Fragmentary Sense

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Frege's notion of sense— as presented to us by Dummett, at least— is an irreductably cognitive one, being intended as the central correlate of linguistic understanding. Sense is that a knowledge of which will constitute a speaker's grasp of what is represented by the content of any complete linguistic utterance which he understands, no matter whether that utterance is made by himself or by some other speaker, and no matter what form the utterance takes (e.g. statement, question, command). Knowledge of sense is thus intended to underpin, and explain, both the representative and communicative functions of language, and to do this right across the board. Against this, I shall be arguing for the fragmentation of the notion of sense along two quite different fault-lines: in sections I and II, I argue that the notion needed to explain the representative function of language is not the notion needed to explain (factual) communication; and in III, that the notion needed to explain factual communication is not the notion needed to explain communication in other regions of linguistic intercourse, such as the imperative.

For the purposes of this paper I propose to accept without argument Dummett's broad approach to the Fregean doctrine of sense, thus accepting that the notion of sense is intended as a contribution to the construction of a systematic, unitary, theory of linguistic understanding. (Those who reject this assumption can treat the paper as being more about Dummett than about Frege.) Moreover, without wishing to commit myself to any very strong exegetical claims, I shall label the view which would distinguish between representative and communicative notions of sense, 'Tractarian'; and the view which would distinguish different notions of sense for the different regions of discourse (different 'language-games'), 'later Wittgensteinian'. These latter two names are intended—at least for present purposes—as little more than labels indicating the respective sources of my inspiration.

I

It is important to realise that there are two very different—though
not unconnected—aspects of Frege's doctrine concerning the sense
of statements. On the one hand there is the importance, for the
theory of meaning, of drawing a distinction between sense and
reference at all. Frege should here be seen as arguing that there can
be no such thing as *bare* knowledge of reference. Thus we cannot
simply devise a theory that assigns referents to the various
component expressions of the language, and hence that assigns
truth-values to the completed sentences of the language, and leave it
at that. For this is not something that any speaker could be said to
know, or at least not directly. Yet precisely what we want from a
theory of meaning, is an account of what it is for a speaker to
understand a language, and understanding is, it would seem, a
species of knowledge. Moreover, a purely referential theory would
leave us puzzling over the question how it is possible for a
statement—most obviously a statement of identity—to convey
information at all. So not only should a speaker be credited with the
knowledge that a particular individual is the referent—the bearer—
of a particular proper name, he must also be credited with a
knowledge of some means of identifying, or 'picking out', that
individual. And not only should he be credited with a knowledge of
the extension, say, of a predicate, but he must also be credited with a
grasp of some rule for determining that extension.

   This aspect of Frege's doctrine of sense—that sense determines
reference, the sense of an expression representing the subject's
mode of thinking about the referent of that expression—has come
under attack recently by such contemporary American writers as
Kripke and Putnam.[1] However I shall not discuss their criticisms
here. My interest is rather in the criticisms that can be made of the
full-blown Fregean theory of sense even from within a broadly
Fregean perspective.

   Note that the notion of sense, as here introduced, is not especially
social, or inter-subjective, in character. It is essentially a theory of
speaker's understanding, of the knowledge that an individual
speaker has of his own idiolect. Nothing has as yet been said about
what is required for there to be communication through the use of

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1   S. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980). H. Putnam, 'The
     meaning of "meaning"', in *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge:
     Cambridge University Press, 1975).

language, beyond the claim that speakers must at least be in possession of *some* means—not necessarily the same for each speaker—of determing the referents of any component expressions involved. Since the whole *modus vivendi* of this notion of sense lies in its contrast with the notion of reference, and since we are here wholly concerned with the question of how the sentences in the idiolect of a particular speaker come to represent reality, I shall designate this notion 'sense$_r$'.

It is important to note the identity-conditions for sense$_r$ to which Frege is committed. Since a large part of the purpose of introducing this notion of sense is to enable us to explain how it is possible for sentences to convey information, we shall want to equate sameness of sense$_r$ with sameness of information-content. For if it were possible for two sentences to possess the same sense$_r$, relative to the idiolect of a particular speaker, but to convey different information to him, then we should lack an all-embracing explanation of informativeness. So we must say that two sentences will possess the same sense$_r$, relative to a particular speaker, if and only if, were he to believe the one to be true, he could not learn anything new on being told of the truth of the other.

