



Eternal Thoughts

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ETERNAL THOUGHTS

BY PETER CARRUTHERS

I

Introduction. A Thought, as Frege understands the notion, is the sense of a context-free sentence (that is, a sentence free of all indexicality, whether explicit or implicit).¹ At various points throughout his writings – including, as is appropriate in this the centenary year of its publication, *Gl* – Frege is to be found arguing that Thoughts exist eternally. Indeed a belief in the eternity of Thoughts stayed with him through almost the whole of his philosophical career, being regarded as an essential plank in his wider views on language, mathematics and truth. I shall present, on Frege's behalf, a number of arguments which he himself does not distinguish very clearly from one another. So although I shall give, in each case, references to those passages in his writings that inspired me to produce these arguments, I shall make no attempt at detailed textual exegesis. A more fruitful approach is simply to construct the strongest possible arguments consistent with what he actually says.

Of course Thoughts are not the only entities believed by Frege to exist eternally. As is well known, he believed the same about numbers. These two beliefs essentially belong together, given his further belief that the truths of arithmetic are analytic. For an analytic truth is, presumably, true in virtue of sense; and the realm of Thoughts is the realm of sense. However, since hardly anyone today shares Frege's belief in the analyticity of arithmetic, I shall have nothing further to say about the possible bearing of his arguments upon the supposed eternal existence of numbers.

I propose to take for granted the broad outlines, at least, of the Fregean apparatus of sense and reference, as well as allowing him his belief in the objectivity of truth and necessity. I shall content myself with showing, contra Frege, that one can be broadly realist about such matters, without being committed to the eternal existence of Thoughts. Indeed I shall take it for granted that Thoughts do *exist*, thus allowing to be genuine such apparent

¹ Throughout I shall write 'thought' with a capital 'T' whenever I use it in the sense of Frege's technical term. When talking about particular Thoughts I shall, as an aid to the reader, use square brackets to indicate the scope of the Thought.

references to them as would occur in, 'A gave expression to the Thought [that p], and B wished to contradict that Thought'. The question that concerns me is not whether Thoughts exist, but whether they exist independently of us. Is it appropriate to speak of a genuinely independent *realm* of entities here, that we have to reckon with and make discoveries about, in the manner of Frege's famous comparison between the mathematician and the geographer? Or are Thoughts somehow supervenient upon human speech and activity? It is to Frege's credit that he recognised a gap here that needs to be filled. The philosophical interest of an argument establishing the existence of such abstract entities as Thoughts or numbers is strictly limited, unless it also establishes, or can be developed in such a way as to establish, that they exist eternally, or at least mind-independently.² I believe many who would not wish to count themselves as platonists, would be prepared to recognise a class of abstract entities whose existence somehow supervenes upon our own existence. It would be natural, for instance, to take just such a line about sentences: to allow that sentences do genuinely exist – and exist independently of whether, and when, they are uttered – but to insist that the sentence, 'It is raining' did not exist prior to the existence of a language in which it may be formulated, and never would have existed had no human beings ever existed.

I shall not, then, be concerned with the issue of ontological reductionism. As is familiar, it is one thing to claim that a certain class of entities (mental states, say) may be reduced to, or analysed into, another class (physical states); and it is quite another, weaker, thing to claim that the one class could not exist in the absence of the other. Nor shall I discuss in any detail just what the supervenience of Thoughts might consist in. However I can see, in outline, at least two possibilities. First, it may be that the supervenience of Thoughts over human behaviour and dispositions is explicable in a manner similar to Davidson's account of the supervenience of the mental over the physical.³ Since on a Fregean approach the notions of belief and judgement will themselves involve the notion of a Thought, the impossibility of a reduction may have to do with the sort of *holism* associated with attributions of beliefs and judgements to intelligent agents. Alternatively, it may be that the relationship is, in the terminology introduced by the later Wittgenstein, *criteria* rather than truth-conditional. There may be 'loose' logical relations between Thoughts and human behaviour – certain kinds of behaviour both warranting ascriptions of

² There is a lacuna here in Crispin Wright's recent spirited defence of Frege's platonism, in that, so far as I am aware, he presents no argument for supposing numbers to be mind-independent (Wright).

³ D. Davidson, "Mental Events", in *Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980). Strictly speaking, Davidson's claim is that although each particular mental event *is* some physical event, nevertheless mental events cannot, in general, be reduced to physical ones.

grasp of Thoughts, and forming part of our understanding of the very notion of a Thought – but where those relations are not of such a kind as could be used in an effective reduction.

There is a strong presumption against the mind-independent existence of Thoughts, in the absence of positive arguments to the contrary. Apart from being metaphysically more conservative, the supervenience thesis would avoid all the mystery that otherwise attaches to the notions of grasping, or thinking, a Thought. Frege's major difficulty is that we are required to be *aware* of Thoughts – it being my grasp of a given Thought which is to guide my use of the associated sentence – and yet we are not aware that we are aware of them. On the supervenience thesis, on the other hand, there is no such difficulty. My grasp of the associated Thought would somehow be *manifest in* (without being constituted by) my use of a given sentence.

