

On Inflating Frege on Thinking

Blagovest Sotirov Mollov

Sofia University "St. Kliment of Ochrid"

e-mail: bmollov@phls.uni-sofia.bg

Apart from the composition of (the final draft of) the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2018 marks another centenary of key significance for (the history of) analytic philosophy - the publication of the first part of Frege's failed book project on the philosophy of logic in, of all places, the somewhat obscure *Beiträge zur Philosophie des Deutschen Idealismus*, under the title "Der Gedanke. Eine Logische Untersuchung" ("The Thought: A Logical Inquiry"). Given Frege's distrust of natural language and his respective attempt to devise a formalized medium for the unambiguous and precise expression of thoughts (more or less rightly credited with the creation of modern logic) plus the narrow focus of his theoretical interests, it might seem strange that his work has somehow become a realm of interpretive controversies, involving Michael Dummett, Hans Sluga, Gregory Currie, Peter Hacker and Gordon Baker, to name just the major representatives of the major opposing interpretative factions. "Der Gedanke" (translated as "(The) Thought" or "Thoughts" in English) has also had its (un)fair share of interpretative warfare that defies and probably does not need brief summary, but there is a recent trend which I deem does need some comment.

In their (rather short 100-page) *Frege on Thinking and Its Epistemic Significance* (2015) Pieranna Garavaso and Nicola Vassallo set out to suggest that contrary to the Dummett-dominated view of Frege's uncompromising anti-psychologism, Frege in fact demonstrates an interest in the psychological process of thinking (*das Denken*) as opposed to the objective, impersonal thought(s) (*der Gedanke*) whose understanding has exclusively attracted interpreters' attention so far. They point out that this Dummettian view could not explain why if Frege supposedly took the study of thinking, as psychological, to be irrelevant to logic and, by extension, to philosophy in general, he nevertheless devoted considerable space to discussions of thinking both in his early (*Begriffsschrift* (1879)) and later work ("Der Gedanke" (1918-1919)). So, "[t]he main goal" of their book is said to be "to fill the gap" of "not paying close enough attention to what Frege says about thinking" (Garavaso & Vassallo 2015: 1). That, by itself, is hardly objectionable, though there is certainly a reason for that neglect on the part of previous Frege scholars, an attitude that the authors think should be corrected by "integrating" the standard reading by "an interpretation of the role of thinking in his philosophical views on logic, knowledge, and language" (ibid., p. 7), since allegedly that role is "important".

They start by locating their position within the domain of current Frege scholarship (Chapter 1); present it in (some) detail in Chapters 2 and 3; go on to outline a picture of Frege's epistemology that emerges from their interpretation (Chapter 4) and conclude with a general discussion of language's relation to (human) thinking (Chapter 5).

That approach is, *prima facie*, promising or at least refreshing: in trying to explore a relatively neglected area next to the two dominant approaches of focusing on "thoughts" or/and their "truth-values" and joining those willing to investigate Frege's views on the apparently logically relevant acts or activities of inferring and judging, Garavaso and Vassallo may seem to rightly hope to provide a new perspective on Frege's more general epistemological concerns that may serve to advance the understanding of those aspects of his work that have led to the mentioned interpretive tensions and, as they put it, to offer an "insight into his view so the roles of language in expressing thoughts and in fostering the development of human knowledge" (ibid., p. 1), something that interpreters (allegedly) have never done yet. While we might expect a clear demarcation of existing borders from a novelty-claiming approach, the authors' decision to choose Dummett as "the foil against which [to] characterize [their] positions" or as their "main interlocutor in contrast to other more recent and not yet as influential scholars" is perfectly admissible, especially if they believe that though Dummett's interpretation is "outdated" and "widely criticized", it is still "the best developed, encompassing, systematic, and articulated effort to reconstruct Frege's thought" (ibid., p. 8). A closer look at the secondary literature, however, in my opinion, might have been useful in the positive account of their own views, assuming that historiographical correctness is optional.