The second aspect of the Fregean doctrine lies in the deployment of the notion of sense to explain human communication. Here sense, as something inter-subjective, is supposed to be that a knowledge of which subserves communication through the use of language. It is supposed that we can, in general, speak simply of '*the* sense of an expression' (as opposed to 'the sense which so-and-so attaches to the expression'); and speakers will understand one another in virtue of knowing one another to attach the same senses to the same expressions (i.e. in virtue of knowing, in general, *the* sense of those expressions). The notion of sameness of sense, or synonymy, is thus a crucial one for Frege's philosophy: since it is supposed to be mutual knowledge of sense that subserves communication through the use of language, two speakers can only be said to understand one another in the use of a sentence if both attach—and know one another to attach— the *same* sense to that sentence. If we designate the notion of sense here introduced 'sense$_c$', then on the question of what counts as sameness of sense$_c$ will turn a large part of the question what it is for a speaker to understand his language, in the sense of 'understand' in which it is a shared understanding of the language that enables different speakers to communicate.

I know of no suggestion in Frege's writings that it ever occurred to him that there might be distinct notions of sense, with different identity-conditions, underpinning the representative and communicative functions of language respectively. And indeed the criterion of sameness of sense$_c$ that Frege gives us—both explicitly at a number of points and implicitly throughout much of his later writing—is sameness of information-content.[1] He is thus committed to the substantial claim that the identity-conditions of sense$_c$ coincide with those of sense$_r$. The generalised notion of sameness of information-content may itself be explained by means of a sort of recursive definition, starting from the idiolect of a particular speaker:

(1) Two sentences will share the same information-content in the idiolect of a particular speaker if and only if, were he to believe the one to be true, he could not learn anything new on being told of the truth of the other; he will be able to say—either immediately or upon reflection—'Oh, I already know *that*.'

(2) Two different speakers will both attach the same information-content to a sentence if and only if, were one of them to employ another sentence, to be understood in the way in which the other understands the original sentence, then both sentences would, in the idiolect of that speaker, possess the same information-content, as defined in (1) above.

(3) Two different sentences of a language will share the same information-content if and only if, all (or most) speakers of the language attach the same information-content to those sentences, as defined in (1) and (2) above.

(4) Two different sub-sentential expressions will possess the same information-content if and only if, any two sentences that differ only in that the one expression occurs in place of the other will possess the same information-content, as defined in (3) above.

Such an account of sameness of sense$_c$ is not entirely without difficulty. In particular, the use of the phrase 'understood in the same way', in clause (2) above, might seem to involve a vicious circularity. For what can be meant by, 'The first speaker employs another sentence, which he understands in the way that the second speaker understands the original sentence' except, 'The first speaker employs another sentence, to which he attaches *the same*

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1   See G. Frege, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. P. Geach and M. Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960), pp. 29, 46n, 62, and *Posthumous Writings,* trans. P. Long and R. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), pp. 208–210.

sense$_c$ as the second speaker attaches to the original sentence'? Yet precisely what we were supposed to be providing, was an account of what it is for two speakers to attach the same sense$_c$ to a sentence. Now although it is true that there must inevitably be a sort of circularity here, it is not, I think, a vicious one. For in particular cases the notion of 'understanding in the same way' can be fleshed out—by specifying a 'way'—without having explicitly to introduce the notion of sameness of sense$_c$. For instance, we might indicate the way in which a speaker understands a particular sub-sentential expression by pointing to the definition—either explicit or ostensive—by means of which it was introduced to him. So a particular application of clause (4) above might proceed as follows: speaker A understands the predicate 'F' in terms of definition D_1, whereas speaker B understands it in terms of definition D_2. Now A and B will both attach the same information-content to 'F' if and only if, were A to employ another predicate 'G', understood in terms of definition D_2, then he must know—either immediately or upon reflection—that 'Fa' and 'Ga' say the same thing. The only sort of circularity involved here is this: we should have to rely upon our common understanding of definitions D_1 and D_2 (our grasp of their senses$_c$) in judging whether or not A and B do in fact attach the same information-content to 'F'. But there is nothing vicious about this, because merely relying upon our common understanding of the expressions of our language (i.e. merely talking to one another), does not in itself commit us to any particular account of what sense$_c$ *is*. It is not viciously circular to *use* our understanding of the language in the attempt to make explicit just what is involved in that understanding.

A further difficulty arises for the account of sameness of sense$_c$ even as it applies to two sentences in the idiolect of a particular speaker. (So this will also be a difficulty for the account of sameness of sense$_r$.) For note that it is not enough that the speaker will always, as a matter of fact, assent to the one if he assents to the other, since this may be contingent upon other things that he happens to believe. What we want is that he always *would* assent to the one if he assents to the other, no matter what else he believes. We are thus committed to there being a distinction—however difficult to draw in purely behavioural terms—between the *contents* of the sentences in a speaker's idiolect (the understanding that he attaches to them), and the particular beliefs that he happens to have. But of course the existence of such a distinction is not entirely beyond controversy.