It will help to impose some structure on the discussion that follows, if we distinguish three different notions within the broad notion of the eternal. Let us refer to an entity that exists at all times in the actual world as “omnitemporal”, to an entity that exists at all times in all possible contingent worlds as “necessary”, and to an entity that exists even if there is no world and no time as “absolutely necessary”. These are notions of increasing strength, with ‘omnitemporal’ being implied by ‘necessary’, and ‘necessary’ being implied by ‘absolutely necessary’, but not vice versa. And note that all three are stronger than ‘mind-independent’, since if an entity is omnitemporal it exists independently of the human mind, but not vice versa. On my presentation, Frege's argument from communication (§III) will attempt to establish the mind-independence of Thoughts, his argument from omnitemporality of truth (§IV) their omnitemporal existence, his argument from objectivity of truth (§V) their necessary existence, and his argument from analyticity (§VI) their absolutely necessary existence. I shall rebut all four arguments.

It will also help at this point to introduce informally the wider notion of a *proposition*, to stand alongside Frege's notion of a Thought. A Thought is, as we said, the sense of a context-free sentence. A proposition, as I shall understand it, is the sense of a type-sentence that may or may not be context-free. Frege himself held the view that the wider notion of a proposition is logically redundant. For he believed that all statements express Thoughts, it being possible to re-formulate what is said by any statement involving an indexical sentence in context-free terms, and it being the sense of this context-free sentence (a Thought), rather than the sense of the original indexical sentence (a proposition), which is the proper bearer of the truth-value of the statement. However this view of Frege's will prove to be of little importance for our purposes.

II

Eternality versus timelessness. Before we begin to consider Frege's arguments, we must face an objection which threatens to render consideration of those arguments pointless.⁴ For it could be maintained that Thoughts exist *timelessly*, in a sense of 'timeless' which bears no logical relation (beyond mutual exclusion) to the three senses of 'eternal' distinguished above, but which would, nevertheless, imply mind-independence. Thus it could be claimed that it simply *makes no sense* to say of the Thought [that snow is white] that it exists now, or exists at all times. On this view, it would make just as little sense to say that a Thought exists at a particular time, as to say that a number exists at a particular place—and the sentence, 'The number 7 is (or is not) in London' is obvious nonsense. If this were correct, then any attempt to argue for a version of the thesis that Thoughts exist eternally, would clearly be misconceived. Yet we should still have enough to establish the thesis of mind-independence. For if Thoughts are *not* independent of the human mind, then there *was* once a time, prior to the existence of the human race, when they did not exist. But this conclusion, according to the timelessness thesis, makes no sense; so the premise cannot be true. (Note that we cannot derive a parallel *reductio* from the premise that Thoughts *are* independent of the human mind. For the claim that there was once a time when no humans existed but Thoughts did, need not be interpreted as implying that the Thoughts existed *at* that time. We can, rather, interpret it as follows: there was a time *t* when no human existed, and it was true at *t* that the Thought [that *p*] exists (timelessly).)

It is important to distinguish the thesis of *timeless* existence, expounded above, from the phenomenon of *tenseless* existence. There is certainly a way of reading, 'There are such things as dodos' ('Dodos exist'), according to which this sentence comes out true, despite the fact that dodos are extinct. Similarly, there is a way of reading, 'There is such a person as Moses' ('Moses exists'), according to which it comes out true. But tenseless existence normally stands in the most intimate logical connection with temporal existence. Thus, 'There is (tenseless) an *x* such that *x* is a dodo' both implies and is implied by, 'There is (present), was, or will be an *x* such that *x* is a dodo'. Now the distinctive thing about attributing existence to Thoughts, on the Fregean view, is that, 'There is (tenseless) an *x* such that *x* is the Thought [that *p*]', implies (and is implied by), 'There is, at *all* times, an *x* such that *x* is the Thought [that *p*]'. The thesis of timeless existence, on the other hand, claims that if the former sentence is true, then the latter sentence makes no sense at all.

⁴ This objection was urged upon me by both Christopher McKnight and Tim Williamson. I am grateful to both for many helpful criticisms of an earlier draft.

One difficulty for the timelessness thesis is this: if Thoughts cannot sensibly be said to exist-at-a-time, how then can they be graspable-at-a-time?⁵ How can a sentence like, 'Person A grasps, at time *t*, the Thought [that *p*]', not entail the sentence, 'The Thought [that *p*] exists at time *t*'? The only response to this difficulty is to deny that the grasping-relation is a genuine, extensional, relation. Construing it, rather, on the model of, 'A has, at *t*, a belief about *x*' (which of course does not entail, '*x* exists at *t*'), it could be claimed to be an intentional relation. This is, however, a high price to pay. For part of the point of introducing the notion of sense in the first place, is that it should be put to work in explaining the phenomenon of intentionality. But now it appears that the notion of *grasp* of sense, which would have to figure in such an explanation, is itself an intentional one.

