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Demythologizing the Third Realm: Frege on Grasping Thoughts

B. Scot Rouse

In this paper, I address some puzzles about Frege's conception of how we "grasp" thoughts. I focus on an enigmatic passage that appears near the end of Frege's great essay "The Thought." In this passage Frege refers to a "non-sensible something" without which "everyone would remain shut up in his inner world." I consider and criticize Wolfgang Malzkorn's interpretation of the passage. According to Malzkorn, Frege's view is that ideas [*Vorstellungen*] are the means by which we grasp thoughts. My counter-proposal is that language enables us to grasp thoughts (ideas are merely their baggage or "trappings," as Frege puts it). One significant consequence of my interpretation is that it helps challenge the standard reading of Frege according to which he is a metaphysical platonist about thoughts. My interpretation thus provides support for the deflationary, anti-ontological reading spelled out by readers like Thomas Ricketts and Wolfgang Carl. As Ricketts puts it, Frege's distinction between the objective and the subjective, rather than being an ontological doctrine, "lodges in the contrast between asserting something and giving vent to a feeling."

Demythologizing the Third Realm: Frege on Grasping Thoughts

B. Scot Rouse

Thus, let no one despise symbols!¹

1. Introduction

This paper addresses some puzzles about the relationship that Frege describes between a thinker and the thought she thinks. Frege calls the relationship we have to thoughts “grasping” [*fassen*]. My treatment of this topic is oriented around a puzzling passage that appears near the end of Frege’s great essay “The Thought.”² In the passage that concerns me, Frege writes about a “non-sensible something” without which “everyone would remain shut up in his inner world.”³ Something non-sensible, Frege argues, enables us both to gain knowledge of the external world through perception and to grasp the thoughts constitutive of such knowledge. The epistemological issue concerning how we can acquire knowledge of what is outside our “inner world” opens up the ontological issue of Frege’s alleged platonism about thoughts and their “third realm.” After all, the urgency of the question concerning *how* we grasp thoughts issues from the requirement to bridge an ontological chasm between non-spatio-temporal thoughts and spatio-temporally bound thinkers.⁴

I first review the puzzling passage about the non-sensible something. Secondly, I consider and criticize the interpretation of the passage and the related ontological and epistemological issues

offered by Wolfgang Malzkorn.⁵ According to Malzkorn, Frege argues that ideas [*Vorstellungen*] enable us to grasp thoughts; the ontological rift is thereby bridged with ideas. On the view I will go on to defend, it is *language*, or rather, our capacity to use and understand language, that enables us to grasp thoughts. This way of reading Frege neutralizes the threat of the ontological chasm that motivates Malzkorn’s interpretation and it makes better sense of the passages Malzkorn draws on to support his view. My focus on our capacity for linguistic understanding has the side effect of providing support for the deflationary, anti-ontological interpretation offered by readers like Thomas Ricketts and Wolfgang Carl. According to these interpreters, we should not read Frege as a metaphysical platonist about thoughts at all, as though he is presenting the ontological underpinnings of objectivity. Rather, as Ricketts puts it, we should see Frege’s talk of the objectivity of thoughts and their “third realm” as a way of “systematically re-describing selected features of our linguistic practices,” namely the distinction between asserting something as true and giving vent to a private feeling.⁶

2. Grasping Thoughts and the Non-sensible Something

Frege usually does not have much to say about how we grasp thoughts. *That* we grasp them is established firmly enough by humanity’s common storehouse of thoughts, by the very facts and practices of human communication, inquiry, and judgment.⁷ Sometimes Frege tries to brush off the question of *how* we grasp thoughts as a psychological issue extraneous to logical considerations: “It is enough for us that we can grasp thoughts and take them to be true; how this takes place is a question in its own right.”⁸ However, in the same paragraph he admits that grasping

thoughts is not a purely psychological phenomenon. That is, while grasping may indeed be a “mental [viz., psychological] process,” it is one by means of which we get in touch with something “whose nature is no longer mental in the proper sense, namely the thought.”⁹ Thus grasping turns out to be a mixed psychological-logical process, something that exasperated Frege, who goes on to say that “this process [grasping thoughts] is perhaps the most mysterious of all,” adding in a note that the question of how grasping happens is “a question that is still far from being grasped in all its difficulty.”¹⁰ In his “Logic” manuscript Frege claims that his logical work can proceed without having to settle these questions,¹¹ but there is nevertheless much at stake in how they are answered so he was compelled to take them up.

According to Frege, thoughts (like numbers) are objective, and yet neither sensible nor temporal, being epistemically accessed not by sensation but by the process Frege calls “thinking” or “grasping.” Yet thinking itself, as just noted, is something that happens as a psychological process in time. So, Frege writes: “Even the timeless, if it is to be anything for us, must somehow be implicated in the temporal” (344). Yet, this “implication” begs for an explanation, because, as Frege worries in the closing paragraphs of “The Thought,” if it turned out that we could not grasp thoughts or understand how this could happen, their very reality (or actuality, *Wirklichkeit*)—and thus the reality of the edifice of human knowledge— would be called into question. Accordingly, Frege worries: “Something entirely and in every respect inactive would be quite unactual [*unwirklich*], and so far as we are concerned it would not be there” (344). Thoughts, on Frege’s view, act [*wirkt*], and so gain their actuality/reality, “by being grasped and taken to be true” (344). Therefore, if we are unable to explain the possibility of grasping thoughts, Frege suggests, we will be unable to account

for the very reality of human knowledge.¹²

At the point in the “The Thought” where Frege employs the notion of a “the non-sensible something” in order to explain how we grasp thoughts, he is criticizing subjective idealism, the view that everything is but an idea of mine. Frege wants to defend the objectivity of judgment and human knowledge against such a view and so it is important that he establish that “not everything is an idea [*Vorstellung*]” (341–342). Frege uses the term “idea” to cover a wide array of inner states:

