Frege's Puzzle or Why Propositions Aren't the Objects of Our Attitudes

1 Introduction

The received view concerning mental attitudes like believing, knowing, hoping and wishing says that mental attitudes are relations holding between agents and so called propositions. Roughly speaking, propositions are primary bearers of truth that are neither sentences nor utterances of sentences. This paper revolves around the question whether the received view is correct. It is no secret that within the received view our normal practice of belief ascription, some standards concerning rationality and semantic principles like the theory of direct reference (DR), which says that the propositional content of singular terms like names and indexicals is their referent, lead to contradictions. This is Frege's Puzzle.

Several attempts were made to solve Frege's Puzzle. For example, following Frege (1892; 1918–19) Neo-Fregeans like Recanati (2012) give up direct reference, whereas Neo-Russellians like Salmon (1986; 1989), Soames (1987a/b) and Braun (1998) modify some standards concerning rationality. We argue that none of these attempts is ultimately successful. This leads to the negative result that mental attitudes like believing aren't relations holding between agents and propositions. Concluding, possible alternatives to the received view are discussed.

2 Frege's Puzzle and the Neo-Fregean Solution

In the first part of the talk Frege's Puzzle is introduced and both the Neo-Fregean solution and the Neo-Russellian solution is discussed. Following this we argue by means of new Frege Puzzles that the solution of Frege's Puzzle cannot be to give up direct reference. For example, we show that Frege's Puzzle also arises in connection with time-bound sentences[1] like 'It is raining in Stockholm' and time-place-bound sentences[2] like 'It is raining'. We argue among others that two utterances of a time-bound sentence at one and the same time express one and the same proposition

[1] Time-bound sentences are sentences whose truth-value depends on the time of utterance.

[2] Time-place-bound sentences are sentences whose truth-value depends on the time and the place of utterance.

((DR_T)). Following this we show that (DR_T), our normal practice of belief ascription and some standards concerning rationality lead to contradictions, too. This is the puzzle of time travel concerning time-bound sentences.

The puzzle of time travel shows that in addition to (DR) a Neo-Fregean solution of Frege's Puzzle has to reject (DR_T). We argue that a Neo-Fregean can reject (DR_T) only if the present tense is an indexical that designates the time of utterance. Following this the puzzle of time travel will be exacerbated by showing that the puzzle also arises in connection with the claim that two utterances of a time-place-bound sentence like 'It is raining' at one and the same time at one and the same place express one and the same proposition ((DR_P)). This is the puzzle of time travel concerning time-place-bound sentences. Since in an utterance of 'It is raining' nothing designates the place of utterance, this will show that the solution of the puzzles of time travel cannot be to give up (DR_T) and (DR_P). Together with the thesis that the puzzles of time travel are simply instances of Frege's Puzzle it will follow that the solution of Frege's Puzzle cannot be to give up direct reference.

3 Frege's Puzzle and the Neo-Russellian Solution

In the second part of the talk we argue that the solution of Frege's Puzzle also cannot be to modify some standards concerning rationality. Most philosophers hold that within the received view concerning mental attitudes like believing (G) is true.

(G) For all a-singular terms[3] A and all sentences S: A sentence of the form 'A believes that S' is true with respect to a context c and a possible world w iff in w the referent of A with respect to c and w believes the proposition expressed by S with respect to c.

We argue that if this is the case, then within a Neo-Russellian solution also the that-clauses in sentences of the form 'A believes that S' are directly referential terms. Together with (G) and plausible assumptions this will lead to unacceptable consequences. For example, we will show that there are circumstances in which (1) is true and (2) is false.

(1) Peter believes that Ralph believes Goldbach's Conjecture.

(2) Peter believes that Ralph believes that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes.

If (G) is true and both names and that-clauses in sentences of the form 'A believes that S' are directly referential terms, then we cannot explain this. If both names

[3] A singular term t is a a-singular term with respect to a context c and a possible world w iff t designates an agent with respect to c and w.

and that-clauses in sentences of the form 'A believes that S' are directly referential terms, then (3) expresses the same proposition as (4).

(3) Ralph believes Goldbach's Conjecture.

(2) Ralph believes that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes.

If (G) is true, it follows that (1) is true iff (2) is true. This is the Goldbach Puzzle.

A possibility within a Neo-Russellian solution of Frege's Puzzle is to say with Crimmins and Perry (1989; Crimmins, 1992) that in a sentence of the form 'A believes that S' 'believe' does not express a two-place relation holding between agents and propositions, but a three-place relation holding between agents, propositions and ways propositions are given to agents. Following this the Goldbach Puzzle will be exacerbated by showing that it also arises in connection with the claim that the that-clauses in sentences of the form 'It is true that S' are directly referential terms. For example, we will see that there are circumstances in which (5) is true and (6) is false.

(5) Peter believes that Goldbach's Conjecture is true.

(6) Peter believes that it is true that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes.

This is the Goldbach Puzzle concerning truth ascriptions. We argue that the solution to the puzzle cannot be to say with Crimmins and Perry that in a sentence of the form 'A believes that S' 'believe' does not express a two-place relation holding between agents and propositions. This will show that a Neo-Russellian solution of Frege's Puzzle does not have the resources to solve the Goldbach Puzzle. It will follow that the solution of Frege's Puzzle cannot be to modify some standards concerning rationality.

Concluding, we argue that the solution of Frege's Puzzle also cannot be to give up our normal practice of belief ascription (e.g. Shier, 1996). Together with the thesis that the solution of Frege's Puzzle can neither be to give up direct reference (Neo-Fregeans) nor to modify some standards concerning rationality (Neo-Russellians) this will show that Frege's Puzzle cannot be solved within the received view. It follows that mental attitudes like believing aren't relations holding between agents and propositions.

References

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