Indeed the kind of holistic theory made famous by Quine in 'Two Dogmas' results from an explicit challenge to its legitimacy. However this difficulty I propose to leave to one side; not as irrelevant, but rather as lying outside the framework of the tradition within which my arguments have their life. The controversy started by Quine is, in effect, over the viability of a whole tradition; whereas what interests me in this paper are the relative strengths of the various positions *within* the tradition.

II

The position I am calling 'Tractarian' may now be expressed quite simply: we should accept Frege's doctrine concerning sense$_r$, but reject his account of sense$_c$. We could thus accept that language comes to represent the world via the modes of determining the reference of component expressions, employed by particular speakers, but deny that for communication mutual knowledge of modes of identification is required (which would, in virtue of the identity-conditions of sense$_r$, imply mutual knowledge of information-content). The Tractarian view is rather that mutual understanding requires mutual knowledge of what might be called 'conceptual-content'—where two sentences possess the same conceptual-content (and hence the same sense$_c$) just in case they are logically equivalent. The thesis is that, at least in the case of non-atomic (compound or general) sentences, two speakers may be said to understand one another in the use of such a sentence if and only if, they know of one another's uses of the sentence that they are logically equivalent. This position could be expressed, somewhat loosely, in the claim that all logically equivalent sentences express the same proposition (say the same thing). Alternatively, it could be expressed by saying that the sense$_c$ of a sentence may be equated with the division which that sentence makes within the set of possible worlds, between those in which it is true and those in which it is false. (All sentences making the same division having the same sense$_c$.) But note that a speaker would not be supposed somehow to have a direct cognitive grasp on a set of possible worlds—on the contrary, that grasp would be effected by the sense$_r$ which he attaches to the sentence. It is simply that two speakers may be said to attach the same sense$_c$ to a sentence (and hence to understand one

another in its use), so long as that sentence would, in their respective idiolects (sense$_r$), be true in just the same possible worlds.

The Tractarian account of communication, sketched above, is intuitively more plausible than the Fregean. Consider the following example. Suppose that I have been introduced to the sentential connective in 'P or Q' by means of its equivalence with '-(-P & -Q)', and that I always rely upon that definition in particular cases. You, on the other hand, have been introduced to the connective in the usual way, perhaps by means of the standard truth-table. Now suppose that you say to me, 'It looks as though it will either rain today or snow tomorrow.' Do I understand you? Frege is commit-ted to saying that I do not, since the sentence will have different information-contents on our respective understandings of it. For it is of course possible for someone to understand both 'P or Q' and '-(-P & -Q)', where both are understood in terms of the truth-table definitions of the connectives, without *realising* that they are equivalent. But, at the very least, we lack any convincing reason for going along with Frege here. It is, however, profoundly un-satisfactory to remain at the level of intuitive plausibility, if for no other reason than that peoples' intuitions can conflict. To adapt a remark of Dummett's from another connection, what we need here, if we are not to travel down the blind-alley of considering the ordinary English usage of the phrase 'mutual understanding', is some account of the function, or importance, of our concept of mutual understanding.[1] For of course our classifications do not exist in a void, but are always connected with some interest that we have. So simply to describe how we would intuitively use a predicate 'F', can provide us with no insight into the ground of the distinction between being F and not being F. Moreover there is always the possibility that our actual usage may diverge, to a greater or lesser extent, from that which would accord with the point of our making such a classification in the first place. Now it may be true— and probably is—that in general our knowledge of a shared cultural background provides us with sufficient reason for assuming, not only shared information-contents, but a great deal of shared factual information as well. The existence of such a background will normally provide any two speakers of a language with every reason to believe that they have mutual knowledge of *whatever* is required

1   See M. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London:Duckworth, 1978), pp. 3, 435.

for mutual understanding. But this does not help us in the least to resolve the dispute between the Fregean and Tractarian positions. For that dispute is over what mutual understanding *is*, over what is *essential* to it. Here, too, Dummett's idea has application: what counts as essential to a certain concept, will depend upon the *point* of our making the classification which that concept effects. So it is only when we have grasped the point of the concept of mutual understanding, that we shall be able to discern its essence.