A more questionable decision is Garavaso and Vassallo's express refusal to treat their book as one on the history of (analytic) philosophy and hence to employ any properly historiographical methods: "we do not look at all that Frege wrote and we do not pay much attention to the targets of his views" (ibid., p. 7). Again, there is nothing objectionable to thusly restricting the scope of one's work - they clearly do not wish to get involved in methodological debates, simply taking the side of, well, Dummett (in that debate). Yet, the absence of any attempt of even cursorily justifying their methodological stance is rather puzzling for, ironically, it depends on the *historiographical* thesis of the continuity or unity of Frege's work. It is that thesis that is taken to legitimize their practice of citing (extensively) from the whole Fregean corpus, regardless of the temporal separation and specificity of particular passages and of taking the views expressed in his mature period as "having more weight than earlier ones" with which they may be in conflict, so just saying that they will "abide by" Dummett's exegetical principles (which they appear to be somewhat confused about anyway (ibid., p. 7), because they "seem highly sensible" to them may not be scholarly satisfactory.

Even if it is taken to be so, assuming that they also accept fully Dummett's own justification of his interpretative approach, the precise character of their study remains rather obscure. It is emphatically said to not be a historical work yet is almost entirely devoted to the exegesis of Frege's texts and has a declared "main goal" of "filling a gap" in Frege interpretation, which, of course, would be very hard to achieve without any historical contextualization of Frege's views on thinking (and without contextualizing those views within his general logical theory and philosophy of language, as the authors say they intend to do, despite their opinion that the current "mainstream" interpretation is "incomplete" and hence, needs "to be integrated by an interpretation of the role of thinking in his philosophical views on logic, knowledge, and language (ibid., p. 8 - 9)). It is not, however, a systematic treatise on thinking because of the narrow textual focus on Frege that also disqualifies it as being a collection of meditations on thinking loosely related to or inspired by Frege's views on the topic. If we take Garavaso and Vassallo at their word, all they want to do is to suggest a mere amendment to the "thought-centred" reading of Frege rather than reject it, or advance an alternative one or an original neo-Fregean theory of thinking, though we are left to guess what that may involve and how exactly they can hope to go about and realize their project with the methodological commitments, to the extent that those are determinable at all, they seem to have.

As might be expected, that inadequacy of the self-conceptualization of authorial intentions translates readily in the body of the book. Garavaso and Vassallo end their introductory remarks with the claim that one of the reasons Frege's views on thinking have been ignored or under-appreciated by his Anglophone readers is the confusion between *das Denken* and *der Gedanke* that the English translation of "*das Denken*" as thought has allegedly caused. While that clearly cannot be a serious argument for the lack of scholarly interest in the issue (if it is an issue, in light of his unhesitant anti-psychologism), we are told that the translation practice in question "has obscured the presence in Frege of a notion of thinking that is not of a merely psychological nature" (ibid., p. 10), namely, what is declared to be the "main thesis" of the study, the presence of a notion of "thinking as a process with philosophical and logical relevance" (ibid., p. 13).

In brief, the structure of the argument is as follows. A careful examination of Frege's expressed positions show, according to Garavaso and Vassallo, that while he opposes some (two) varieties of psychologism - semantic psychologism (or the view that the meanings of words or sentences are ideas or mental images associated with them) and, the somewhat oxymoronic, "Platonist psychologism" (denying the existence of a "third realm" of abstract and mind-independent entities besides the physical and mental realms) - he is nevertheless committed to (a kind of) "qualified" logical psychologism (the view that logic is prescriptively related to actual human thinking, i. e., in Frege's words, that logical laws "legislate how one ought to think" (*Basic Laws*, iv) (ibid., pp. 19 - 25)). That is an extremely controversial claim that goes against

both most of Frege's emphatic pronouncements and almost all of the subsequent interpretations of the latter (the authors actually discuss Carnap's and Haack's opinions on the matter but only to disagree with them without explaining why). They also note the lack of consensus of how to define psychologism, which, as they approvingly quote Martin Kusch as saying, "makes it an easy feat to identify psychologism or psychologistic tendencies in each and every philosophical system" but do nothing else than suggest their (similarly controversial) division of psychologism into the three mentioned varieties (of semantic, Platonist and logical). Instead they present us with a comparison between Boole and Frege (ibid., pp. 26 - 34) in order to demonstrate the alleged similarity of their views on the normative role of logic for thinking, which, for some reason they take as "provid[ing] further support for [their] reading of Frege's philosophy of logic as partially psychologistic" (ibid., p. 26).