Another difficulty with the timelessness thesis is simply that it lacks intuitive plausibility. For sentences like, 'The Thought [that snow is white] always has, and always will, exist', just do not have the obvious kind of senselessness possessed by such sentences as, 'The number 7 is everywhere'. They seem, on the contrary, perfectly intelligible, if not obviously true. If they are, despite appearances, senseless, it wants an argument to show that they are. Now admittedly, what *is* true is that sentences attributing existence to Thoughts at *particular* times have an air of oddity about them, not possessed by the sort of universally quantified sentence above. Thus a sentence like, 'The Thought [that snow is white] existed in the year 2000 B.C.', does have a strange ring to it. But this will be easily explicable if it is supposed to be obvious and uncontroversial that Thoughts exist omnitemporally.⁶ For in that case, the attempt to attribute existence to a Thought at some particular time, will lack any significant contrast; and the resulting ring of oddity will derive from a breach of one of the conventions of conversational implicature, rather than from literal senselessness. For one of these conventions is that you should not give less information on a certain topic than you are capable of giving (easily). Yet this is just what someone would be doing who asserted the sentence above, if it were generally accepted that it implies, 'The Thought [that snow is white] exists at all times'. "Why do you bother to say that?" one would wish to expostulate, "when for no greater expenditure of effort you could have said so much more, and when to say what you did suggested that the Thought in question did *not* exist at *other* times." Nevertheless, what would have been asserted would have been, literally, true. Moreover I shall wish to deny, myself, that the mere existence of a Thought *does* imply that it exists at all times; in which case it will be significant, after all, to assert that the Thought exists at some particular time.

⁵ I owe this point to Crispin Wright.

⁶ Any oddity that might be felt about the claim that Thoughts always have, and always will, exist, will be similarly explicable if it is supposed to be obvious that Thoughts have necessary existence.

If the timelessness thesis is to survive these difficulties, some argument must be found in its support. An apparently promising line would be to press the analogy between timelessness and spacelessness: just as it makes no sense to say of an abstract object, like a Thought or a number, that it occupies some particular place (nor all places), so too, it might be suggested, it makes no sense to say of a Thought – non-physical, imperceptible, and essentially changeless – that it exists at some particular time (nor at all times). But can the analogy be substantiated? The reason why it makes no sense to attribute spatial position to an abstract entity, is that it forms an essential part of our conception of what it is for an entity to occupy space (with the exception of spatial points themselves), that it be either physical, or perceptible, or both. We simply have no conception of what it would be for an entity to occupy a particular place, except in terms of its possible causal interactions with other entities (including ourselves). However these aspects of the supposed nature of Thoughts – their being non-physical and imperceptible – cannot be enough to establish the timelessness thesis. For it is at least intelligible that someone might believe there to be a class of entities – e.g., souls and their states – which are not physical (which perhaps cannot causally interact with anything physical, even), and which are imperceptible, and yet the changes in which occupy genuine positions in time. So if any feature of Thoughts is to establish their timelessness, it must be their supposed changelessness. And indeed it is true that the concept of change seems essentially connected with that of time, in something like the way that the concept of the physical is connected with that of space. Many have argued that if there were no change there could be no time, just as they have argued that if there were no physical things there could be no space. However, the nature of the essential connection is certainly not strong enough to warrant the timelessness thesis, since we can easily imagine a physical object which, while being itself absolutely changeless (in everything except relational properties), is surrounded by changing things, and which may be said to exist *through* the times of those changes. So the changelessness of any particular entity certainly does not imply that it exists timelessly.

The only other possible ground that I can see for adopting the timelessness thesis, arises purely out of a confusion between the notions of the timeless and the absolutely necessary. Suppose someone were to believe that Thoughts would have existed even if there had been no world and no time: he might take this to be tantamount to believing that Thoughts cannot sensibly be said to exist *at* any time. For if Thoughts would exist even if there were no time, how can they exist *in* time, given that there *is* time? But this is a muddle. Suppose the universe to consist simply of a single changeless sphere: then, many would maintain, there would be no time; so the sphere exists in the absence of time. Now imagine this very same sphere surrounded by changing things: is there any reason to deny that it exists *at* the times of those changes? Thus from the

supposition that Thoughts would exist even if there were no time, it does not follow that they cannot be said to exist at times, given that there is time. (On the contrary, as I indicated above, I take the absolutely necessary existence of Thoughts to *entail* their omnitemporal existence.)

III

*The argument from communication.*⁷ The argument for the mind-independence of Thoughts which is closest to the surface in Frege's writings, is also the weakest. It runs as follows:

- (1) Communication between two individuals takes place only if,
 - (a) the Thought expressed by the one, and the Thought grasped in consequence by the other, are one and the same, and
 - (b) both know that this is in fact the case.
- (2) All mental states and events are private to the individual who has them.
- (C) So Thoughts must have an existence which is independent of such states.

There are in fact two rather different arguments here, depending upon whether 'private' in (2) is taken in an epistemic sense, or rather in the sense of 'inalienable'. Consider the former possibility first. Then premise (2) will claim that no one can have knowledge of the mental states of anyone besides himself. This is false. But more interestingly in the present context, even if true it would not warrant Frege's conclusion, since the existence of mind-independent Thoughts leaves him in no better position to explain the possibility of communication. For, as stated in (1b), communication only takes place if speakers know what Thoughts the others are currently *grasping*; and even if Thoughts themselves are mind-independent, the grasping relation is presumably mental. (See Currie, p. 164).