Even an unphilosophical man soon finds it necessary to recognize an inner world distinct from the outer world, a world of sense impressions [*Sinneseindrücke*], or creations of his imagination, of sensations, of feelings and moods, a world of inclinations, wishes and decisions. For brevity’s sake I want to use the word “idea” to cover all these occurrences, except decisions. (334)

According to Frege, we *have* such ideas: we neither perceive them nor grasp them. Hence, a visual impression is the private internal result of looking at something: “I see a green field, I thus have a visual impression [*Gesichtseindruck*] of the green. I have it, but I do not see it” (334).

The non-sensible something comes up in Frege’s argument against a descendent of subjective idealism, a position Malzkorn calls “a strong sensualist position,” and which Malzkorn helpfully characterizes as involving the following two claims: (1) that thoughts are only a species of idea (and thereby subjective), and (2) that the ideas of the external world provided to us by sense impressions are our sole source of knowledge. These claims are obviously a challenge for Frege’s conception of thoughts and thinking. Thoughts are objective and independent of us, though not located in the external-sensible world, and not given by sense

impressions. If the sensualist position is tenable, Frege's conception of thoughts and thinking cannot stand.¹³

Frege's argument against the sensualist position hinges on a distinction between sense impression and sense perception [*Sinneswahrnehmung*]. If he can show that a subject's private sense impressions do not actually yield knowledge or perception of the world, then Frege has undermined the sensualist position. So, Frege contends that "sense impressions alone do not reveal the external world to us" (342). Sense impressions, on Frege's account, are necessary but not sufficient conditions of our perceiving things in the world (343). Indeed, an internal sense impression is only a "constituent" [*Bestandteil*] of an instance of sense perception (342).

This distinction between impression and perception is a little hard to grasp. Frege explains it with reference to a case of vision. He writes: "To have visual impressions is not to see things. How does it happen that I see the tree just there where I do see it? Obviously it depends on the visual impressions I have and on the particular sort which occur because I see with two eyes" (342-3). Next, Frege imagines that "someone else sees the tree in the same place," and notes that this other perceiver must have his *own* visual impression which is determined by his *own* retinal images of the tree (343). Frege then immediately adds: "And yet we move about in the same external world."

Frege claims that our private impressions must be somehow supplemented in order for us to count as actually perceiving (here, seeing) the tree: "What must still be added is not anything sensible [*ist nichts Sinnliches*]. And yet this [the non-sensible something] is just what opens up the external world for us; for without this non-sensible something [*Nichtsinnliche*] everyone would remain shut up in his inner world" (343).

3. Wolfgang Malzkorn's Interpretation

According to Malzkorn, Frege means to strike a blow at the sensualist "by showing that even our knowledge of the external world relies on more than sense-impressions."¹⁴ Thus, Malzkorn sees Frege as arguing that the sensualist position is untenable because it involves a faulty view of perception: it is ignorant of the fact that "sense perception cannot simply be construed as a kind of wax impression of actual objects."¹⁵ So far, so good. Frege does rely upon a distinction between sense-impression and sense-perception and, as Malzkorn points out, he uses the non-sensible something to do so. But how? According to Malzkorn the non-sensible something is "a certain faculty to process sense impressions of actual things and thus turn them into sense perceptions of those things."¹⁶ In my view, this construal of the non-sensible something as a kind of faculty or capacity is a step in the right direction, but Malzkorn's emphasis on sense impressions, like his eventual focus on ideas, obscures crucial aspects of Frege's position. In order to see how and to prepare the ground for my alternative interpretation, we have first to back up and take a brief overview of some further features of Malzkorn's general interpretive strategy.

Malzkorn contends that Frege leaves the notion of non-sensible something hanging without explaining how it is supposed to enable us to grasp thoughts.¹⁷ He thinks Frege was satisfied that the distinction between perception and impression had beat back the challenge of the sensualist and, having no further need to spell out the notion of a "non-sensible something" and how it processes impressions, Frege supposedly just dropped it. Not that this was Frege's final word on *how* we grasp thoughts, according to Malzkorn. As I will critically discuss in the next sec-

tion, Malzkorn goes on to argue that, for Frege, we grasp thoughts by means of the *ideas* we can form of them.¹⁸ This claim for the mediating role of ideas is Malzkorn's rendering of Frege's insistence that "there must be something in [the thinker's] consciousness that is aimed at the thought" (342).

I will ultimately argue that the non-sensible something is a capacity at work in our linguistic and communicative competence, a rational capacity manifest in our basic ability to recognize, as Thomas Ricketts explains, the difference between the assertion of the judgment that a certain thought is true and the venting of a private feeling. Malzkorn was right to look for what Frege could have had in mind with the claim that there is something in the thinker's consciousness aimed at the thought and enabling us to grasp it, and he was even heading in the right direction in claiming that we grasp thoughts by means of *ideas*. But the role Frege allows for ideas in this context is highly specialized and it can only be properly understood along with the right interpretation of the non-sensible something. After criticizing Malzkorn's view and explaining my alternative interpretation of the non-sensible something, we will see that we can accept a carefully modified version of Malzkorn's thesis that we grasp thoughts by means of the ideas we have of them. We have to build up to these issues by getting back to the details of Malzkorn's interpretation of Frege's "non-sensible something."