What we get next is an interpretation of Frege's conception of thinking ("in relation to logic, language, and objective entities such as thoughts", in another typical vague formulation (ibid., p. 42)) which proceeds via a distinction between two notions of objectivity (as excluding the subjective and as intersubjective, respectively) and between three types of thinking, namely, "psychological" (the "inner" stream of subjective "ideas", representations etc); "logical" or "pure" ("wholly devoid of psychological features") and "logical-psychological" (apparently, the actual thinking informed by logic, which "allow[s] humans to grasp thoughts, to distinguish between the psychological and the logical, to isolate the logical element, and to build on its basis inferences that can be shared" (ibid., p. 108). The suggested taxonomy is obviously problematic for if the logical thinking is "wholly devoid" of any "psychological elements" so that it cannot be "embodied" in the minds of actual thinkers that unavoidably contain psychological elements (ibid., p. 53) (and if, apparently, the same applies to psychological thinking as no one's mind is actually a pure stream of particular subjective incommunicable contents), it is not clear why Frege takes "pure thinking" as the achievable goal of *Begriffsschrift* and how that type of thinking can be normative, i. e., prescribe the rules for actual thinking.

As it is unclear what the drawing of the distinction between these three kinds of thinking is supposed to achieve in the first place, apart from an overcomplicated and deeply confused expression of a trivial reminder on Frege's part of the need to improve our actual thinking by carefully freeing it from the psychological elements that prevent us from attaining objective truth. Neither the "logical" or the "psychological" types of thinking in Garavaso and Vassallo's taxonomy seem coherent conceptions. A purely psychological type of thinking, presented by them as one that "cannot be aimed at thoughts" (ibid., p. 57) but concerned merely with subjective images, representations, sensations etc. would certainly not qualify as "thinking" for Frege since for him thinking is nothing else than grasping thoughts (Frege 1918/1997: 74/341). A purely "logical" type of thinking as a pure activity of

grasping thoughts seems equally incoherent, for apparently there cannot be totally impersonal, non-subjective activity of "grasping" - leaving aside the issue that even if such a (non-human) activity is somehow conceivable a purely logical thinking would not be automatically identical with pure grasping of thoughts but only of thoughts of particular logical nature among many other types of non-logical thoughts, an issue that GaravasoandVassallo fail to notice.

The incoherence affects the authors' account of Frege's epistemological views as related to the notion(s) of thinking they ascribe to Frege. GaravasoandVassallo devote a whole chapter in their attempt to correct the view that Frege was not really interested in wider epistemological questions (GaravasoandVassallo 2015: 64) by discussing his engagement with core classical epistemological topics as skepticism, epistemic justification, the sources of knowledge, the definition of propositional knowledge and even (the currently fashionable) naturalism. All these engagements, GaravasoandVassallo maintain, demonstrate the "epistemic dimension" Frege's notion of thinking has. For instance, skepticism is countered by recourse to the existence of mind-independent, objective, publicly accessible thoughts (requiring a mind-independent "grasper" of them) that effectively guarantee the reality of external reality and the reliability of our knowledge of it (ibid., pp. 67 - 8). While that reply may not satisfy the skeptic, who would still want to have a proof that a Third realm of that kind exists beyond any doubt, it indicates the general strategy of the authors of supporting their thesis or rather their particular interpretation of Frege's doctrine of thinking, for there is hardly any doubt that thinking does have an "epistemic dimension".

