Propositions, Concepts, and the Fregean/Russellian Distinction

DUŠAN DOŽUDIĆ
Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia

In this paper, I deal with recognising an appropriate criterion for distinguishing two competing conceptions of the propositional content among the content realists—the Fregean and the Russellian—especially in connection to some classical proponents of the realist view (Frege, Moore, and Russell). My starting point is a survey characterisation of the two conceptions and the accompanying classification of Russell's and Moore's conceptions of the propositional content, which I find problematic on several accounts. I set up a context for my consideration and elaborate on why I find it problematic. My central point is that, given how the classical proponents of propositions understood their respective conceptions, as well as how more recent proponents of propositions (for example, David Kaplan) understood them, one should draw the distinction between the Fregean and the Russellian conception on the grounds of what propositional components do rather than the nature of propositional components (unless, of course, one ultimately reduces the latter to the former).

1. *The unfitting demarcation*

Two disagreements prevail in the debate over propositions. One disagreement is whether such entities exist at all; the other is a disagreement among proponents of propositions themselves, and it concerns the nature and function of such entities. Two competing conceptions prevailed among the authors involved in the latter disagreement for the last hundred and fifty years. One of the conceptions started with

Frege and the other one with Russell. In their entry on propositions, McGrath and Frank (2023: sect. 1) consider several classical proponents of propositions and propose the following characterisation:

> In their early writings, Russell and Moore endorse propositionalism. In his 1903 book *The Principles of Mathematics*, Russell affirms the existence of propositions, taking them to be complexes of ordinary concrete objects (the referents of words) rather than of Fregean senses (p. 47). Propositions so conceived are now standardly called *Russellian*, and propositions conceived as complexes of senses or abstract entities are called *Fregean*. In his 1899 paper, "The Nature of Judgment," Moore affirms the existence of propositions, taking them to be broadly Fregean in nature (in particular as being complexes of mind-independent Platonic universals which he calls concepts).

According to this passage, although Russell and Moore agreed at one point that one needs propositions to explain the relevant phenomena, they disagreed about the nature of such entities. For Moore, they were *Fregean* propositions "conceived as complexes of senses or abstract entities"; for Russell, *Russellian*, namely, "complexes of ordinary concrete objects […] rather than of Fregean senses." According to this characterisation, the disagreement between the two primarily comes down to the disagreement about the nature of proper constituents of propositions—whether their constituents are ordinary concrete objects or senses (i.e., abstract entities). In what follows, I will use McGrath and Frank's characterisation of Russell's and Moore's conceptions (as well as the Russellian and the Fregean conceptions) to point out what I consider the key feature that separates the Fregean and the Russellian conceptions. I will first show why the above-quoted characterisation of the Fregean and Russellian propositions is inadequate and why the accompanying characterisation of Russell's propositions is essentially wrong (sect. 2). Then, I will show why the characterisation of Moore's propositions suggested in the same passage is incorrect (not necessarily for the same reason the first two characterisations are wrong) (sect. 3). Finally, I will use the mischaracterisations detected in the quoted passage to point out what I take to be the key distinguishing feature of the competing conceptions of propositions (sect. 4). In the rest of this section, I briefly characterise Fregean and Russellian propositions using the apparatus Frege has provided.[1]

If one draws parameters for characterising *Fregean* propositions from Frege (1984a), propositions turn out to be entities that stem from the fundamental division of objects and concepts on the one hand and their modes of presentation (senses) on the other.[2] For the sake of ter-

---

[1] A reviewer objected that throughout the paper I uncritically follow McGrath and Frank in attributing to Frege the view that propositions (i.e., Frege's thoughts) are *structured* entities, thus neglecting the alternative view that for Frege propositions were not structured. In the paper, however, I mainly talk about Frege*ans*, not Frege, and where I talk about Frege, I remain neutral about the matter.

[2] A reviewer suggested I should explicitly state my assumption that for any object or any concept, there is a mode of presentation that (re)presents it uniquely.

minological consistency, neutrality, and brevity, I will call all the examples of objects and concepts Frege had in mind "items." Thus, objects such as Socrates and Aristotle, and properties and relations, such as wisdom, death, cat, older than, or son of, will be "items."[3] Given the characterisation, only modes of presentation of items are constituents of propositions sentences express, never items themselves. Thus, on the one hand, there are complexes, such as *Socrates being older than Aristotle*, which consist of various items (here at least: Socrates, Aristotle, and the *older than* relation) arranged in a particular manner. On the other hand, there are modes of presentation of items arranged in a propositional complex and expressed by the corresponding sentential complex. The expressed proposition, in turn, relates the sentential complex with the complex of items; it is the mediator between the two complexes.