Consider then the other possibility: that premise (2) claims – truly – that no person can *possess*, or have any kind of immediate awareness of, the mental states of another. This, too, makes the argument fail, even given the truth of premise (1). It does not even follow that Thoughts cannot be *reduced* to mental states, let alone that they are not supervenient upon them. For suppose that the truth-conditions of 'A grasps the Thought [that *p*]' could somehow be cashed in terms of A's current mental states and dispositions. Then it could be true, as (1) requires, that A and B both grasp the very same Thought, the identity in question being explicable in terms of the kinds of mental state that constitute a

⁷ See LI, pp. 15–17, 26, and PW, pp. 133–4, 137.

grasp of that Thought. All we should need would be to provide an analysis of Thought-identity along the following lines:

(Thought $x =$ Thought y) iff, for all persons p (p_1 grasps x & p_2 grasps y) iff (Fp_1 & Fp_2)

(where ' Fp_1 ' states the truth-condition, in purely mentalist terms, of ' p_1 grasps Thought x ').

IV

*The argument from omnitemporality of truth.*⁸ Frege's second, and much more plausible, argument for the mind-independence of Thoughts, is as follows:

- (1) Truth is a property of Thoughts.
- (2) Possession of a property implies the existence of the thing possessing that property.
- (C1) So any truth implies the existence of a Thought.
- (3) Truth is omnitemporal (i.e., if something is true at any time, then it is true at all times).
- (C2) So Thoughts exist omnitemporally (and hence mind-independently).

I regard the truth of (2) as uncontroversial, as is the move from (1) and (2) to (C1). My discussion will concentrate on the plausibility of premises (1) and (3), and the soundness of the move from (C1) and (3) to (C2).

Whether we accept or reject premise (1), we shall still have sufficient reason to conclude, with Frege, that any truth implies the existence of a Thought (or at least a proposition), so long as we remain within the framework of a Fregean semantics. The only other half-way plausible candidates, as bearers of truth-values, would be propositions, sentences (either token or type), statements, occurrent thoughts (acts of thinking), and beliefs. If propositions are the bearers of truth-values, we shall immediately be able to construct a parallel argument to show that any truth implies the existence of a proposition, which is of course no advance. And in the case of all the other candidates, the existence of Thoughts or propositions must still be brought into the picture in one way or another. It is only sentences-with-a-given-sense that can plausibly be maintained to be the bearers of truth-values. And in each of the other cases, it will be the Thought or proposition that constitutes the *content* of the act or state in question. If one accepts the legitimacy of the notion of sense at all, then to make a statement will be to put forward a Thought (or proposition) as true; to have a thought occur to you will be to grasp, or think, a Thought (or proposition); and

⁸ See FA, p. vi, LI, pp. 4, 17, 25, 27–8, and PW, pp. 129, 135, 148.

to have a belief will be to adopt an attitude involving a Thought (or proposition). The general point can be put like this: the idea of truth is the idea of a *correct representation of reality*. And for anyone who adopts a broadly Fregean approach to semantics (as we have resolved to do), it is the senses of sentences—either on their own (Thoughts), or in conjunction with context (propositions); and either as such, or asserted, grasped, or believed—which constitute the essential representors of reality. So how could there exist such a thing as a correct representation (a truth), unless there also exists that which represents (a Thought, or a proposition)?

Let us now turn our attention to premise (3), to the effect that truth is omnitemporal. One conflicting thesis, that truth is, rather, timeless, may be dealt with in a manner similar to the way in which we dealt with the parallel suggestion about the kind of existence that Thoughts possess: the thesis has little intuitive plausibility—‘It always was, is, and will be true that $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ seems to make perfectly good sense—and what plausibility it does have will be easily explicable in terms of breaches of conventions of conversational implicature. Moreover, there is a distinct lack of sound arguments to make up for the lack of plausibility.

Another ground for rejecting premise (3) would be a conviction that truth is fundamentally a property of statements, occurrent thoughts, or beliefs, rather than of Thoughts or propositions. It is certainly not the case that if a statement is true at a certain time, then it is true at all times, since it will not *exist* at all times; and of course the same goes for occurrent thoughts and beliefs. We might try to capture the thesis of omnitemporal truth in hypothetical terms only, to try to get around this problem. Thus: if a statement is true at a certain time, then if anyone *were* to make that statement at any other time, they would make a true statement. But this will run foul of examples such as the following. Consider the statement, ‘No intelligent life exists prior to the year 20 million B.C.’. This is, let us suppose, true. Now an application of the hypothetical version of the thesis of omnitemporal truth, will give us the following: if anyone (i.e., any intelligent agent) *had* made the above statement in the year 40 million B.C., he would have made a true statement. This is, of course, false. (Note that if we try to get around this sort of difficulty, by adding a clause insisting that the making of the statement at the time in question be independent of the truth of that statement, then we have effectively limited the scope of the omnitemporality thesis. Not *all* truth will be omnitemporal, on this account.) So if we wish to maintain the truth of premise (3), we have no option but to insist that truth is a property of Thoughts, or at least propositions.

