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Arguments for Acceptance of the Sense of Proper Name: G. Frege

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Abstract

In philosophical discussion, there are some important debates regarding the acceptance of the sense of proper name. A proper name is, for J.S. Mill, a kind of singular name which is a non-connotative and concrete term. J.S. Mill, before Frege, holds that proper names have only denotations and they are non-connotative terms. That means, a proper name, for Mill, has only reference but has no sense. But Frege holds that Mill's view about proper name cannot explain the cognitive difference between two types of identity statements, namely, 'a=b' and 'a=a'. Frege admit the sense of a proper names to explain the cognitive significance (informative content) of identity statements of the form 'a=b' and the meaningfulness of the sentences like 'Pegasus is the winged horse of Greek mythology'. He thinks that Mill's view about proper name cannot properly explain these linguistic problems. In this paper I shall try to explain Frege's argument for his acceptance of the sense of a proper name.

Keyword: Proper name, identity statements, Meaningfulness of sentences, Trivially true, cognitive significance.

J.S. Mill, before Frege, holds that proper names have only denotations and they are non-connotative terms. That means, a proper name, for Mill, has only reference but has no sense. Mill holds that a proper name is a singular name, non-connotative and concrete term. A proper name is, for J.S. Mill, a kind of singular name which is a non-connotative and concrete term. Generally a name is a word or a group of word. For example, the expressions 'Aristotle', 'The pupil of Plato' are instances of name. But any word or any group of word is not a name. According to Mill, a name is a word or a group of words which expresses things of which anything can be affirmed or denied. For example, the word 'Aristotle' is a name, because, the word refer to a person of which anything can be affirmed or denied. When we say 'Aristotle is a man', in this sentence, the term 'Aristotle' is used to refer Aristotle and we also affirm a quality, i.e., the property of being man, of that person. But the word 'all', 'if-then', 'either-or' etc. cannot be considered as names. Mill says,

It is usual, before examining the various classes into which names are commonly divided, to begin by distinguishing from names of every description, those words which are not names, but only parts of names. Among such are reckoned particles, as *of, to, truly, often*; the inflected cases of nouns substantive, as *me, him, John's*; and even adjectives, as *large, heavy*. These words do not express things of which anything can be affirmed or denied.¹

Mill holds that such type of words or a group of words do not express things of which anything can be affirmed or denied. According to Mill, a word or a group of words can be considered as name only if that word or group of words is used as subject term of a sentence.

For Mill, there are two types of name: general name and singular name. According to Mill, singular name is only capable of being truly affirm of one single person, at least in the same sense. Mill says,

An individual or singular name is a name which is only capable of being truly affirmed, in the same sense, of one thing.²

For Mill, the word 'men' is a general name, because the word 'men' is capable of being truly affirmed of indefinite number of individuals in the same sense. According to Mill, general names also refer to certain qualities. When a general name is used as a predicate in a sentence, it ascribes some property to something designated by the subject term of that sentence. Thus, general names are connotative terms. Accordingly, Mill holds that general names cannot be considered as proper names. But there are some singular terms which are also connotative. For example, 'the author of Gitanjali' is a singular term which is used to refer to a singular individual but it refer to that very individual if that individual possesses the property of being the writer of Gitanjali. So the expression 'the author of Gitanjali' being connotative term cannot be regarded as proper name, according to Mill.

The expressions 'Aristotle', 'The pupil of Plato' are, according to Mill, singular names.

On the other hand, according to Mill, a general name is capable of being truly affirmed of an indefinite number of things in the same sense.

According to Mill, a proper name is also a concrete term. For, a proper name is used to refer to particular concrete individuals. Mill says,

A concrete name is a name which stands for a thing...³

Therefore according to Mill, proper names are non-connotative, singular and concrete term.

¹ J.S. Mill, 'A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.25

² J.S. Mill, 'A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.28

³ J.S. Mill, 'A System of Logic Ratiocinative and Inductive', in R.M. Robson (ed.),p.29

Frege uses the term ‘proper name’ in extended sense. Any complete expression is, for Frege, a proper name. Any expression which refers to an object, for Frege, is a proper name. He says,

I call anything a proper name if it is sign for an object.⁴

According to him, a proper name has a sense as well as a reference. Frege introduces the distinction between sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung) in his various remarkable writings, namely, ‘Function and Concept’, ‘On Sinn and Bedeutung’ and ‘On Concept and Object’. Frege is the first philosopher who admits the sense of proper name in addition to its reference.