There are apparent exceptions, one being the attitude and indirect speech sentences (reports). In such cases, modes of presentation become items that enter complexes about which one talks using an attitude or indirect speech sentence.[4] In such cases, however, it is not the mode of presentation about which one says something that enters the proposition but *its* mode of presentation, namely, the mode of presentation of that mode of presentation. With the hierarchy of modes of presentation in mind, the fundamental distinction between items (that enter complexes about which one talks using the sentence) and their modes of presentation (which make it possible to talk about complexes in the first place) is preserved. The direct speech sentences that target linguistic expressions as items make another exception.

Accordingly, the point of Fregean propositions is this: When one refers to and says something about items, whatever they may be, these items, relative to the context, are never regarded as senses of given expressions or sentences. Whenever items are referents, they never function as constituents of the expressed proposition. On the other hand, Russellian propositions do not presuppose the Frege-like division, namely, concepts and objects on the one side and senses on the other. The idea of Russellian propositions is that items to which one refers

In fact, here, the assumption is not mine but Frege's, and it would be curious to adopt Frege's apparatus yet deny the assumption. I do not think that Frege ever questioned it.

[3] Thus, items would be similar to what Russell (1992: 43–44) called "terms" (cf. Cartwright 2003: 115–116). Of course, the convention is tentative, and one should bear in mind the potential threat of Frege's "concept horse" problem and his dispute with Russell over it (Frege 1984b; 1980a).

[4] See Frege (1984a: 159, 166–167; 1980b: 164). One should note that Frege, unlike many later Fregeans, strongly opposed any commitment to complexes consisting of objects and concepts, not only as candidates for propositions, but also as candidates for their truthmakers. Instead, he eventually adopted the view that all true sentences refer to the True and all false ones to the False. After he introduced the sense/meaning (reference) distinction, Frege nowhere considered in an approving way any complexes in addition to sentences, thoughts, complex concepts, and complex physical objects (see Frege 1980b: 163–164; 1984a: 161–165).

and about which one says something are precisely entities that function as constituents of the expressed proposition. Indeed, all items that enter complexes and about which one says something function as constituents of the expressed proposition (Russell 1992: 42–52; 1980: 169).

In summary, both Fregeans and Russellians acknowledge the level of items one can refer to and which, if their respective metaphysics allow them, enter complexes about which one talks using the sentences. The disagreement comes at the point of deciding what are the constituents of the proposition and how they come to function that way. One typically considers that point of disagreement in semantic terms of how one succeeds in referring to something and expressing propositions that enable a sentence to hook onto a segment of the reality—a complex. Given the characterisation in the opening quote, what seems to be of interest here is the what-enters-the-proposition disagreement. However, having the Fregean/Russellian distinction and disagreement between Fregeans and Russellians in mind, as already indicated, the question is not merely what enters the proposition, i.e., what are its constituents, but also what the constituents of the proposition do. By acknowledging this what-enters/what-it-does distinction, consider next the characterisation of Russellian and Fregean propositions suggested in the opening quote.

2. *The Fregean and the Russellian*

The opening quote contains the characterisation of Russellian propositions as "complexes of ordinary concrete objects." McGrath and Frank do not specify what ordinary concrete objects would be (except that they are "the referents of words") nor provide examples. I suppose they primarily have well-familiar particulars in mind, such as the pen I am currently writing with, my present computer, the book I am reading right now, or my gluttonous dog lying next to the table. Russell's (1992: 53) neat example that fits here is "an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public-house and a drunken wife." Suppose such candidates exhaust the list of ordinary concrete objects (and I do not see what else would appropriately be described as *ordinary* and *concrete* that would significantly differ from the listed entities).[5] In that case, the characterisation of Russellian propositions proposed in the quoted passage appears inadequate in several respects.[6]

[5] In fact, earlier in the section, McGrath and Frank remark something that supports the proposed reading of "ordinary concrete objects." They briefly consider Plato's view and conclude that "it is far from clear that he takes the objects of belief to be statements rather than simply the ordinary concrete objects (e.g., Theaetetus) and forms (e.g., flying), which the statement is about" (McGrath and Frank 2023: sect. 1). Here, forms (attributes, universals) are clearly excluded from the list of the ordinary concrete objects.

