

ABSTRACT

Confusing the contents of a representation with attributes of its vehicle has very some subtle forms. I discuss first a number of instances from the theory of perception, and end with a very abstract message about thought: something like a mingling of vehicle with content motivates Frege's conception of Sinn or mode of presentation. Very crudely, Frege has done something like confusing sameness in the vehicle of representation with a representation of sameness. To clarify this claim, I also take up the question what the act is that constitutes taking one thing to be the same as itself or another.

Perceptual Content and Fregean Myth

Ruth Garrett Millikan
University of Connecticut
Storrs CT 06268

I. Introduction

When my daughter Natasha was very small, she often arrived in my bed in the night. One morning she woke there, eyes big with excitement: "Mommy, I saw your dream!". The dream was mine, it seems, because it was in my bed. A charming mingling of the intentional contents of a representation with attributes of the vehicle of representation--something that we philosophers try hard to avoid.

The possible forms of this confusion are numerous, however, and some are vanishingly subtle. Some, I believe, persist in the work of contemporary philosophers, philosophers explicitly aware of the danger. I will warm up by discussing a number of instances of this confusion in contemporary work on perception. But this will lead up, in the end, to a very abstract message about thought. I will claim that something like a mingling of vehicle with content motivates Frege's conception of Sinn or mode of presentation. Putting things very crudely, Frege has done something like confusing sameness in the vehicle of representation with a representation of sameness. For a starting intuition, compare Kant's suggestion in the Paralogisms that Hume had confused a succession of representations with a representation of succession. To clarify this claim about Frege, I will also have to take on the question what the act is that constitutes taking one thing to be the same as itself or another.

II. The Error to be Excised

Let me begin by retrieving the unconscious roots of the neurosis to be excised. These roots are most easily traced through naive theories of perception.¹ In following these roots through the early mind that tries to understand perception, I will be tracing a path well mapped already by others.

It all begins with an impulse to reify the claims of perception. I cannot say "the impulse to reify what is perceived," because "perceive" is a success verb; whatever I perceive is surely already real and needs no resurrection. Rather, what gets resurrected is something to serve as correspondent to another thing itself unquestionably real but lacking a laymen's name. This is the act or state that stands to perception as belief stands to knowledge. Call this act or state, without

¹ I am grateful to Christopher Peacocke's challenging work on perceptual content (Peacocke 1986, 1987, 1989a, 1989b), in which he introduces "manners" of perception (1986, 1989a) and contrasts these with Fregean modes of presentation, for leading me to investigate these possible roots of Frege's Sinne. Although we disagree on some quite fundamental points, without Professor Peacocke's help I should never have thought of looking at Frege in this light. My ungrateful choice of a couple of Peacocke's claims and arguments to use as negative examples in the text that follows reflects that these happened, so, to be on my desk at the time of writing, not that they are singular in any other way.