Yet another ground for rejecting (3), would be to deny that indexicality is always eliminable. If this were correct, then two things would follow. First, we should have to give up the idea that truth—all truth—is a property of Thoughts, or involves the existence of Thought. For if the proposition [that I

am now in pain] is true, and if it were to prove impossible to capture adequately in context-free terms what is – in the circumstances – expressed by this proposition, then it would not be any Thought, but rather a proposition, that is true. Secondly, we should have to give up the thesis that truth is omnitemporal. For from the fact that the proposition above is true now, as expressed by me, it does not of course follow that it always was and will be true. However it is doubtful if this need really affect Frege's argument, if only because, since some propositions *are* Thoughts (the class of Thoughts being a sub-class of the class of propositions), the argument can go through as before so long as the scope of premise (3) is restricted to the truth of *Thoughts*. Thus consider the Thought [that there exist sabre-tooth tigers in England in the year 20 million B.C.]. If this is true, then the omnitemporality thesis tells us that it was also true in the year 40 million B.C., and indeed in any other year that you care to mention. Now how can it be the case that both (a) any true Thought implies the existence of that Thought, and (b) the Thought above was true in the year 40 million B.C., unless that Thought existed in that year? (This argument can of course be extended to show that the Thought in question exists in every year. And since a parallel argument can be constructed for falsity, we may establish that all Thoughts exist omnitemporally.)

It is worth noting that a similar argument may be used to demonstrate the omnitemporal existence of at least some propositions that are not Thoughts, specifically those in which the only form of indexicality is *tense*. For there is a thesis relating to such propositions, that has just as much plausibility as the thesis of omnitemporal truth has in relation to Thoughts, namely, the thesis of the unrestricted soundness of the truth-value links between the tenses. (There may be similar theses governing other forms of indexicality as well, but I shall not pursue this suggestion here.) According to this thesis, if the proposition [that Peter is now in pain] *is* true, then the proposition [that Peter will be in pain] *was* true (at all times in the past), and the proposition [that Peter was in pain] *will* be true (at all times in the future). And how could it be the case that both (a) any true proposition implies the existence of that proposition and (b) the proposition [that Peter will be in pain] was true in the year 40 million B.C., unless that proposition existed in that year? This argument does not yet show that such propositions exist omnitemporally. It only shows that all true future-tensed propositions exist at all times in the past, and that all true past-tensed propositions exist at all times in the future. However, since a parallel argument would also work for falsehood, we shall be able to derive the omnitemporal existence of tensed propositions so long as the principle of bivalence is endorsed relative to any particular time. And then, having demonstrated that all Thoughts, as well as some propositions that are not Thoughts, exist omnitemporally, it would seem reasonable to believe that *all* propositions exist omnitemporally.

Frege is correct: one cannot believe in the omnitemporality of truth without being committed to the omnitemporal existence of Thoughts. (Nor can one believe in the unrestricted soundness of the truth-value links between the tenses without being committed to the omnitemporal existence of at least some propositions that are not Thoughts.) But why should we not take this argument as a *reductio*, replacing the thesis of omnitemporal truth with a more modest hypothetical form, similar to that sketched above for statements? – namely, if any presently-existing Thought is true, then if anyone *were* to give expression to that Thought at some time other than the present, they would give expression to a true Thought (unless, as in some of the examples above, the Thought in question itself implies that it was *not* expressed at that time). Indeed this is surely the correct response, since the full extent of our *use* for the omnitemporality thesis lies in the weaker hypothetical form. We have no use for the thesis of the omnitemporal truth of Thoughts, except in our assessments of the truth-values of assertions of those Thoughts. (A similar point holds for the truth-value links between the tenses of tensed propositions.) Thus we make use of the fact that the Thought [that sun shines in Belfast on the 16th of June 1984] is presently true, in assessing last week's prediction by a weather-forecaster that it *would* be sunny on the 16th, as well as in justifying the counterfactual that if he *had* predicted sun on the 16th he would have been right. We have no use for the idea of the past truth of that Thought, except as it relates to actual, or possible, predictions. (Similarly, we have no use for the idea of the future truth of the Thought, except as it relates to assessments of actual, or possible, historical claims.) We thus have no need of the strong theses of omnitemporal truth, and of the truth-value links between the tenses; the weaker hypothetical forms will do.

I suggest, then, that we should reject as false the sentence, 'The Thought [that no intelligent life exists prior to the year 20 million B.C.] was true in the year 40 million B.C.', not because of any thesis about the indeterminacy of the future, but simply because it implies the existence of a Thought in the year 40 million B.C.. We should, similarly, reject as false the sentence, 'The proposition [that no intelligent life will exist prior to the year 20 million B.C.] was true in the year 40 million B.C.'. For nothing of any importance will be lost to us by giving up these sentences as false. Each consists, in fact, of two independent claims. First, that the Thought or proposition in question existed in the year 40 million B.C.; this we have no reason to accept, in the absence of an independent proof of the mind-independence of Thoughts and propositions. Secondly, that it is in fact true that no intelligent life exists prior to 20 million B.C.⁹ Whether

⁹ Dummett marks a similar distinction, in his brief discussion of eternal Thoughts, FPL, pp. 368–70. He does not, however, distinguish between the arguments from omnitemporality, and from objectivity, of truth; nor does he give either argument a proper run for its money.

or not a belief in the objectivity of such truths commits us to the mind-independence of Thoughts and propositions, will form the subject of the next section.