When we say that it is mutual knowledge of $sense_c$ that is supposed to subserve mutual understanding—or communication— through the use of language, just what is it exactly that is to be subserved? Or better: what is it that communication itself sub- serves? In the first place, clearly, it is communication that enables us to acquire new beliefs through the assertions of others. An assertion, in normal circumstances, provides you with reason to believe what is asserted; and it is obvious that you can only safely make an addition to your stock beliefs if you know *what* has been asserted. So from this point of view the notion of $sense_c$, and of mutual understanding, will be given to us as: whatever a man needs to know if he is to be confident in relying upon the assertions of others in making alterations to his stock of beliefs. But this can only take us as far as: mutual understanding requires mutual knowledge of *material* equivalence.

It might be said that the only way in which two speakers could know, that their respective idiolects are such that their respective tokens of the same type sentences do always as a matter of fact share the same truth-values, would be for them to know at least that they are logically equivalent. This might be true in general, but it certainly need not always be so. Suppose that we provide a speaker A, who is completely colour-blind, with a hand-held machine for detecting colour. The machine is sensitive to wavelengths of light between ultra-violet and infra-red, and vibrates in the hand with an intensity proportional to the wavelengths being received from the direction in which it is pointed. Now suppose that we teach A to use his machine, providing him with what are, in effect, ostensive definitions for the use of the colour-words. It is clear that speaker A, and any normally sighted speaker B, will have every reason to suppose one another's understandings of sentences involving colour-words—at least in transparent contexts—to be materially equivalent. (They certainly are not more than that.) They can, indeed, use one another as reliable sources of new information: an

assertion of A's will give B reason to make an addition to his stock of beliefs, as expressed in *his* idiolect. (Note that it is crucial to this example that neither should know the position that the other is in, since it is designed to give a case in which speakers know nothing beyond material equivalence. It is of course a truism that two people can, in general, attach different senses$_c$ to a given sentence, and yet still understand one another in its use, in virtue of knowing *what* sense$_c$ the other attaches to it.)

Of course there is more to communication—even of that form of communication whose sole concern is truth—than the bare exchange of information. Factual communication is not simply a matter of swapping statements. We also challenge (demand evidence for) the statements of others, and attempt to justify our own. Since it is a matter of common experience that people often say what is false, we cannot reasonably add everything that they say to our stock of beliefs. Indeed it could be claimed that the point subserved by mutual understanding is the acquisition of *rationally grounded* beliefs; in which case communication will require a shared conception of what is to count as a rational ground. So there must be more to mutual understanding than merely knowing what alterations the statements of another give one (weak) reason to make to one's stock of beliefs. I must also have sufficient knowledge to mount a challenge to the statements of others, and to provide evidence that will constitute an attempted justification of my own. This requires at least mutual knowledge of logical equivalence. For only so will any challenge that I mount actually *be* a challenge to the statement as you understand it, and any evidence with which you respond be evidence for the statement as *I* understand it. Thus in our example above, if B tries to challenge A's statement that a certain object is green by saying, 'How do you know, you haven't even looked?', this simply is not a challenge to the statement as A understands it. Not only that, but the remark will be unintelligible to A: he will be unable to see what possible bearing it might have on the statement that he made; nor *will* he be able to see this until he acquires knowledge of his challenger's method of determining the extension of 'green'. Moreover, if A does reply, 'I have had my hand pointed at it all the time', this is not any kind of justification for the statement as B understands it.

Note that to insist, as here, that it is an essential part of understanding statements that one have some conception of what would constitute evidence for, or a challenge to, the truth of those

statements, does not by itself commit us to any version of Verificationism (although it does push in that direction). For at its weakest, the claim is simply that understanding requires some knowledge of the logical relations between statements, and these can be expressed in purely truth-conditional terms. However there might seem to be a substantial question here as to the strength of the notion of logical equivalence—whether classical or intuitionist, for example—supported by the above argument. If I claim that mutual understanding requires mutual knowledge of logical equivalence, precisely *what* notion of logical equivalence is involved? I suggest that we may gloss the argument of the preceding paragraph as follows: mutual understanding of a sentence requires it to be guaranteed that any state of information justifying its assertion in one idiolect, could be transformed into a state of information justifying its assertion in the other. In which case it might seem that the notion of logical equivalence at issue approximates to that of the intuitionists.[1] But in fact the issue cannot be resolved so simply. For the classical logician, too, can say that if two sentences are (classically) logically equivalent, then any information warranting the assertion of the one, can be transformed into information warranting the assertion of the other; the transformation consisting in a (classical) proof of their logical equivalence. So I conclude that the Tractarian account of sense$_c$, as I have explained it, is neutral between classical and intuitionistic conceptions of logical equivalence. In which case I propose, for simplicity, to continue to work with the classical.