As we saw above, Malzkorn claims that the non-sensible something is a faculty to process sense-impressions into sense-perceptions. Malzkorn does not specify what this supposed processing involves, but the idea seems to be that a perceiver of a tree has two retinal images which, in order to yield the perception of a *single* tree, need to be somehow processed. That is, Malzkorn takes Frege to be looking for an explanation of how we get from the

"raw data" of the impressions associated with the two retinal images to the single perception. But this actually misses Frege's point in talking about the retinal images in the first place.

The point of bringing up retinal images is not to suggest that perception requires the processing of impressions. Rather, it is to provide an auxiliary argument establishing *the idiosyncratic privacy of impressions*, to play up this as their essential difference from perceptions, which are *of a shared, intersubjectively accessible, objective world*. If both Jones and I are looking at the same tree, we each have our own retinal images, and therefore we each have our own ideas. Frege writes:

To have visual impressions is not to see things. How does it happen that I see the tree just there where I see it? Obviously it depends on the visual impressions I have and on the particular sort which occur because I see with two eyes. On each of the two retinas there arises, physically speaking, a particular image. Someone else sees the tree in the same place. He also has two retinal images but they differ from mine. We must assume that these retinal images determine our perceptions. Consequently the visual impressions we have are not only not the same, but markedly different from each other. (343)

Frege's argument for establishing that an individual's private impressions are insufficient for the perception of a shared external world goes like this: (P1) If all that we have are distinct private impressions, we could neither agree with nor contradict one another about certain public facts about this tree, particularly in Frege's example, its specific spatial location.¹⁹ (P2) But we are, in fact, able to agree with and contradict each other about facts about the tree. *Therefore* private impressions are insufficient to explain perception. Let me put this reading of the argument on firmer textual

footing. I need to describe in more detail what is involved in Frege's conception of the distinction between impression and perception. There are three observations to put on the table.

(1) Recall the remark from early in "The Thought": "I go for a walk with a companion. I see a green field, I thus have a visual impression of the green" (334). Notice that Frege, upon seeing this field, has an impression just of the green: *not* of the green *field* itself, and more specifically, not *that* there is a green field there, in that particular place, out in the world in front of me. It is only a bona fide perception that would involve the content of this "that-clause." For Frege, perception of the world has propositional content: perceiving something involves grasping a sense (a thought). Hence, in the "Logic" manuscript, Frege writes: "But do I not then see *that* this flower has five petals? We can say this, but if we do, the word 'see' is not being used in the sense of *having a mere visual experience*: what we mean [*meinen*] by it is bound up with thinking and judging."²⁰ Mere impressions do not involve any stance *that* such and such is the case in the world. Impressions do not take any thoughts to be true about the world, they are not in the business of *wahr-nehmen*.

The upshot is this: bona fide perceptions have as their content a judgment *that* something is the case. The thought that is the content of the judgment can be expressed or conveyed to one's hiking partners in an assertion (taking "assertion" in Frege's sense of being the expression of a judgment that a certain thought is true). On the other hand, there is no thought or judgment involved in Fregean impressions. Therefore, mere impressions are not able to be the subject of an *assertion* at all. Our individual, idiosyncratic impressions do not allow for agreement or contradiction. That you are having a blue impression does not contradict my having a green impression. Adopting a phrase from Thomas Ricketts, we

can say that the expressions of impressions are bound to be mere ventings of an inner state, like cries of pain and shouts of joy.²¹ So, again, as in Ricketts's example, your sigh of "satiated contentment" does not contradict my groan of "distended discomfort."²² The distinction between perceptions and impressions thus parallels the distinction between assertions (the manifestation of a judgment) and such ventings of idiosyncratic inner states. This is reinforced by the next two observations.

(2) Frege's examples in this context reveal that this possibility of agreement and contradiction is of central importance. On Frege's account of ideas, "it is impossible for us men to compare other people's ideas with our own" (335).²³ Different peoples' impressions are essentially private and incommensurable. Among them there is no standard of comparison, hence absolutely no hope at all for the adjudication of competing claims. It is against this background that we can properly appreciate the importance of the fact that in Frege's examples of looking at fields, trees, and strawberries he always describes himself as being with another person, a possible interlocutor. Hence: "I go for a walk with *a companion*..." (344). "*My companion* and I are convinced that we both see the same field, but each of us has a particular sense impression of the green" (334). "I pick up a strawberry, I hold it between my fingers. Now *my companion* sees it too, this same strawberry" (T 335); "I see the tree... *Someone else* sees the tree in the same place" (342-343, all emphasis in the foregoing quotations is mine).

Perceptions, again, are not mere inner states, for they involve a judgment *that* something is the case in the world.²⁴ They contain an implicit claim to truth: they are assertable to an interlocutor, who can either agree with my assertion ("Yes the tree is over there"), or contradict it ("No, the tree is not over there, that is just a mirage. The real tree is over *there*."). In such cases, it makes no

sense for my companion to say, “Well, the tree is over there only for *you*.” Hence, at the end of “The Thought,” Frege writes: “The influence of man on man is brought about for the most part through thoughts. People communicate thoughts” (344).