V

*The argument from the objectivity of truth.*¹⁰ This argument proceeds first, as did the previous one, to conclusion (C1), that any truth implies the existence of a Thought (or proposition). It then continues as follows:

- (3) There are objective truths about the past (and future), and about counterfactual situations.
- (C2) So Thoughts (and propositions) exist at times in the remote past and future, and many would have existed even had the world been very different.
- (4) Any falsehood implies the existence of a Thought (or proposition), and the principle of bivalence holds relative to any particular time and context in any particular possible world.
- (C3) So Thoughts (and propositions) exist necessarily (i.e., they exist at all times in all possible worlds).

Premises (3) and (4) appear obviously true; at any rate, I propose to grant them, since I am granting Frege his general realism. And the move from (C2) and (4) to (C3) appears sound. Everything turns, I suggest, on the soundness of the move to (C2). On one way of taking the argument, this move has essentially the same form as was involved in the argument from omnitemporal truth. Thus consider, as a particular instance of (3), the true Thought [that there exist sabre-tooth tigers in England in the year 20 million B.C.]. The claim will be that since this Thought was, itself, *true* in the year 20 million B.C., it must have existed in that year. But this can now be rejected as false. We can retain objectivity of truth in relation to the past by maintaining that the Thought in question is *presently* objectively true. We can reject as false the claim that it *was* true in 20 million B.C., on the grounds that the Thought probably did not exist in that year. For the same reason we can reject as false the claim that the Thought *would have been* true if there had never been any intelligent agents. The objectivity of truth in relation to such a counterfactual possibility may be adequately captured by means of the following: the Thought [that there exist sabre-tooth tigers in the year 20 million B.C., in any world that differs from the actual world only in that it never contains any intelligent agents] is (now) objectively true. So what is quite unclear, is why it should be believed that a

¹⁰ See FA, p. vii, LI, pp. 4, 25 and PW, pp. 129, 131–3.

truth *about* the past, or *about* a counterfactual possibility, presupposes the existence of a Thought (or proposition) *in* the past, or *in* that other possible world. What reason have we for saying anything more than that we make use of currently existing Thoughts and propositions in order to represent the past, and in order to represent how things might have been?

There are hints in Frege of quite a different sort of warrant for the move from (C1) and (3) to (C2), which is best presented by developing a certain conception of objectivity.¹¹ Objectivity about the present apparently requires that a Thought (or proposition; take the qualification as read for the remainder of this section) and the state of the world should settle the truth-value between them, with no further contribution required from us. Given that a sentence about something in the present has the sense that it has, and given that the world is as it is, then that sentence is already determinately true, or determinately false, independently of us; all that remains for us to do is discover, if we can, *which* it is.¹² Now try applying this idea to explain objectivity about the past, without bringing in Thoughts as independently existing entities. Thus suppose that sense is some function of presently-existing semantic intentions: then objectivity about the past requires us to picture these intentions somehow “reaching out” into the past to determine, in conjunction with the way the world was, and independently of us, the truth-value. But is this picture intelligible? How can anything reach into the past, since the past no longer exists? How can a presently-existing Thought – which exists, by hypothesis, *only* in the present (and recent past) – be made true by some long-past event? How can the relationship between a Thought and the state of affairs that renders it true, cross the boundaries of time? Frege’s answer is: only by having itself *existed through* the time in question. The idea is this: it is because the Thought I now express is the very same Thought as a Thought that existed at the time I am thinking about – at which time it was rendered determinately true or false by the state of the world at that time – that I have given expression to a Thought which has, now, a determinate truth-value. We can thus conceive of the Thought about the long-past event as having picked up its determinate truth-value at the time when the event occurred, and as having carried that truth-value forward to the present.

Note that we cannot adopt quite this treatment for determinacy of truth-value about the future, nor about counterfactual possibilities. For we cannot sensibly say that a Thought may “carry its truth-value back” from the future to the present, nor from other possible worlds to this one. All that we can say is:

¹¹ See, for instance, FA, p. vii, where Frege argues that if nothing remained fixed for all time, then there could be no knowledge and no truth.

¹² For further exposition of this conception of objectivity, together with a critique, see my “Ruling-out Realism”, *Philosophia* 1985.

the Thought that we now express will still exist in the distant future, and would have existed had things been different; and it will then, or would then, have picked up a determinate truth-value. It is doubtful whether this is sufficient for us to say that those truth-values are *now* determinate. But then our belief in objectivity in relation to the past is that much more firmly held than the corresponding beliefs about the future and about counterfactuals. (We can, however, still get an argument for the necessary existence of Thoughts, although the argument expounded here only strictly establishes their past existence, if we are prepared to insist that there will always be, and would always have been, objectivity of truth in relation to the past.)