Thus, they reconstruct Frege's conception of (propositional) knowledge, drawn from a 1924 - 5 manuscript on the "sources of knowledge", as consisting of (i) grasping given thoughts and (ii) recognizing them as true, where the two are distinct; (i) is a condition of (ii); and (ii) is seen as involving judgment as "what justifies the recognition of a truth", though judging a thought to be true is not to be entirely identified with the justification of its truth, regardless of how "close" it is to the latter and is also not to be identified with the truth of a thought, since thoughts, for Frege, are true or false independently of whether they are recognized as such (ibid., p. 71 - 2). On that account, thinking as solely the activity of grasping thoughts is different from knowing but, surprisingly enough, their project being what it is, GaravasoandVassallo do not consider textual evidence that Frege may have had a less restrictive conception of thinking: as an activity that not only grasps thoughts but can itself produce knowledge by judging and proving the truth of thoughts, and perhaps, even more, for example, generate thought-like contents such as "elucidations" of purely logical concepts through logical notations, as some interpretations of *Grundlagen* and *Grundgesetze* hold. Which is indeed strange, given that they end their book with a (largely irrelevant) chapter on the role of (symbolic) language with respect to thoughts and thinking as a means for expressing the former (so that they become "graspable" by human thinkers) and "directing"

the latter (because of the direct way distinct types of thinking are "tied...to the language employed in the process of thinking": actual thinking - to natural languages; logical-psychological thinking - to a suitable conceptual notation) (ibid., pp. 85 ff; 102; 90).

That is an exceedingly underwhelming attempt at "rehabilitating" the significance of Frege's conception of thinking within his philosophy of logic and epistemology (if he is to be taken as possessing a distinct and sufficiently developed one). Leaving aside the general confusion concerning the intentions and character of that particular attempt - for, as mentioned, there is hardly any doubt that Frege did discuss thinking and certain epistemological questions (of relevance to his more restricted project) and that thinking, for Frege and in general, has an important role in knowledge (and, additionally, that language has a similarly important role to play in thinking, including the one Garavaso and Vassallo concentrate on ignoring other ones of no less importance) - perhaps the legitimate question it may be credited as raising is whether the "mainstream" interpretation of Frege's understanding of thinking has indeed left out or obscured aspects of his views on the issue that can elucidate more interpretatively controversial views of his or make some supposedly non-controversial ones controversial (despite Garavaso and Vassallo's disclaimer that they do not wish to challenge or radically revise the "mainstream" interpretation).

Though I cannot go into details here (nor perhaps do I need to, since the issue does seem rather self-evident), I do not really see how that question can get an affirmative answer (or be regarded as in any sense pressing in the current context of either Frege interpretation or analytic philosophy). At the risk of oversimplifying (or complicating) the point, there appears to be no alternative to the standard interpretation of Frege's self-interpretation as espousing and promoting "anti-psychologism" - he would certainly be shocked to be classified as committed to even "qualified" logical psychologism. Nor are there textual or other reasons to consider an alternative to the standard interpretation of Frege as an anti-psychologist pace his own interpretation of his views or their implications, for, admittedly, he may have misidentified those (and we may not wish to expose interpretative selves to possible accusation of slipping into the intentional fallacy anyway).

Conceding that the problem of what psychologism involves and who can or cannot be classified as a psychologistic or psychologism-prone philosopher is far from settled, we can safely claim that if anyone is to be classified as resolutely anti-psychologistic, it is Frege (mostly of the *GrundlagenderArithmetik* (1884), of the "Foreword" of the *GrundgesetzederArithmetik* (1893), his review of Husserl's *PhilosophiederArithmetik* (1891) but also in *Der Gedanke* (no matter that he always actually spoke of "psychological logicians" and/of "the intrusion of psychology in logic" rather than of "psychologism" in general (cf. Kusch 1995: 59)). The textual and extra-textual evidence at our disposal and the

sustained and dedicated work of generations of Frege scholars firmly support the "mainstream" interpretation against GaravasoandVassallo's identification of elements of logical psychologism in Frege. Which certainly does not exclude the (unlikely) possibility that they might have been wrong though indicatively Frege's (logical) anti-psychologism has never been an object of interpretative controversy amidst other interpretative conflicts his work has given rise to - again, not a real proof of interpretative correctness but a fact that places the burden of proof on those who would wish to challenge the standard account. Not to claim that actuality is an evidence for validity, but perhaps the further fact that the issue of psychologism in logic is now only familiar to historians of logic is at least a sign of the universal consensus of the soundness of Frege's campaign against "psychological logicians" (and, of course, of the universal ascription to him of the anti-psychologism of the currently dominant logic, whose dominance is seen as at least partially a result of its separation from psychological considerations and concerns, a separation Frege has been credited with having effected).