My point here is this: the fact that Frege’s examples in this context always paint an intersubjective situation shows that the possibility of communication and of agreement or contradiction about the external world among different perceivers is of central importance for how we should understand the non-sensible something and how it is involved in perception and in grasping thoughts. Thoughts, being essentially communicable according to Frege, are in principle graspable by any number of different thinkers. The objectivity and independence of thoughts cannot be understood apart from their intersubjective graspability and communicability. Thus in *Foundations*, Frege insists that the objective “is what is subject to laws, what can be conceived and judged, what is expressible in words.”²⁵

(3) Finally, we should note explicitly the important role that spatial location plays in Frege’s examples. Frege emphasizes that I have a perception that the tree is there, in that particular place, in front of me. My statement expressing this perception is not just about *me*: it makes a claim about how things are out there in the world, independently of me. Thus “processing” of impressions is not Frege’s concern: the idiosyncratic privacy is what he is out to establish.

4. An Alternative Interpretation of the Non-sensible Something

What, then, are we to say about this non-sensible something? In a way, my view is somewhat close to Malzkorn’s. Like Malzkorn, I

think we have to see the non-sensible something as capacity—however, I see it, not as a capacity to “process” raw impressions, but as a rational capacity at work in our linguistic and communicative competence, a rational capacity that is manifest in our basic ability to recognize the difference between an assertion and a venting. Thus, Frege writes: “to the grasping of thoughts there must correspond *a special mental capacity, the power of thinking*” (341, my italics). It is this very capacity that enables the logician’s task of correcting our colloquial language to suit scientific purposes. Although the distinction between asserting and venting is embedded in our communicative abilities, and we tacitly learn this elementary logical distinction when we learn a natural language, the expressive propensities of natural languages themselves do not always respect the distinction. So this capacity is linguistic, but not essentially bound to grammatical distinctions characteristic of natural languages.²⁶ Before moving on to develop this suggestion, it will help briefly to situate it with respect to the competing interpretative alternatives.

Something in the direction of my interpretation, that the non-sensible something is a linguistic capacity that is part and parcel of understanding a natural language and manifest in our basic ability to recognize the difference between an assertion and a venting, is suggested by Eva Picardi, who poses yet leaves unanswered the question “whether this non-sensible element is to be construed as a thought-like ingredient, or as the faculty of reason *tout court*.”²⁷ The view that the non-sensible element is a thought, or something thought-like, is put forward by Dummett.²⁸ But, as Malzkorn rightly points out, since Frege has it that a non-sensible something is required for us to be able to grasp thoughts, Dummett finds himself in the uncomfortable position of maintaining that grasping a thought is what enables us to grasp thoughts.²⁹ Another possible

interpretation of the non-sensible something is given by Stuhlmann-Laeisz, who argues that the non-sensible something that must be added to a sense-impression of a thing in order for it to count as a perception is “the [perceived] thing itself.”³⁰ Stuhlmann-Laeisz’s interpretation depends on the problematic claim that Frege uses the word “sensible” to refer to *inner* phenomena. Yet, as Malzkorn convincingly shows, the textual evidence is overwhelmingly against this reading of “sensible.” For Frege, the word “sensible” qualifies those things out in the world which we access with our senses.

I will now further develop my interpretation by way of examining and criticizing Malzkorn’s view in more detail, specifically his claim that, according to Frege, we grasp thoughts by means of the *ideas* we have of them. Malzkorn begins his argument by investigating what Frege has to say about the term “grasping.” There are two footnotes in “The Thought” in which Frege discusses this term.³¹ Malzkorn mines a lot from the second footnote:

The expression “grasp” is as metaphorical as “content of consciousness.” The nature of language does not permit anything else. What I hold in my hand can certainly be regarded as the content of my hand; but all the same it is the content of my hand in quite another and a more extraneous way than are the bones and muscles of which the hand consists or again the tensions these undergo. (341, n.F)³²

On Malzkorn’s reading, Frege here identifies a “weak” sense of the word “contain.” Thereby, Malzkorn’s story goes, Frege sets up an analogy between *grasping* a thought and *holding* something in my hand. Both of these expressions employ a weak sense of “contain.” Malzkorn writes: “the thought is—according to Frege’s comparison—a *content* of the persons [*sic*] mind in the same (*weak*) sense as what I hold in my hand is the *content* of my hand.”³³

But attention to the text undermines the claim that, for Frege, to grasp a thought is to make it a content of one’s mind, even in a weak sense of “contain.” Frege is not comparing grasping to containing in this footnote. Rather, with this passage Frege means to flag the metaphorical nature of his philosophical terminology: both “grasp” (the relation of humans to thoughts) and “content of consciousness” (the relation of humans to ideas) are metaphorical expressions. The talk of holding something in one’s hand is meant to show that even this relatively straightforward use of “contain” is metaphorical vis-à-vis a more literal (less “extraneous”) understanding of what it means for a human hand to have contents (i.e., bones and muscles). *Taken literally*, Frege notes, to talk of “the contents of a human hand” refers to bones and muscles and, as he puts it, “the tensions these undergo” beneath the surface of the skin.

As Frege frequently reminds his reader, human language tends to be metaphorical and pictorial—its nature “does not permit anything else.”³⁴ Rather than arguing that thoughts are contents in the mind in some weak sense, Frege is here flagging explicitly his use of metaphorical and colloquial turns of phrase in a scientific context. Sometimes he feels the need to appeal for a pinch or two of salt from his readers. He does something similar at the end of “On Concept and Object,” where he writes that “‘Complete’ and ‘unsaturated’ are of course only figures of speech but all I wish or am able to do here is to give hints.”³⁵ Hence, by shedding light on an everyday occurrence of a metaphorical expression in this footnote—saying that my hand “contains” what I hold in it—Frege tries to comfort those who might wince at his use of metaphors such as “grasp” and “contents of consciousness.” Frege is not positing or justifying the use of a weak sense of the word “contain.” If Frege is not positing a weak sense of “contain,” then

Malzkorn's interpretation of "grasping" and his associated way of understanding what in the person's consciousness is "aimed" at the thought are not tenable.