We have moved from material equivalence to logical equivalence. Is there any reason for narrowing our concept of sameness of sense$_c$ still further, insisting that communication requires, not only mutual knowledge of logical equivalence, but also mutual knowledge of information-content? One argument sometimes suggested, and attributed to Frege, is that one needs such a concept of sense$_c$ to serve as the reference of expressions within opaque contexts. Now suppose we grant Frege that in order to understand (know the sense$_c$ of) a report like 'John believes that P', one has to know the information-content associated (either by John or by the speaker) with the sentence forming the that-clause (it being *that* information-content which John is said to believe). Clearly it does not follow immediately from this, that one would fail to understand

[1]   See for instance, C. Wright, 'Critical Study: Dummett and Revisionism', *Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1981), pp. 47–67.

a transparent assertion of the sentence 'P' if one did not know the information-content associated with it. Frege needs, in addition, a strong compositionality principle for sense$_c$. He needs to hold that the sense$_c$ of any complex expression will be a function of the senses$_c$ of its component parts, together with the manner of their combination. For in that case any failure of understanding of a complex expression (as would occur, on the supposition we are granting Frege, when one heard the report 'John believes that P' without knowing the information-content of 'P'), must result from a lack of knowledge of the sense$_c$ of one of the component parts (or the manner of their combination). This would then give us a motive for denying anyone an understanding of a transparent occurrence of 'P', who did not know its information-content.

However even the compositionality principle, coupled with the claim that an understanding of opacity requires knowledge of information-content, is not really enough to give the Fregean his position. For everyone must accept that in the construction of a fully developed theory of sense$_c$, the application of that principle need not be straightforward. One may, for instance, have to fix the sense$_c$ of an expression for one type of context, and then further determine its sense$_c$ for another type of context. (A knowledge of the former being presupposed to a knowledge of the latter, but not vice versa.) Thus consider the use of the word 'black' as it occurs in the sentence, 'June the 9th was a black day for the labour movement.' If someone does not understand this use, are we going to insist, merely on that ground, that he does not understand 'The dog is black'? Surely not. Yet it is not that 'black' is simply ambiguous between the two contexts. On the contrary, one would expect a theory of sense$_c$ to first of all lay down the primary, literal, content of the term, and then build on this in some fashion to develop an account of the more metaphorical use. It thus remains open to question whether the transparent and opaque occurrences of sentences might not be related in some similar fashion, so that one will need to know *more* to understand an opaque occurrence of a sentence than would suffice for an understanding of its transparent occurrence. And there is, indeed, every reason to believe that something like this *is* the case. (Always supposing that knowledge of information-content is required for an understanding of opacity.) For the function of communication, in transparent contexts, will be adequately subserved by knowledge that falls short of mutual knowledge of information-content. Thus what I should learn when

I come to know the the particular information-content you associate with a sentence, would not be anything relevant to the acquisition of knowledge about the realm of entities with which that sentence is concerned, but rather a truth about *you*. I should learn in what circumstances you might be surprised to be told of the truth of the sentence, in what circumstances you must see its truth straight away, in what you might need some sort of demonstration, and so on. Such knowledge can surely play no essential part in the making and understanding of statements (unless of course they happen to be statements about the speaker's state of information). On the contrary, the point of making statements is to convey how things stand in the world. And the function of communication, or mutual understanding—at least as it concerns factual discourse—is to make possible the acquisition of rationally grounded beliefs about the world. This function will be adequately served, as we said, just in case we have mutual knowledge of logical equivalence.

The only other possible reason that I can think of for adopting the narrower conception of sameness of sense$_c$ would be this: only if we share mutual knowledge of information-content can I be confident that any evidence I provide for the truth of my statement, or any challenge that I mount to the truth of yours, will immediately be *recognised* as evidence, or as a challenge. Thus suppose I challenge your statement that P by drawing your attention to the fact that not-Q, where P implies Q. Only if we both attach the same information-content to the sentence 'P' can I be confident that you will recognise, as I do—without the need for any sort of demonstration—that the truth of 'P' is incompatible with the falsity of 'Q'. Thus only so can I be confident that you will immediately see the relevance of what I say, and recognise my challenge *as* a challenge. However it could be argued, and with justice, that we have here left the realm of the theory of meaning, and have entered the province of psychology. The point of mutual understanding cannot lie in its guaranteeing me the ability to convince anyone of the truth of my (true) beliefs, if only because nothing *could* provide such a guarantee. Even mutual knowledge of information-content cannot guarantee that any challenge, or any proof, will always be recognised as such. For if my challenge takes several steps—with our mutual knowledge of information-content ensuring that you recognise the relevance of what I say at each step—you may still be unable to recognise the totality of what I say as a challenge to your belief. It is a familiar fact that one may be convinced by every step in