Frege holds that Mill’s view about proper name cannot explain the cognitive difference between two types of identity statements, namely, ‘ $a=b$ ’ and ‘ $a=a$ ’. Frege admit the sense of a proper names to explain the cognitive significance (informative content) of identity statements of the form ‘ $a=b$ ’ and the meaningfulness of the sentences like ‘Pegasus is the winged horse of Greek mythology’. He thinks that Mill’s view about proper name cannot properly explain these linguistic problems.

Arguments for Acceptance of the Sense of Proper Name:

Firstly, Frege points out in his paper ‘On Sinn and Bedeutung’, that cognitive significance of the identity statement ‘The morning star is the morning star’ is different from the identity statements ‘The morning star is the evening star’. The former statement has the form ‘ $a=a$ ’ and identity statements of this form are analytic, *a priori* or trivially true. Frege points out that identity statements of the form ‘ $a=a$ ’ are *a priori* and are in Kantian terminology analytic. For example, to know the truth value of the statement ‘The morning star is the morning star’, we need not depend on sense-experience. We cannot deny the truth value of this proposition without involving contradiction. Thus the identity statement ‘The morning star is the morning star’ is analytic. On the other hand, the identity statements of the form ‘ $a=b$ ’ are not *a priori*, for they are informative. For example, to construct the identity statement ‘The morning star is the evening star’, we depend on our sense experience. Our scientists need several observations to discover that the morning star is the evening star. When someone hears the identity statement ‘The morning star is the evening star’, it increases his knowledge. In this sense, identity statement the form ‘ $a=b$ ’ are informative. Frege says,

The reasons which seem to favour this are the following: $a=a$ and $a=b$ are obviously statements of differing cognitive value [Erkenntniswert]; $a=a$ holds a priori and, according to Kant, is to be labelled analytic, while statements of the form $a=b$ often contain very valuable extensions of our knowledge and cannot always be established *a priori*. The discovery that

⁴ G.Frege, ‘On Concept and Object’, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, p.185
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the rising sun is not new every morning, but always the same, was one of the most fertile astronomical discoveries.⁵

To explain the difference between cognitive significances of identity statements 'a=b' and 'a=a', Frege claims that when we make an identity statement by using a sign of identity, namely, '=', between two proper names, we assert that identity is a relation between two proper names instead of a relation of an object to itself. According to him, if we think that identity is a relation of an object to itself, then the identity statement 'a=b' (if it is true) asserts that the object designated by 'a' is the very same object designated by 'b'. Thus the identity statement 'a=b', like 'a=a' asserts that an object is identical with itself. Frege thinks that the objectual self-identity interpretation of identity statements cannot satisfactorily explain the informative content of the identity statement 'a=b'.

Thus, Frege holds that identity is a relation between two proper names. However, Mill's view about the proper name cannot satisfactorily explain the informative content of identity statement 'a=b' even if we consider the relation of identity as the relation between two proper names. According to Mill, a proper name has no meaning above and beyond the object to which it refers. For example, the proper name 'Aristotle' just means the individual Aristotle which it refers. Thus, the identity statement 'a=b' has no informative content so far as it merely asserts that 'a' and 'b' designate or refer to the same object to explain this Munitz writes,

Thus the statement 'a=b' need not give us any more information or knowledge about the object than is contained in the statement 'a=a'. The statement 'a=b' would be known to be true, just as we know 'a=a' is true. For if all that is involved in knowing that a=b is that the sign 'a' refers to some object, and the sign 'b' refers to some object, and the sign '=' means '*has the same referent as*', then the entire statement 'a=b' is true by *virtue of this definition*.⁶

Frege accepts the sense of a proper name to explain informative content of identity statement 'a=b'. According to Frege, every proper name has sense by means of which it determines its reference. Frege holds that the mechanism of reference is essentially indirect. That means that a proper name refers to an object as its reference via its sense. For Frege, identity statement 'a=b' unlike 'a=a' is informative because the sense (the mode of presentation or determination of reference) of 'a' is different from that of 'b', although they have same reference.