However, Malzkorn finds other passages to support his claim that, for Frege, thoughts in some weak sense become "contents" of our consciousness when we grasp them. For example, Frege writes:

The grasp of the thought presupposes someone who grasps it, who thinks. He is the owner of the thinking, not the thought. Although the thought does not belong *with* the contents of the thinker's consciousness, there must be something in the consciousness that is aimed at the thought. But this should not be confused with the thought itself. Similarly, *Algol* is different from the *idea* someone has of *Algol* (342, Malzkorn's italics)

Malzkorn takes this passage to argue that *ideas* are "something in consciousness that is aimed at the thought."³⁶ Specifically, according to Malzkorn, it is the thinker's "idea of the thought" that is aimed at the thought: "a person's ideas(s) of a thought is/are the medium of his/her grasping of the thought."³⁷

Unless very carefully specified in way that Malzkorn fails to do, the claim that, according to Frege, we grasp thoughts by means of ideas we have of them is not convincing. Assuming the ontological interpretation of Frege's three realms, Malzkorn analyzes "grasping" into a conjunction of two different relations among three kinds of entity: (i) the relation of a thinker to her ideas and (ii) the relation of thoughts to ideas, where thoughts are somehow the content of the thinker's inner ideas.³⁸ If the thought is the content of the idea that a person has in her mind, then, according to Malzkorn, in some "weak" sense the thought too is a content of the person's mind, and the person is thereby successful-

ly related to an entity in the third realm. We have already seen, though, the problem with Malzkorn's attributing to Frege a "weak" sense of "contain." If Frege does not postulate a "weak" sense of "contain," then Malzkorn's interpretation of the relation between thoughts, ideas, and minds cannot be correct.

Immediately upon suggesting his reading of the passage quoted above, Malzkorn admits that "one could oppose this claim by arguing that a person's having a certain idea [and thus grasping a certain thought] must be construed as an *act* or *procedure* rather than as a relation between a person and another entity (an idea).³⁹ However, Malzkorn dismisses this view by appealing to Frege's supposedly obvious prior ontological commitments: if thoughts, ideas, and minds are indeed three different kinds of entity, then grasping must be analyzed as a specific relation among entities, and not as a process. Yet, if the platonist picture is not taken for granted, then the mental "process" or "act" account of *grasping* cannot be so easily dismissed. The distinctive claim of the anti-metaphysical interpretation of Frege that my rendering of the "non-sensible something" and of "grasping" supports is that it "denies to ontological notions the independence and primacy they have on the platonist reading" because, for Frege, "ontological categories [e.g., distinctions among different kinds of entity] are wholly supervenient on logical ones [e.g., judgment, assertion, contradiction, inference]."⁴⁰

Accordingly, the more plausible reading of the passage under consideration is close to the one Malzkorn dismisses: grasping, rather than being a relation between different entities, is exactly "an *act* or a *procedure*" involving the exercise of a specific non-sensible capacity. In the passage Frege illustrates the analogies and disanalogies that hold between thinking a thought, perceiving an object, and having an idea. Thoughts are independent of being

grasped, just like Algol is independent of being perceived. The grasping (thinking) of a thought is a mental event (or “procedure,” in Malzkorn’s term) “aimed at” but not identical with the thought, as the idea (e.g., mental picture) one has of Algol is distinct from, but related to Algol itself. When Frege says there must be something in the thinker’s consciousness *aimed* at the thought, then, he is talking about the act of thinking, the “mental event,” or psychological act the likes of which Frege is attempting to spell out with the help of his notion of the non-sensible something. In other words, the comment concerning what is in the consciousness of the thinker “aimed” at the thought is best understood as an elaboration upon the sentence that precedes it: “[The thinker] is the owner of the thinking, not the thought.” Below we will see the essential role that language and symbols play in allowing a thinker to aim at a thought.

There are further problems with Malzkorn’s interpretation. Working through them will help us to come to a better understanding of Frege’s view. One problem is that Malzkorn never gives an explanation of what an “idea of a thought” is and how it is supposed to function as the medium of grasping. He only says that thoughts are supposed to be the “content” of ideas.⁴¹ But my worry here is sharpened exactly when we take into account Frege’s conception of ideas. Ideas are things like sense impressions, creations of imagination, feelings, moods, wishes and inclinations (334). Thoughts are what we understand *independently* of the coloring [*Färbung*] and shading [*Beleuchtung*] that tend to attach to them in colloquial language.

Let’s try to imagine a case that would fit Malzkorn’s interpretation. How could the thought expressed in the sentence “Lieutenant John Pike shot pepper spray into the faces of protesting students” be grasped by means of a Fregean “idea” such as a feeling

or a mood? Even if a sense of anger *accompanies* my grasp of the thought, it is hard to see how that feeling could be my *medium* for grasping the content of thought. How could the feeling of anger bear the *content* of the thought? Well, what if I create in my imagination a picture of Pike, causally walking past the line of sitting students, spraying them in the face with the orange spray: is that how I grasp the thought that “Pike pepper-sprayed the protesting students”? Is that an idea *of* the thought? Nothing in Frege’s own account of ideas and thoughts would explain how such imaginative mental pictures can be the vehicle of the relevant propositional content. Moreover, Frege would say that such mental images and emotional responses are just the psychological concomitants of my grasping the thought. They are the *baggage*, not the medium.