a proof and yet fail to be convinced by the whole, precisely because one is unable to command a clear view of the whole. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly the case that mutual knowledge of information-content is likely to ease the passage to conviction. But what is important, in factual communication, is that it should be guaranteed that the evidence I provide for the truth of my statement (as I understand it) *should be* evidence for the statment as you understand it, even if you cannot immediately see it as such. Just how easy it proves to get you to see the relevance of what I am saying, is a relatively trivial matter of psychology, having to do with convenience rather than with fundamentals.

The account of mutual understanding sketched here seems to me to be correct with respect to molecular and general statements (so long as we abstract from the particular content of the component sentences), and with respect to predicative expressions. But it is definitely *in*correct if extended to cover mutual understanding in the use of proper names. The point to bear in mind, is the distinction drawn between sense as that which fixes speaker's reference (sense$_r$), and sense as that which underpins communication (sense$_c$). It could plausibly (though no longer uncontroversially) be maintained, that an understanding of a statement involving a proper name requires the possession of some means of identifying the referent of that name. But it is quite another thing to maintain that mutual knowledge of (the logical equivalence of) methods of identification is required for mutual understanding in the use of a name. This is, as I have argued elsewhere, highly implausible; the crucial point being that we hardly ever have occasion to challenge the statements of others by challenging the existence of a bearer for one or more of the names involved.[1] All that is really required, in my view, is mutual knowledge of reference. All that we need to know, to understand one another, is that we are in fact talking about the same individual; we don't have to know anything about one another's methods of identification. It is thus too simple to say that mutual understanding is a matter of mutual knowledge of logical equivalence. Rather what ought to be said is this: understanding a statement means knowing what that statement is *about* (i.e. knowing the referents of any names involved), and knowing what is being *said about* those things. (where the criterion of identity for 'saying about' is logical equivalence).

1   See my 'Understanding Names', *Philosophical Quarterly,* vol. 33 (1983), pp. 19–36.

III

Although the Tractarian account of sense$_c$ is a distinct advance on the Fregean, we cannot let matters rest there. For this very account leads directly to the paradoxical Tractarian conclusion that philosophy is, literally, nonsense. Distinguish, first, between senselessness and nonsense: a sentence is only senseless, not nonsensical, if it is the result of combining together expressions that have a perfectly legitimate sense in a perfectly legitimate manner, but where those expressions are combined in such a way that the resulting sentence says nothing. A nonsensical sentence, on the other hand, will contain an expression, or mode of combination, to which no significance has been attached; as in 'Most toves are blue'. Now second, since all tautologies, and indeed all necessary truths generally, are (classically) logically equivalent, they must, on the present account of mutual understanding and of propositional identity, all say the same thing. And since it is manifest that 'P v -P' says nothing, they must all say nothing. Of course this is not to deny that one can be *surprised* that something is a necessary truth. Nor is it to deny that there is any *point* in coming to recognise that something is a necessary truth; it might, for instance, facilitate the recognition of the soundness of a pattern of inference. It is merely that if one considers the necessary truth as a purported *statement*, then what one comes to recognise when one recognises that it *is* a necessary truth, is that it tells us nothing (is senseless). Now, finally, the distinctive thing about the sentences of philosophy is that they involve predicates, such as 'is an object' and 'is a necessary truth', in terms of which it is impossible to form anything other than necessary truths or necessary falsehoods. And since, as we have just seen, such sentences say nothing (are without conceptual-content), we must have failed to attach any sense to the predicates in question. For if a sign is useless it is meaningless; and to be useful means, on the present account, to make a contribution to the conceptual-content of statements. So any sentences containing such expressions in a predicative (as opposed to a style-of-variable-indicating) role, will contain an expression that lacks meaning (is nonsensical), and will thus be nonsensical also.

It is important to note that the Fregean, too, will have difficulty in providing adequately for the role of philosophy, given his account of sameness of sense$_c$.[1] In particular, he will be incapable of finding

1   See, G. Frege, *Posthumous Writings,* trans. P. Long and R. White (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), pp. 207–212.

room for the idea that philosophical analysis may throw light upon our understanding of our language. For if the analysis is enlightening, and not entirely trivial, then the analysans and analysandum will (at least when they are whole sentences) have different information-contents, by the definition of the notion of information-content. So the analysis does not *elucidate* the meaning of the analysed expression, but at best provides us with a logically equivalent expression having a different meaning. This is certainly one source of the Fregean idea that the business of philosophy is reconstruction; for what we have, when 'analysis' has done its work, is simply a new language.