Note also that we cannot hope to explain determinacy of truth-value about the past, without committing ourselves to the independent existence of Thoughts, by appealing to the hypothetical version of the thesis of omnitemporal truth, whose acceptance was urged in the last section. For suppose we try to explain how the Thought [that there are sabre-tooth tigers in England in the year 20 million B.C.] can be, now, determinately true, by claiming that, if that Thought *had* existed in the year in question, then it *would have* been rendered determinately true (or false). Is this hypothetical Thought itself determinately true (or false) or not? If not, then it cannot be used to explain the determinacy of the original. But if so, then just the same problem recurs: how can a merely presently-existing Thought be made true by a past event? For it can be nothing other than the fact that there *were* sabre-tooth tigers in England in that year which makes it true that, had the Thought in question existed, it would have been determinately true.

My strategy against this argument of Frege's will not be to tackle head-on the challenge of explaining how a presently-existing Thought can "reach back" into the remote past. It may indeed be that this idea cannot be made fully intelligible, thus motivating some version of anti-realism about the past. Rather, I shall argue that Frege's own position involves essentially the same difficulty. So a belief in independently-existing Thoughts at any rate leaves us no *better* placed to explain objectivity of truth in relation to the past.

If Thoughts are to enable us to bridge the gap between present and past, then we must have some conception of the identity-over-time of such entities. Now as for criteria of identity *at* a time, we might either go with Frege, and give our account in terms of sameness of information-content, or with the early Wittgenstein, and give it in terms of logical equivalence.¹³ But either way, we could hardly do other than utilise the very same notion in explaining identity *over* time, since Thoughts are essentially changeless. Suppose we gave our

¹³ For further discussion of these different conceptions of sense-identity, see my "Fragmentary Sense", *Mind* (1984).

account in terms of the weaker notion of logical equivalence (this being the simpler view to express), thus: Thought x at $t_1 =$ Thought y at t_2 if and only if x is logically equivalent to y . Then, substituting, our attempt to explain determinacy of truth-value about the past becomes: the Thought that I now grasp is logically equivalent to a Thought that was rendered either determinately true, or determinately false, at the time in question. This requires us to be able to identify, or refer to, a past Thought, by means of the description, ‘the Thought logically equivalent to the Thought I now express’. So we now have to picture the sense of this description reaching back into the remote past to pick out a particular Thought. Yet this is, of course, precisely the sort of phenomenon (“reaching back into the past”) that Frege’s account was designed to explain – in which case we might just as well let the past-existing Thought drop out altogether. If Frege’s own account presupposes that a presently-existing description-sense can reach back into the past to pick out a particular Thought, then we may as well picture the presently-existing Thought projecting back internal relations to confront the past state of the world *directly*, so as to determine an objective truth-value.

VI

*The argument from analyticity.*¹⁴ The final argument for the mind-independence of Thoughts that may be discerned in Frege’s writings, runs as follows:

- (1) There are truths that are true absolutely necessarily (i.e., that are true at all times in all possible worlds, and would have been true even if there had been no world).
- (2) Such truths are analytic, or conceptual, truths, and are true purely in virtue of the meanings (senses) of the words involved.
- (3) That in virtue of which something is true must exist at any time, and in any circumstances, in which it is true.
- (C1) So meanings (senses) exist absolutely necessarily.
- (C2) So Thoughts (senses of context-free sentences) exist absolutely necessarily.

This argument is, I suggest, valid. Any weakness must lie in the premises.

I propose to grant Frege the existence of the class of analytic truths, as being an essential aspect of his views on mathematics, and of his general approach to the philosophy of language. Given this, the thesis that analytic truths are

¹⁴ See: FA, pp. vi–vii, LI, pp. 17, 24–5, 27, and PW, pp. 133, 135, 148.

eternal truths is extremely plausible, in either its weaker or its stronger forms. For not only are we prepared to rely upon an analytic truth – a law of logic, for instance – in reasoning about events in the remote past or future, we should also be prepared to rely upon it in reasoning about any counterfactual possibility, no matter how far removed from the real world. And indeed many have felt that God himself must have been subject to the laws of logic, even prior to the creation.

Note that we cannot reject premise (1) by deploying the sort of distinction we used in our attack on the argument from omnitemporality in §IV. For consider the statement that it *was* impossible, 20 million years B.C., that any object should have been both red all over and green all over. We cannot here distinguish between the implied claim that a certain Thought existed in the year 20 million B.C., and the claim (expressible by a merely presently-existing Thought) that a certain state of affairs obtained in that year. For in virtue of premises (2) and (3), what state of affairs could this be, except the obtaining of relations between senses? (It will be instructive here to compare the argument from analyticity with a more modern variant, namely, (1) Necessary truth is truth in all possible worlds, (2) Any truth implies the existence of a proposition, (C) So (some) propositions exist in all possible worlds. Premise (1) is in fact no more plausible than the thesis of omnitemporal truth, and may be rejected accordingly. Distinguishing between truth *about* a possible world, and truth *in* a possible world, we may express the necessity of, ‘No object is both red all over and green all over’ as follows: for all possible worlds *w*, the Thought [that no object is both red all over and green all over] is a truth about *w* (as opposed to a truth *in w*). And this of course gives us nothing beyond the existence of the Thought in *our* world. The distinctive feature of the argument from analyticity, in contrast, is that a necessary truth is construed as being *about* relations between sense. This apparently enables it to block the deployment of any parallel distinction.)