But perhaps there is some role for ideas to play. In order to see how, we have to consider Frege’s views about symbols and language. My claim is that, according to Frege, it is human language that “implicates thoughts in the temporal” and enables us to grasp them. Our capacity to use language is the non-sensible something that enables us to grasp thoughts. But the exercise of this capacity requires a sensible substrate – words, symbols, and sentences – to support its activity. Thoughts are the senses of sentences; to understand an assertoric sentence or a question – an assertion or question that you have sensibly heard with your ears or seen with your eyes – just *is* to grasp the thought it expresses. Support for this interpretation emerges from a passage Malzkorn himself quotes but does not seem fully to understand:

In human beings it is natural for thinking to be intermingled with having ideas and feeling. Logic has the task of isolating what is logical, not, to be sure, so that we should *think without having ideas, which is impossible*, but that we should carefully distinguish between the log-

ical and the **ideas and feelings which accompany** it. One problem is that **we think [i.e., grasp] in some language** and that grammar . . . intermingles the psychological with the logical.⁴²

Curiously, Malzkorn does not discuss language in his interpretation, even though this passage states directly that “we think in language” and also states that ideas are mere accompaniments rather than media of thinking.

As I have mentioned above, on my reading, the non-sensible capacity we have to grasp thoughts is a kind of elementary rational capacity.⁴³ Furthermore, this rational capacity is a linguistic or communicative capacity, a point we can appreciate by considering the way our communicating with each other involves effortlessly making the distinction between what a person says and the words or symbols she uses to express it, or making the distinction between an assertion, a question, or sigh of pain. Language (either natural language, or an invented system of symbols like Frege’s *Begriffsschrift*) is the sensible instrument by means by which we can exercise our non-sensible capacity to grasp thoughts. Hence, Frege writes, “The thought, in itself imperceptible to the senses, gets clothed in the perceptible garb of a sentence, and thereby we are able to grasp it” (328). Grasping does not happen by merely perceiving the sensible character (whether written or spoken) of the sentence. The perceptible character bears non-perceptible content. Our sensory perception of written or spoken language gives us the sentence (or in our minds we can imagine a sentence), and our non-sensible something (our capacity to think/grasp thoughts by means of such symbols) enables us to grasp the thought. Language, as a system of sensible symbols, is able to function as the “medium” of grasping precisely because it is not reducible to its sensuous character—it is compound, that is, sensible (spatio-

temporal) and yet animated by (non-spatio-temporal) sense. Hence, the non-sensible something, our power of grasping, comes into play on the sensible forms of language that, as Frege says, “clothe the thought.”

With these specifications, we can put an acceptable spin on Malzkorn’s claim that *ideas* are the means by which we grasp thoughts. When I think the thought that $5 + 7 = 12$, what I am aware of is an idea (mental image) of the sentence (in marks or sounds) “ $5 + 7 = 12$.” The thinking is aimed at the thought in virtue of the link between the sensual sentence and the thought it expresses. Thus, we can accept a modified version of Malzkorn’s thesis if we take Malzkorn’s notion of the “idea” of thought to be *an idea of a sentence* bearing the sense that is the thought.

Elsewhere, Frege writes that “our thinking is closely bound up with language” and he contends that it “is for us men necessary that a thought of which we are conscious is connected in our mind with some sentence or other.”⁴⁴ The foregoing citations are from Frege’s later years. But this same position is put forward strongly in his early writings. In the early 1880’s, trying to convince people of the importance of his *Begriffsschrift* for the perspicuous sensible representation of thoughts and their logical relations, Frege exhorts us not “to despise symbols,” because “we have to use sensible symbols to think” and soon adds that “we think in words . . . and if not in words, then in mathematical or other symbols.”⁴⁵

5. Conclusion

I will close by stating briefly how the position I have sketched supports the anti-platonist reading of Frege’s conception of thoughts. I do not claim to have provided a full-blown independent exploration or defense of the anti-platonist reading, yet it

should be clear that the central claims of the anti-platonist reading and of my explanation of Frege's "non-sensible something" provide support for each other.

Again, the thrust of the anti-platonist reading lies in the claim that, for Frege, logical or epistemological notions (like assertion, contradiction, agreement, inference, truth) are prior to ontological notions (distinctions among different kinds of entities). What might sound like Frege espousing certain ontological doctrines about the objectivity of thoughts (their timelessness and lack of spatial location, for example), should rather be understood, as Ricketts argues, as Frege's metaphorical "means for systematically redescribing selected features of our linguistic practices, those which elucidate the various aspects of Frege's conception of objectivity."⁴⁶ The objectivity of thoughts is not a matter of their being independently existing entities that we somehow have to link up with in order to ground the objectivity of our judgments. Rather, the objective/subjective distinction in Frege, as Ricketts and Wolfgang Carl have argued, is about the possibility or impossibility of intersubjective agreement and contradiction.⁴⁷ Thus, again, following Ricketts, the relevant features of our linguistic practices that Frege seeks to redescribe with his metaphor of the "third realm" and insistence upon the *independence* of thoughts from thinkers include the way many different people can grasp the same thought at the same time (though different people cannot have the same pain); that is, different people can agree or disagree about the truth or falsity of the thought in a way that they cannot agree or disagree about their mere impressions or idiosyncratic inner states. Communicatively competent people recognize and work with a distinction between assertions that track truth and mere ventings of private psychological states that do not; they also easily are able to distinguish the content of a person's expression and

the particular words, symbols or language in which it happens to be expressed; people are able to realize that the same thought can be expressed in a number of different ways (which is why Frege recommends aspiring logicians to study foreign languages). The interpretation I have given of the non-sensible something as the linguistic capacity at work in our communicative competence and associated ability to grasp thoughts directly gears into these observations and provides more textual and philosophical basis for the anti-platonist interpretation they support.