One way of attempting to rescue the Tractarian position, would be to consider placing restrictions upon the notion of logical equivalence, so as to enable us to say that not all necessary truths are logically equivalent. Thus we might insist that in order to count as equivalent, two necessary truths must be in some way 'relevant' to one another.[1] Now whether or not some such restriction might be plausible in its own right, it will not provide us with a wholly satisfactory solution to our present difficulty. Whilst saving us from the worst excesses of the Tractarian position, it still leaves us with the obverse of the Fregean difficulty: if the business of philosophy is analysis, and if a sentence P can only provide an adequate analysis of a sentence Q if P and Q have the same sense$_c$, then a difficulty will arise whatever particular account of sense$_c$ we adopt. For the Fregean, as we saw, the difficulty is to explain how an analysis can be informative or enlightening. For the Tractarian the difficulty is rather to explain how such informativeness can be *communicable*. If sense$_c$ is explained in terms of logical equivalence, there can be no difficulty in explaining how it can be enlightening, for a particular individual, to realise that P and Q have the same sense$_c$. But then the difficulty is this: since P and Q have the same communicable content (for the purposes of communication, it will be a matter of indifference which sentence is used), just *what* is it that is supposed to be communicated by presenting P as an analysis of Q?

Another line of approach would be to object against the Tractarian, that even if the sentences of philosophy are— considered strictly, and from the point of view of statement-making—nonsensical, still there may be some other role that they might perform: say that of 'elucidation'. Now looked at in one way,

1   I owe this suggestion to Jack Copeland.

this embodies a simple misunderstanding of what, for both Fregean and Tractarian, a theory of meaning should look like. But looked at in another, it is a point of the highest importance, leading us to challenge one of the assumptions made in much current work in the philosophy of language. The apparent misunderstanding is this: for both Fregean and Tractarian, meaning and understanding are *unitary* concepts. Both assume—as do most others who work in the philosophy of language—that there is a sense in which statement-making is the central function of language. Thus a theory of meaning should begin with an analysis of the contents of statements, and the results of that analysis will then extend smoothly to account for the contents of all other forms of linguistic act. From this point of view there can simply be no question of adopting an account of the contents of linguistic acts belonging to the category of 'elucidation'—if there is such a category—different from that provided for the contents of statements.

In order to begin to see that something might have gone wrong here, let us return to the example deployed early in section II, of the two people who attach different information-contents to the connective expressing disjunction. You will remember that the one understands 'P or Q' in terms of its truth-table, the other in terms of its equivalence with '-(-P & -Q)'. We argued that there are no grounds for insisting that these two speakers misunderstand one another in their use of the connective in empirical statements, despite the difference in information-content; and I still stand by that. But notice that there is one sphere in which they definitely will misunderstand one another, and that is when they come to do logic. In particular, there will be a failure of communication over the attempt to *prove* the equivalence of 'P or Q' with '-(-P & -Q)'. For the one who understands the former in terms of its equivalence with the latter will simply not be able to see what the other is about. He will be baffled as to why the other is going through such complicated manoeuvres in order to prove something that has the form 'P if and only if P'. In general it would seem that mutual understanding in the fields of logic and mathematics does require mutual knowledge of information-content. For only so can the participants be confident that they will all be able to follow the course of a proof, and be able to see its point and significance. (So here we have an explanation of why Frege should have chosen information-content as the criterion of sameness of sense$_c$. Given his overwhelming interest in the fields of logic and mathematics,

what could be more natural than that he should choose for his general account of understanding exactly the notion that is required to explain communication in those areas?)

I suggest that mutual understanding in philosophy, too, requires mutual knowledge of information-content. Indeed the only satisfactory way of finding some sort of middle path between the Tractarian doctrine of philosophy-as-nonsense, and the Fregean view of analysis as reconstruction, is to give up the assumption that the knowledge required for mutual understanding is essentially the same for all different areas of discourse. Thus it is because understanding is a matter of mutual knowledge of logical equivalence in the realm of factual discourse, that one can present, as an analysis of the content of a given statement, a statement that is its logical equivalent; for both statements will say the same thing. But it is only because we do also share knowledge of information-content, that you can present someone with such an equivalent statement, and expect the realisation of that equivalence to throw the *same* light on his understanding of the original as it did on yours. If it is the function (or one of the functions) of philosophy to elucidate by means of analysis, then such a thing can only be possible, on an inter-subjective basis, if speakers possess mutual knowledge of information-content.