The account of analyticity expressed in premise (2) should appear plausible to anyone who, like Frege, believes in the objectivity of necessity, who believes that we are here concerned with a genuine class of *truths*, and who is prepared to put forward a reasonable account of our knowledge of them. For it is extremely natural to believe that there are objective, internal relations between the senses of our expressions, which can be genuine objects of discovery. And it is equally natural to believe that we must be especially well placed to have knowledge of such relations. For since sense is what is known in virtue of linguistic understanding, all that one would have to do to discover internal relations between senses, would be to think clearly about the content of our understanding. Thus in the case of at least a large class of those sentences believed to be necessarily, and objectively, true, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that such sentences are true in virtue of sense.

Premise (3), too, appears plausible. The Thought [that Jesus is a carpenter in the year 20 A.D.] is true, if it is, in virtue of the properties Jesus possessed in the year represented. So how could it be true unless Jesus, and his properties, existed in that year? Similarly then, if the necessary truth, 'No object is both red all over and green all over' holds good for the year 20 million B.C. (as indeed it does for all time), and if it is true in virtue of relations between senses, then how could those senses not exist in that year? However, if this analogy is to be sound, we have to regard the Thought [that it is impossible that any object should be both red all over and green all over throughout the year 20 million B.C.], as being true in virtue of the fact that the senses of the predicates 'is red all over' and 'is green all over' *were* incompatible in the year in question, just as the Thought about Jesus is true in virtue of the properties Jesus possessed in the year in question. But we could equally well regard it as being true in virtue of the fact that the senses of the predicates 'is red all over throughout 20 million B.C.' and 'is green all over throughout 20 million B.C.', *are* incompatible. We can thus reject premise (3), in its complete generality, without having to give up either of premises (1) and (2). We can claim that it is relations between merely presently-existing senses which constrain our talk *about* the past.

If Frege's argument is to work, then when we say that an analytic truth holds good for all times, and in all possible worlds, we have to be construed as saying something which will be true, if at all, in virtue of relations that obtain between senses at all times in all possible worlds. Thus the eternity of, 'No object is both red all over and green all over' has to derive from a truth of something like the following form:

For all times t , and all possible worlds w , the senses of 'is red all over' and 'is green all over' are mutually incompatible at t in w .

This certainly would imply the eternal existence of sense. But we could equally well be construed as saying something which will be true in virtue of relations between merely presently-existing senses, where those relations are such that they remain invariable so long as they occur in Thoughts relating to the same objects at the same time, and so long as those Thoughts relate to the same possible world. Thus the eternity of 'No object is both red all over and green all over' could just as well derive from a truth of the following form:

For all modes of identifying a time t , and all modes of identifying a possible world w , the senses of 'is red all over at t in w ' and 'is green all over at t in w ', are mutually incompatible.

Here, by quantifying over *modes of identification* of times and worlds (i.e., entities belonging to the realm of sense), we have avoided commitment to anything other than the present existence of sense. And yet we have retained

enough to explain how it is that sentences like ‘In the year 20 million B.C., there is an object both red all over and green all over’ and ‘If there had never been any intelligent agents, there would have been an object both red all over and green all over’, cannot possibly be true.

One can thus believe in the existence of a class of objective analytic truths: believing that all internal relations between senses were determined, independently of us, as soon as the senses of our expressions were determined; believing, indeed, that these relations are genuine objects of discovery. And one can believe that an analytic truth is an eternal truth: constraining our talk about remote times, and about counter-factual situations, just as much as it constrains our talk about the present. And yet one can, consistently with both beliefs, believe that sense depends for its existence upon our existence: only coming to exist when we first begin to use a language in which that sense may be expressed.

VII

Conclusion. This paper has been largely negative: I have argued that Frege has provided us with no good reason for believing in the mind-independent existence of Thoughts and propositions. There remains the positive task, which falls outside the scope of my discussion of Frege, of showing just *how* these entities might depend upon the human mind. Do Thoughts reduce to some function of human activity? Or do they merely supervene on that activity? And if the latter, what is the exact nature of the supervenience relation? It is conceivable that this positive task may prove to be impossible. (Thus reductionism, at any rate, would appear to be an unpromising strategy, given the work of such modern writers as Quine and the later Wittgenstein.) If this were to turn out to be the case, then we should, after all, have a negative argument (an argument “by default”, so to speak) for the independent existence of Thoughts. But it would still want an argument to show that Thoughts exist eternally. For compare: if it were to prove impossible either to reduce the mental to the physical, or to explain adequately how the mental might supervene on the physical, then we should have reason to believe that minds exist independently of bodies; but we should have no reason to believe that they exist eternally, in any of the various senses of ‘eternal’. Nor can the supposed changelessness of Thoughts make the difference between the two cases, since from the fact that an entity is changeless throughout its existence, it does not follow that its existence cannot have a beginning and an end.

Thus if, as I believe, Frege’s arguments for the eternal existence of Thoughts are the best available to us, and if the considerations adduced in this paper have been sound, then there is no prospect of any convincing argument for a belief in eternal Thoughts. The most that could be hoped for – were there to be repeated

failure in attempts to ground a supervenience thesis – would be some reason to believe that Thoughts exist independently of the human mind. But we should then still be left with the problem of explaining how one can grasp, and be guided by, a Thought, without being aware that one is.

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