Maybe (but only maybe) if the issue of psychologism is somehow itself separated from that of the epistemic role for thinking - a highly problematic move, since that would involve making concessions to psychologism and hence changing the whole framework of the problem - can a project of the type of GaravasoandVassallo's one hope to succeed, i. e., if it also (somehow) manages to show that in fact Frege would tolerate the ascription of genuine productivity to thinking (along the previously mentioned lines) as opposed to the "passivity" of grasping thoughts. Yet again that strategy would seem to require an extremely controversial revision of the interpretation of the nature of Frege's concerns, a revision that would be hard to justify against the explicit and unambiguous textual evidence of the Fregean corpus.

Bibliography

Baker, G. P. and P. M. S. Hacker, *Frege: Logical Excavations*, Oxford University Press (1984).

Carl, W., *Frege's Theory of Sense and Reference*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1994).

Currie, G., *Frege: An Introduction to His Philosophy*, Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press (1982).

Dummett, M., *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1981).

- // -, *Frege and Other Philosophers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991).

Frege, G., "Der Gedanke. Eine Logische Untersuchung", in *Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus* 1 (1918-9): 58-77, reprinted in Frege 1990: 342-78; trans. as "Thoughts" in Frege 1984: 351-72, and as "Thought" in Frege 1997: 325-45.

- // -, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. by: Geach and M. Black, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1952).

-// -, *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*, trans. by M. Black, V. Dudman: Geach, H. Kaal, E.-H. W. Kluge, B. McGuinness, and R. H. Stoothoff, New York: Basil Blackwell (1984).

- // -, *Kleine Schriften*, ed. by I. Angelelli, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag (2nd ed.) (1990).

- // -, *The Frege Reader*, ed. by M. Beaney, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1997).

Garavaso, P. and N. Vassallo, *Frege on Thinking and its Epistemic Significance*, Lexington Books (2015).

Kusch, M., *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge*, London: Routledge (1995).

Ricketts, T. and M. Potter (eds.), *Cambridge Companion to Frege*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2010).

Sluga, H., *Gottlob Frege*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1980).

A more thorough engagement with the secondary literature might also provide additional paths to the discussion of the problematics the authors are interested in: for instance, via Russell's criticism of Frege for allowing the "intrusion" of "psychological elements" in the realm of logic (cf., § 478, in Appendix A of Russell's *Principles of Mathematics*); Dummett's objections against what he takes to be Frege's extreme Platonism that ignores the role of mental activity in determining meanings, thoughts and understanding in general; and especially the newer trend of Frege interpretation, associated with the work of Danielle Macbeath, Thomas Ricketts, Joan Weiner etc. who emphasize the way Frege himself had thematized that role. And, certainly, the even newer historical, broadly contextualizing studies of Frege, within the so-called "historical turn" of analytic philosophy, can shed valuable light on his actual conceptual background, premisses and terminological uses in dealing with thinking as an activity and its role in logic and cognition (the authors do mention the work of Sluga and mostly Wolfgang Carl in that respect (Garavaso & Vassallo 2015: 6).

Thus, they say: "According to Dummett, the main mistake that can be made is "to interpret what he said in his mature period in the light of his earlier writings" for "it is unhistorical to read back into Frege ideas which originated only with his successors." Which is a clear confusion between two different contentions (coming from two different books of Dummett's, separated by a decade,

Dummett 1981: 7 and Dummett 1991: 217, respectively), the second one being precisely the a-historical fallacy Dummett has often been accused of, a fact Garavaso and Vassallo mention in their note without noticing the inconsistency of their sentence.

Whose position they somehow manage to misinterpret, (Garavaso & Vassallo 2015: 23 - 4), for Carnap's view in the cited passage (taken from *Logical Foundations of Probability* (1962), pp. 41 - 2) in fact rejects rather than supports qualified logical psychologism and thus in no sense can be said to "resemble" the passage from Frege's introduction to *Grundgesetze* that asserts the normative character of all laws with respect to human thinking.

The term "psychologism" is tellingly not to be found in at least two of the fundamental works of modern (XXth c. logic), namely, Quine's *The Philosophy of Logic* (1986) and Kneale & Kneale's *The Development of Logic* (1965).