Secondly, Mill's view about the proper name has trouble to explain meaningfulness of sentences which contain empty names. For, according to Frege, 'Pegasus' has no meaning because it has no reference i.e., its reference does not exist. Hence, following the principle of compositionality, the sentences 'Pegasus is the winged horse of Greek mythology' has no

⁵ G.Frege, 'On Sinn and Bedeutung, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, p.151

⁶ M.K. Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, p.111

meaning since it has no reference. Frege also holds that the sentence ‘Pegasus is the winged horse of Greek mythology’ has no reference, although it express thought (or it has sense). According to him, the reference of a sentence is its truth value which is a function of the referent of its components. That means that, reference or truth value of a sentence is determined by the referents of its components. Truth value of a sentence is either true or false. Truth value of a true sentence is true and truth value of a false statement is false. When a proper name is contained in a sentence as its part, reference of that proper name plays an essential role in determining the reference or true value of the whole sentence. Accordingly, the sentence ‘Odysseus was not ashore of Ithica while sound asleep’ has no reference or truth value, since it contains empty name ‘Odysseus’ which has no reference. However, Frege maintains that a sentence containing empty name express thought, although it has no truth value. For, he thinks that an empty name has sense but its references do not exist. He says,

The thought remains the same whether ‘Odysseus’ has a *Bedeutung* or not.⁷

Thus, according to Frege, the sentence ‘Odysseus was not ashore of Ithica while sound asleep’ expresses a thought or has a sense, although it has no reference. Moreover, he says that the thought expressed by the above sentence belongs to myth or fiction.

Thus, Frege’s notion of sense of a proper name has an advantage to explain the meaningfulness of sentences containing empty names. I may point out that Frege’s discussion of empty name and of the notion of sense without reference are inconsistent. For, if the sense of a proper name is the mode of presentation of its reference, how can he explain the sense of an empty name which has no reference as the mode of presentation of its reference. M. Beaney says,

If the sense of a name is a ‘mode of presentation’ of its referent, as Frege’s explanation at the beginning of ‘*On Sinn and Bedeutung*’ suggests, then this implies that if there is no referent, then there can be no ‘mode of presentation’ of it, and hence no sense.⁸

Thus, an empty name has no sense so far as it has no reference. Thus Frege’s sense of a proper name is in trouble to solve the problem of meaningfulness of sentences containing empty names. In order to get rid of this problem, we may say by using Frege’s words, that ‘sense is independent of whether there is a *Bedeutung*’⁹ in the realm of myth or fiction. According to Frege, sentences which contain empty names express only ‘mock thoughts’ which are not real thought. For him, mock thoughts lack truth value.

⁷ G.Frege, ‘On Sinn and Bedeutung, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, p.157

⁸ G.Frege, ‘Introduction, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, p.22

⁹ G.Frege, ‘Introduction, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*, pp.22-23

Moreover, Frege claims that sentences with empty name express thought, since the reference of a proper name is inessential to the thought content of a sentence in which it occurs.

Thus, for Frege, to say that a proper name has a sense does not mean that it has also a reference. He writes,

...a proper name always has a sense. But this is not to say that to the sense there also corresponds a Bedeutung...In grasping a sense, one is not thereby assured of a Bedeutung.¹⁰

To explain Frege's view in this regard, L.T.F. Gamut writes,

It is of great importance that it is possible to be quite familiar with the sense of a name without knowing what its reference is. Anyone with a minimal competence in English understands the sense of the richest citizen of the United States, but that is not to say that he knows what individual is fortunate enough to have become the reference of the expression. Sense is 'the mode of presentation', but familiarity with the reference of any given expression is merely a possibility and may not be assumed. Sense is merely a criterion by means of which reference may be determined under various circumstances.¹¹

However, Frege points out that it is a defect of natural language that it contains empty names like 'Odysseus', 'Pegasus' etc. which have senses but their references have no existence. He claims that every proper name of a logically perfect language must have a reference.

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¹⁰ G.Frege, 'On Sinn and Bedeutung', in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Frege Reader*,p.153

¹¹ L.T.F. Gamut, *Logic, Language, and Meaning*,vol.2,p.9