The conditions for mutual understanding in other areas of discourse (other 'language-games') will be different again. Suppose we ask, for example, what knowledge on the part of different speakers is essential for mutual understanding of the content of a command. Here as elsewhere, we need to bear in mind the function that communication is intended to subserve. Clearly speakers will at least need sufficient knowledge to be confident that, as the recipient of an order, they will know when they have reached a position that would satisfy the person who issued the order. They will, plausibly, also need sufficient knowledge to realise what would constitute a satisfactory excuse or defence for not complying with the order. So what is required, for mutual understanding of the content of a command, is firstly: that any circumstance which constitutes obedience to the command, given one interpretation of it, will also constitute obedience on the other interpretation of it. This requires only mutual knowledge of material equivalence. And secondly: that any circumstance which prevents you obeying the command, given your interpretation of it, *would have* prevented you obeying the command given the speaker's interpretation of it. For in that

case anything which you mention as an excuse for not fulfilling the command, will be an excuse on the other's interpretation also. This requires more than mutual knowledge of material equivalence; for from the fact that 'F' and 'G' are co-extensive, it does not follow that anything which prevents you from, say, bringing home an F, would also have prevented you bringing home a G. But then it is hard to believe that anything so strong as mutual knowledge of logical equivalence is required. All that is really needed is mutual knowledge of what might be called 'causal equivalence'. If two speakers are to understand one another in the use of a command, it is both necessary and (so far as the content of the command goes) sufficient, that they know of one another's interpretation of the command, that just the same events would be necessary to bring about a state of affairs that would constitute obedience to it, on either interpretation. Thus suppose A and B respectively interpret the predicate 'F' to mean 'living creature with a heart' and 'living creature with a kidney'. Then they are always going to satisfy one another when they obey the order 'Bring me an F'. But more importantly, anything which prevents one of them from fulfilling the order as he interprets it, *would have* prevented him fulfilling the order had he interpreted it as the other interprets it. So anything which he mentions (truthfully) as an excuse, will be an excuse for the other too, even if he cannot immediately see it as such. We are thus left with no motive for insisting that A and B misunderstand one another, despite the fact that they do not possess mutual knowledge of logical equivalence.

Besides the kind of discourse—the factual—which requires (roughly speaking) mutual knowledge of logical equivalence, we have found one kind—the imperative—which requires something weaker, namely mutual knowledge of causal equivalence, and a number of kinds—broadly speaking *a priori*—which require something stronger, namely mutual knowledge of information-content. There are other areas of discourse in which the requirement on mutual understanding is stronger still. Thus the knowledge that is required for understanding a joke is much more than mutual knowledge of information-content. A shared background of beliefs will often be required, either about the matter to which the joke relates, or about such things as the similarities of sound of the expressions of the language (puns). In the same way, a shared background of belief will generally be required if you are to understand a conversation (as opposed to understanding each particular utterance in the course of

the conversation). For only if such a background exists, will you be able to see the bearing of what has just been said on what was said before. A similar point holds for the understanding of live metaphors (that is to say, metaphors whose significance has not been fixed by convention).

It is widely recognised that the later Wittgenstein rejected the idea of a unitary theory of meaning, and that this rejection is somehow connected with his stress upon the variety of different language-games. Dummett believes that this attitude stems ulti- mately from a rejection of the Fregean sense/force distinction (that is to say, the distinction between the content of an utterance, and the linguistic act effected by it).[1] But we now have to hand an alternative interpretation: without rejecting that distinction, one could still claim that the idea of a unitary theory of meaning is illusory, on the grounds that what counts as sameness of sense$_c$ will vary systematically from one region of discourse (one kind of force) to another. Indeed we are now in position to conclude with a rather deeper account than is usual of the later Wittgensteinian doctrine that understanding is a family-resemblance concept. For it has emerged that there is no *one* notion that can be put to work to provide the core of an explanation of the conditions for mutual understanding, for all different forms of linguistic intercourse. The notion that we need in order to explain what it is to understand an imperative, is not the notion that we need in order to explain communication in factual discourse; neither notion will serve to explain communication in logic and philosophy; and the conditions for understanding a joke or a metaphor are different again. This is, indeed, just what we might have expected, had we remembered that an account of mutual understanding must wait on an account of the point, or purpose, of communication by means of language. For since the point is different in the different spheres of linguistic activity, the knowledge that is required to subserve mutual understanding in those spheres will be different also.

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1   M. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), pp. 446–454.

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[Footnotes]

[1] **Review: Dummett and Revisionism**
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[1] **Understanding Names**
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