[6] McGrath and Frank explicitly attribute their explanation of Russellian propositions to Russell (1992). But Russell in his 1903 *Principles of Mathematics* (or anywhere else, for that matter) gives no such characterisation of propositions. In

For one thing, those Russellians whose underlying metaphysics comprises more than ordinary concrete objects would not accept it. And I suspect that would be a majority of Russellians (past and present), if not all of them (see Caplan 2007 and Schiffer 2007: 270–271). It is even hard to conceive the possibility of Russellian propositions consisting only of ordinary concrete objects. Proposals of the trope theory could hardly come to the rescue here (as one of the reviewers suggested) since tropes are far from ordinary and are certainly not concrete (cf. Loux and Crisp 2017: 70–75). It is equally challenging to imagine a sentence expressing such a proposition. What would make a complex consisting exclusively of concrete parts *proposition,* and what would make the sentence that expresses it *declarative*? What would bind its ordinary concrete constituents to match the structure of a declarative sentence? Or, as Russell (1992: 35, 39) puts it, what would enable a proposition to *assert* anything of its subject?

Accordingly, some Russellian propositions would not be Russellian on the characterisation proposed in the opening quote. And these would be all the propositions that have abstract in addition to concrete constituents. An example would be the proposition *that Socrates was stubborn*, in which *Socrates* is an ordinary concrete particular and *stubbornness* an abstract entity. Suppose the sentence "Socrates was stubborn" expresses a proposition. That proposition cannot consist only of Socrates as an ordinary concrete object, and there is nothing ordinary and concrete in other candidates for constituents suggested by the sentence. Russell's (1992: 45) more illustrative example involves the proposition *that humanity belongs to Socrates*. Here, within the corresponding sentence, one refers to *humanity* and *Socrates* (using the expressions "humanity" and "Socrates") and indicates they stand in a particular relation to each other. As Russell puts it, a concept "does not walk the street, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books" (Russell 1992: 53, 64). Particular humans, dogs, books, etc., being ordinary and concrete, indeed do not inhabit such a limbo. But it is not only that the propositions of the kind would not be Russellian by the proposed characterisation. Such propositions would neither be Fregean. As clearly stated in the quote, Fregean propositions are "complexes of senses or abstract entities," and propositions mentioned so far all have concrete in addition to abstract entities: *Socrates* in the proposition *that Socrates was stubborn* in neither a sense nor an abstract object. It is as if the quoted passage presupposes a metaphysical clear-cut between Fregean and Russellian constituents of propositions; that for the former, they are supposed to be abstract, for the latter, concrete. But there is no such clear-cut overlap.

One should thus modify the initially proposed characterisation of Russellian propositions by saying that such propositions are complexes

---

fact, he insists that in every proposition there must be at least one constituent that is not a term but a concept (1992: 212).

of items. And items would include more than ordinary concrete objects; they would also include properties and relations (and abstract objects, too, if one's metaphysics allows them). Alternatively, they would include no ordinary concrete (or abstract) objects but only properties and relations (I will return to that in the next section).

What holds for Russellian propositions also holds for Russell's (1992) propositions.[7] For him, at the turn of the twentieth century, a proposition is a structured entity—a unity consisting of at least two constituents (1992: 44, 508). One can distinguish constituents of propositions in several ways. Still, the fundamental distinction is to things and concepts (1992: 44). And one can further distinguish concepts into class concepts (e.g., *smart* or *dog*) and relations (e.g., *mother of* or *older than*) (1992: 44–45); class concepts are universals that can have instances, whereas relations are universals without instances (1992: 51–52). Things are terms of a proposition that can occur only as its subjects. In contrast to things, concepts can occur within propositions as subjects (terms) or irreplaceable parts of assertion (in Russell's sense) (1992: 39, 44–45). Every proposition must contain at least one concept that is not a term in it (1992: 212). As far as things are concerned, Russell distinguishes several kinds: ordinary concrete objects (such as the computer on which I am currently typing this or one of my particular mental states (1992: 45)), but also "many other entities not commonly called things" (1992: 44), namely, abstract entities, such as classes or geometrical points (1992: 45–46), but also propositions themselves (1992: 35, 48–49). Russell conveniently summarises his position:

> Whatever may be an object of thought, or may occur in any true or false proposition, or can be counted as *one*, I call a *term*. […] A man, a moment, a number, a class, a relation, a chimaera, or anything else that can be mentioned, is sure to be a term; and to deny that such and such a thing is a term must always be false. (1992: 43)

Characterised in that way, Russell's propositions obviously do not fit McGrath and Frank's characterisation of the proposition class to which such propositions indisputably belong, namely, the class of Russellian propositions.