Of course the anti-platonist interpretation is under pressure by Frege's own language and descriptions. Doesn't he directly say: "A third realm must be recognized" (337), and doesn't he go on to list the characteristics of "anything belonging to this realm" (non-perceptible, non-temporal, non-dependent on consciousness)? Moreover, why would thoughts need a "sensible clothing," if not on account of their being imperceptible entities in need of a special garb (328)? Ricketts's strategy is to argue that such turns in phrase by Frege are not meant to be factual claims, but metaphorical attempts to get the reader to appreciate the features of our linguistic practice that I reviewed just above. I accept this solution and will end by defending it against a criticism made by Tyler Burge. Burge writes that he "see[s] no evidence for a relevantly applicable distinction in Frege between factual and non-factual claims."⁴⁸ But there is such evidence. The distinction between non-factual and factual claims tracks the distinction between more and less metaphorical turns of phrase, a distinction we saw Frege struggling with in his attempt to explain what he means by expressions like "grasp" and "contents of consciousness." In fact, Frege often uses metaphorical turns of phrase, and, as we have seen above, he even explicitly begs for his reader's pardon or pinches of salt for doing so. He refers to metaphorical turns of phrase he uses as being in-

appropriately pictorial. For example in a footnote in “The Thought,” he says “The pictorial aspect of language presents difficulties. The sensible breaks in and makes the expressions pictorial and so improper” (331, note D). In the “Logic” manuscript, Frege blushes over his use of the word “grasp,” saying “all metaphors go lame at some point.”⁴⁹ Why not extend this metaphorical understanding of philosophical terminology to Frege’s talk of a “third realm”? If we do, we no longer have to take Frege literally about the “third realm,” just like he did not want us taking him literally about “saturation,” “contents of consciousness,” or “clothing for thoughts.”⁵⁰

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Notes

¹ Gottlob Frege, “On the Scientific Justification of a Conceptual Notation,” in *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles*, trans. and ed. by Terrell Ward Bynum, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972), 84.

² Gottlob Frege, “The Thought,” in *The Frege Reader*, ed. Michael Beaney (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 343. Simple parenthetical references in the text are to this work.

³ “Non-sensible something” is a translation of a single German substantive: *Nichtsinnliche*.

⁴ A classical formulation of this epistemological access worry is given by Paul Benacerraf, “Mathematical Truth,” *Journal of Philosophy*, 1973, Vol. 70, no. 19, 661–679, reprinted in *Philosophy of Mathematics: Selected Readings*, ed. Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For an influential account of this worry with respect to Frege in particular, see Michael Dummett, “Frege’s Myth of the Third Realm,” in *Frege and Other Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially 251–252. Tyler Burge also articulates a version of this worry in his “Frege on Knowing the Third Realm,” *Mind*, 1992, 101: 633–650), see particularly p. 645. Burge’s essay is reprinted in his collection of essays, *Truth, Thought, and Reason: Essays on Frege* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Wolfgang Malzkorn, “How Do We ‘Grasp’ a Thought, Mr. Frege?”, in *Building on Frege: New Essays on Sense, Content, and Concept*, eds. A. Newen, U. Nortmann, and R. Stuhlmann-Laeisz (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), 35–51.

⁶ Thomas Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood: Frege's Metaphysics of Judgment," *Frege Synthesized*, eds. L. Haaparanta and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Co., 1986), 72. Wolfgang Carl rejects Frege's alleged platonism on basically the same grounds. According to Carl, the objective/subjective distinction as captured by Frege's appeal to a third realm is not an ontological distinction, but an epistemological one. With it, Carl argues, Frege is out "to distinguish between different kinds of discourse in terms of the appropriate evidence" needed to support them. Wolfgang Carl, "Frege – A Platonist or a Neo-Kantian," in *Building on Frege: New Essays on Sense, Content, and Concept*, eds. A. Newen, U. Nortmann, and R. Stuhlmann-Laeisz (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), p. 9. See also, W. Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference: Its Origins and Scope* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapters 2 and 4. Another helpful spelling-out of the deflationary, anti-ontological interpretation of Frege, especially with regard to his conception of number, is Erich H. Reck, "Frege on Numbers: Beyond the Platonist Picture," *Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Volume XIII, No. 2, Fall 2005. Unlike Ricketts and Carl, Reck is content to keep the label of "platonism" on Frege's doctrines, but it is, as he puts it, a "logical," rather than a "naïve ontological" platonism (See Reck, "Frege on Numbers," 34-36, and n.9).

⁷ On the notion of a common stock of thoughts, see "On Concept and Object," note G, in *The Frege Reader*, 184-185.

⁸ Frege, "Logic," in *The Frege Reader*, 246.

⁹ Frege, "Logic," 246.

¹⁰ Frege, "Logic," 246.

¹¹ Frege, "Logic," 246.

¹² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for stressing this point.

