And I don't say this in any way to debase classicists. On the contrary. Ancient philosophy thrives through the cooperation and teamwork between classicists and philosophers.)
2. Dr Dr Carus claims that I apparently wanted to diversify into the somewhat larger pool of analytic philosophers. Straightforwardly false, see my publicly available CV. My first and widely cited publication was on Kant (1986). So, I did not have to diversify from classics, which in any case is a subject I never studied. Moreover, I have nine (some extensive, many in top journals) papers out on contemporary logic and language, have given over twenty invited lectures, including as keynote speaker, and named lecturer, and have taught many graduate classes, on contemporary analytical philosophy.
3. Dr Dr Carus claims that Frege counts as a major hero among analytic philosophers. This is doubtful. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Frege is a respected figure in the history of philosophy who had a major impact on some 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers and is rightly

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<sup>4</sup> See above footnote 1.

<sup>5</sup> I obtained my *Graecum* at Bonn University in extensive language courses offered to all doctoral students in the humanities, since the *Graecum* was then a requirement for the doctoral title and learned further ancient Greek by extensive self-study of Greek philosophical texts.

taught as one of the early figures of analytic philosophy. Few nowadays would consider Frege a hero among analytic philosophers.

Attempting to cancel him [i.e. Frege] or advertising such an attempt, while courting accusations of failing to deliver), then, even if it flops, is likely to get some attention in those circles.

Here Dr Dr Carus implies that I attempt to cancel Frege. This is a false implication. I do no such thing. This will be clear to anyone reading my essay. Showing that a historical figure plagiarized some other historical figures is not the same as attempting to cancel them. It is a contribution to the history of philosophy since it helps us understand the relations and developments of historical views better. Such is one of the main purposes of the paper.

And it [seems to have worked](#) [link to the Daily Nous article to my essay], to some degree; even this present mention of it is likely to increase its circulation a little.

It might. But in his blogpost Dr Dr Carus deliberately left out the title of my essay as well as my name and any bibliographical information.

Which is too bad, but a cost worth incurring to raise the larger question whether philosophy, too, is now succumbing to the economics of attention that now dictates everything else online, including what version of the NYT front page I see (which is different from the one you see, but is nonetheless also largely dictated by how many people click on what things).

Here Dr Dr Carus turns to very deep and substantial meta-philosophical questions. Reading this sentence, in tandem with earlier phrasings such as “the obnoxiously agit-prop title” makes one wonder: could it be that Dr Dr Carus, who by his own choice did not pursue a career in academe (so he states on his blog), is making an attempt at getting some attention?

Traditional avenues to attention in academia were well-understood by everyone who went into those professions; the price of entry was that you respected the somewhat feudal power structure in your discipline, accepted its agenda, and tried to do whatever you could within those constraints to gain attention and respect.

I note that, as my CV attests, my “avenues to attention in academia” are traditional in the sense Dr Dr Carus mentions.

It certainly wasn't the optimal system for producing the best possible research, but it was understood and accepted; and in some disciplines, at least (physics, math, chemistry, biology. . .), it's been widely recognized as pretty successful by just about any standard. I'm certainly not defending that old system; I'm only asking whether we really want to replace it with the Facebook system we now seem to be drifting toward (of which I regard the case cited above as an obvious example), where the [most inflammatory claim](#) gets the most attention (regardless of merit)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dr Dr Carus' writing a blogpost in which he makes basically anonymous grave accusations without any scholarly or factual back-up seems to me to fall right into the category of what Dr Dr Carus describes here as “the Facebook system”.

So here, without scholarly back-up, Dr Dr Carus falsely insinuates that with my essay I make the most inflammatory claims in order to get the most attention. Falsely implied is also that my essay lacks merit. (I note that the essay is published in a volume of Keeling Lectures in Ancient Philosophy, as a supplement volume of the *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, which rarely attracts any non-specialized readership.)

— and thus eventually the most citations.

Here Dr Dr Carus accuses me implicitly and falsely of trying to harvest undeserved citations. (I note that if I was interested in citations, I would not have spent thirty-five years of my life working on Stoic and later ancient logic. Because these are subjects that usually gain only a dozen or so readers per publication.)

The more scientific disciplines, it seems, are able to resist that syndrome, for the most part, while the rest of us are at the mercy of the algorithms. Perhaps we philosophers, of all people, should resist?

I fully agree with Dr Dr Carus that publishing in philosophy in order to get citations is not good.

And while we're on the subject of Frege's "philosophy of language" (which, remember, is the only part of Frege's output where he supposedly "plagiarized" the Stoics),

For the inaccurate claim that my paper is about Frege's philosophy of language as opposed to Frege's philosophical logic, see above.

I can't resist pointing out that [Joan Weiner](#) years ago made a very good case that really there wasn't such a thing, at least in the form Dummett had popularized it, and that supposing that Frege intended a "philosophy of language" in that Dummettian sense leads to serious misunderstandings. As far as I'm aware, no one ever responded to this paper of hers [Joan Weiner]; it remains a defiant and unanswered challenge to (much of) the vast and rather complacent Frege industry.

False. Weiner's paper has over twenty-five citations.

Keywords: [Dummett \(M.\)](#), [Frege](#), [Gabriel \(G.\)](#), [Hülser \(K.\)](#), [Ignorance](#), [Philosophy as a discipline](#), [Philosophy of Language](#), [Schlotter \(S.\)](#), [Weiner \(J.\)](#)

There appears to be a disconnect between the topic of the blogpost and the keywords of the blogpost. I leave it to the reader to figure out what the disconnect is.

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