¹³ Interestingly, this "strong sensualism" is the same kind of radical empiricism against which Frege, in *Foundations of Arithmetic*, had to defend his conception of number (which, like thoughts, are not given by our ideas or sense-impressions). In *Foundations*, the sensualist interlocutor poses the question: "How, then, is a number to be given to us, if we cannot have any idea or intuition of it?" Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1980), §62. As an anonymous referee emphasized to me, in the context of Frege's discussion of number in *Foundations*, his response to sensualism appeals to our understanding of public language in that it draws upon his context principle. However, in the discussion of thoughts, though language plays again a crucial role, the context principle does not. For an account of how Frege uses the context principle against empiricist/sensualist objections, see Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference*, 38-43. See also, Reck, "Frege on Numbers," 31-34.

¹⁴ Malzkorn, "How Do We 'Grasp' a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 45.

¹⁵ Malzkorn, "How Do We 'Grasp' a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 45.

¹⁶ Malzkorn, "How Do We 'Grasp' a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 45.

¹⁷ Malzkorn, "How Do We 'Grasp' a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 45-46.

¹⁸ See Malzkorn, "How Do We 'Grasp' a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 46-50.

¹⁹ The consequent of this premise is supported by Frege's various remarks regarding the incommensurability of private impressions. See Frege's claim in *The Foundations of Arithmetic* that, with respect to our private subjective sensations (say, of color), "we cannot know [them] to agree with anyone else's" (§26, 36). On this, see also n.22 just below.

²⁰ Frege, "Logic," 238, my italics. The claim that perception involves a judgment of the truth of a thought is not uncontroversial, and Frege himself, as Dummett points out, did not specify whether perception involves a complete thought, or a thought-constituent, like the concept 'tree'. In claiming that a thought involves a judgment of the truth of a complete thought, I follow Dummett who explains that perception, for Frege, is a source of knowledge, and that knowledge issues in and is manifest in judgments. See Dummett, "Thought and Perception: The Views of Two Philosophical Innovators," in *Frege and Other Philosophers*, 273. That perception for Frege involves grasping a thought is also argued by Burge, "Frege on Knowing the Third Realm," 635, n.6, as well as by Wolfgang Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference: Its Origins and Scope* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 194-195. We will return to this point shortly.

²¹ Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood," 68-72.

²² Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood," 69-70.

²³ This sentence about the incommensurability of different peoples' impressions makes two appearances in the same paragraph. Frege was clearly concerned to emphasize it strongly. Several lines above the sentence just cited, Frege notes: "For it is impossible to compare my sense impression with someone else's" (335).

²⁴ See n.19, just above

²⁵ Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, §26, 35.

²⁶ See, Frege, "Begriffsschrift," in *The Frege Reader*, 50-51, and "Letters to Husserl, 1906" in *The Frege Reader*, 303.

²⁷ Eva Picardi, "Frege's Anti-Psychologism," in *Frege: Importance and Legacy*, ed. M. Schirn (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), cited by Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 42.

²⁸ Dummett, "Thought and Perception," 273, 277, and 280. Dummett does not like the ability/capacity view, because he thinks it calls realism into question, cf. p. 278.

²⁹ This point comes out in Malzkorn's discussion of Wolfgang Carl, who argues that the non-sensible something involved in perception is the grasping of a thought, and so who is stuck attributing to Frege either the circular argument just discussed (that grasping a thought is what enables us to grasp a thought), or the implausible proliferation of non-sensible somethings, such that the one involved in perception is totally different than the one involved in grasping thoughts. see Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 41-42, and Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference*, 194-195.

³⁰ Stuhlmann-Laeisz, *Gottlob Freges 'Logische Untersuchungen'. Darstellung und Interpretation* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), 91-95, cited by Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 39-40.

³¹ In *The Frege Reader*, these are notes E and F in "The Thought," 337 and 341, respectively.

³² Cf. Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, §61.

³³ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 47.

³⁴ Cf. footnote D in *The Frege Reader*, 333-334, and also, "Letters to Husserl," 303.

³⁵ Frege, "On Concept and Object," 193.

³⁶ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 47.

³⁷ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 48.

³⁸ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 48.

³⁹ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 48, my gloss in the brackets.

⁴⁰ Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood," 66, my gloss in the brackets. See also, Reck, "Frege on Numbers," 31-44, and Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference*, 79-84.

⁴¹ Malzkorn, "How Do We Grasp a Thought, Mr. Frege?," 48.

⁴² Frege, "Logic," 243, Malzkorn's translation and italics, my bold-face and brackets. Remember that Frege uses "thinking" and "grasping" interchangeably.

⁴³ Other commentators agree that Frege grants a basic rational capacity to recognize elementary implications and contradictions. For example Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood," 73, and Burge, "Frege on Knowing the Third Realm," 645.

⁴⁴ Frege, "Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences," in *The Frege Reader*, 369. Translation slightly modified.

⁴⁵ Frege, "On the Scientific Justification of a Conceptual Notation," in *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles*, trans. and ed. Terrell Ward Bynum (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 83.

⁴⁶ Ricketts, "Objectivity and Objecthood," 72.

⁴⁷ See Carl, *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference*, 78-83.

⁴⁸ Burge, "Frege on Knowing the Third Realm," n.16, p. 644.

⁴⁹ Frege, "Logic," 237.

⁵⁰ I am grateful for the helpful feedback on an early version of this paper provided by Thomas Ricketts, and by audiences in Oxford and Paris. I am also grateful for the insightful comments and criticisms provided by two anonymous referees for this journal.

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