Once it is granted that Russell's propositions, and Russellian propositions in general, would have to consist of at least one constituent that is not an ordinary concrete object, one can note another problem with the opening characterisation of Russellian propositions. For Russellians who are realists about abstract entities and hold that such entities can be named and not merely described, there would surely be Russellian propositions that consist only of abstract entities. Examples of these might be the proposition *that redness is relational*; *that redness is not greenness*; *that five is greater than three*; *that two is not seven*; etc. Perhaps even the proposition *that five's being greater than two implies*

---

[7] See Cartwright (2003: 113ff.) and Hylton (2003: 207ff.) for further discussion about Russell's early conception of propositions and their constituents.

two's being less than five, and the like, would belong here, provided one considers propositions themselves to be abstract entities and "that"-clauses referential devices, as some Russellians consider them to be (cf. Schiffer 2006: 268–271).

Thus, it is not only that the above-mentioned Russellian propositions do not satisfy the opening characterisation of Russellian propositions. These propositions satisfy the opening characterisation of Fregean propositions as complexes of senses *or abstract entities*. Take the proposition *that two is not seven*; every constituent of that proposition is indeed abstract, if it is anything at all. Thus, by the proposed characterisation, some Russellian propositions would be Fregean. In fact, given the characterisation, one could hardly find any candidate for Russellian propositions and, accordingly, any actual proponent of Russellian propositions that would fit the characterisation.

For the same reason, the opening characterisation of Fregean propositions fails, too: Some of the propositions that one would, guided by the characterisation, identify as Fregean would, in fact, be Russellian. The problem with the opening characterisation of propositions is not that it is too sketchy and thus allows different interpretations. Its problem is that it emphasises a less important metaphysical aspect, which shifts the focus from what is more important for drawing the Fregean/Russellian distinction.

3. *Moore's concept(ion)*

Mislabelling Russellian propositions as "Fregean," licenced by the opening characterisation, does not stop at the so-far considered cases of Russellian propositions that consist only of abstract entities. There is an interesting kind of Russellian proposition, which McGrath and Frank also labelled "Fregean", namely, Moore's (1993a) propositions. In the opening quote, one reads that "Moore affirms the existence of propositions, taking them to be broadly Fregean in nature." The statement follows up with a brief explanation: "in particular as being complexes of mind-independent Platonic universals which he calls concepts." It is hard to figure out what "broadly Fregean" means here. I take it to mean something like: *not typical Fregean, but definitely not Russellian.*

Why is the just quoted characterisation of Moore's propositions incorrect? Are mind-independent Platonic universals (concepts) not abstract? The provided characterisation is incorrect because Moore's propositions are Russellian, not Fregean. Indeed, one should say that Moore's propositions are broadly Russellian in nature and thereby mean that such propositions are *not typical Russellian but definitely not Fregean*. The reason Moore's propositions are not typical Russellian, one should note, has nothing to do with the key feature of Russellian propositions but rather with Moore's unusual metaphysical conception of their constituents adopted as a reaction to the British idealist tradition (I will return to that shortly) (cf. Hylton 2003: 207–208). As for the

question of what such constituents of propositions do, the answer is the same as in cases of more typical candidates for Russellian propositions. Constituents of Moore's propositions do the same thing that, e.g., *Socrates* or *Aristotle* would do in Russell's propositions. And they occur in propositions in the same way and for the same reason *Socrates* or *Aristotle,* in Russell's case, do. Russell's or Moore's propositions are a means to challenge idealism, and to be able to do so on the ground of propositions, they thought, propositions should not involve any mediation; otherwise, one might end up where idealists are. I will elaborate on that because to see why Moore's propositions are Russellian, not Fregean, it is important to understand what concepts for Moore are and how they relate to propositions on the one hand and the world on the other.

Moore (1993a) starts as a reflection on some of the doctrines proposed in Francis Bradley's *Logic*. He puts the matter as follows: Although in his *Logic*, Bradley attempted to preserve the objective reality independent of one's ideas, he, nevertheless, ended up with ideas alone, fuzzily separating them as something that designat*es* and as something designat*ed* (cf. Russell 1992: 47). In his reaction to Bradley's idealist conception, Moore took the radical realist stance on the issues Bradley dealt with in *Logic*. Accordingly, he substituted "Bradley's ideas" with objectively existing "logical ideas." Bradley called such entities "universal meanings," and Moore decided to call them "concepts." For him (1993a: 4), concepts (including both properties and relations) are not psychological (subjective) or linguistic entities. They exist objectively and are related to language and thought only as their objects (in the way a ball is the object of someone's kicking) but ontologically independent of such a relation. Concepts are not created. They are causally inert, incapable of change (1993a: 4–5), and something immediately known (1993a: 6), be they empirical or a priori (1993a: 14).[8] As it turns out, Moore's proposal here seems to be a peculiar realist version of Berkeley's (1998) bundle theory (minus the God). He writes:

> All that exists is thus composed of concepts necessarily related to one another in specific manners, and likewise to the concept of existence. I am fully aware how paradoxical this theory must appear, and even how contemptible. But it seems to me to follow from premises generally admitted, and to have been avoided only by lack of logical consistency. (Moore 1993a: 6)

And continues afterwards along Berkeleyan lines:

> It seems necessary, then, to regard the world as formed of concepts. These are the only objects of knowledge. They cannot be regarded fundamentally as abstractions either from things or from ideas; since both alike can, if

[8] Following Moore, Russell adopted the outlined metaphysical characterisation of concepts and applied it to all *terms*: "[E]very term is immutable and indestructible […] no change can be conceived in it which would not destroy its identity and make it another term" (1992: 44). For a further discussion about Russell's *terms*, see Cartwright (2003: 115ff.). I return to Moore's impact on Russell in the following section.

anything is to be true of them, be composed of nothing but concepts. A thing becomes intelligible first when it is analysed into its constituent concepts. The material diversity of things, which is generally taken as starting point, is only derived […]. (Moore 1993a: 8)[9]

If Moore intends concepts to supplant Bradley's ideas, one might think that concepts accordingly have the same function Bradley's ideas do, with the sole difference of being external and objective rather than mental and subjective. In one sense, that is true. If Bradley's ideas are something with the help of which one comes to know the world (whatever it may be), concepts coincide with ideas. If Bradley's ideas make words and sentences meaningful, concepts also coincide with ideas by that feature. And if Bradley's ideas are all one ultimately needs, and thus all that ultimately exists, as Moore (1993a: 1–3) suggests it holds in Bradley's case, then by that feature, concepts coincide with Bradley's ideas, since for Moore concepts are all there is (this last thesis is particularly important for understanding and classifying Moore's conception of propositions.). But if Bradley's ideas *represent* something other than ideas or even other ideas, then concepts do not coincide with Bradley's ideas, not by that feature.

Precisely here lies the crucial point for understanding Moore's conception of propositions, without which one could hardly assign it the proper label, "Fregean" or "Russellian." For Moore (1993a: 4–6), propositions are entities composed of at least two concepts that stand in a specific relation to one another. The truth or falsity of a proposition does not depend on what exists in the world independently of the proposition and the correspondence between the proposition and the existent. Instead, it depends on the nature of the relation between concepts within the proposition. Indeed, since concepts are all that exists, the notions of correspondence and representation become utterly redundant. All one could ultimately have are simple concepts (such as *red*), complex concepts formed out of the simple(r) ones (such as *rose*), and propositions composed of simple or complex concepts connected by a specific relation (for example, the proposition *that this rose is red*). By this characterisation of the constituents of propositions, concepts for Moore in no way coincide with Frege's senses or alternative constituents of Fregean propositions besides being abstract. Moore's concepts are not representational; Frege's senses are, and other sense-like entities within the later Fregean semantic tradition are also supposed to be of the kind.

---

[9] See also Moore (1993a: 18; 1993b: 21). Just as for Berkeley (1998), the exception here would be the particular knowing subjects. It should be noted that, although Russell (1992) diverged from Moore's conception in allowing *things* beside and independent of *concepts* (as I already mentioned), in his later writings, he apparently returned precisely to Moore's outlined conception. Thus, one finds Russell later writing: "I wish to suggest that 'this is red' is not a subject-predicate proposition, but is of the form 'redness is here'; that 'red' is a name, not a predicate; and that *what would commonly be called a 'thing' is nothing but a bundle of coexisting qualities* such as redness, hardness, etc." (1961: 97, emphasis added; unlike in his early writing, Russell here uses "proposition" for sentences, not their contents).

Another thing that separates Moore from Frege (and later Fregeans who agreed with Frege on that point) is that Frege presupposes a hierarchy of senses (Frege 1984a; cf. Carnap: 1956: 129). For any particular item, there is the item, senses of that item, senses of senses of that item, senses of senses of senses of that item, etc. That feature of senses allowed Frege to explain the peculiarities of indirect speech or attitude sentences without abandoning the familiar pattern of the explanation he introduced for the "customary" sentences, such as "Socrates is stubborn." One might think that, at least in that respect, Moore's concepts do not differ from Frege's senses. One should, however, bear in mind that even if Moore would allow for such a hierarchy (namely, concepts of concepts, concepts of concepts of concepts, etc.), and I can see no reason why he would not, that would still not justify a Fregean interpretation of the higher-level concepts. They would not be something that uniquely picks out the lower-level concepts and constitutes the meaning of the words in question. But, to my knowledge, Moore never suggested something along these lines, and the concepts he considers are not singular (individual). Singularity, if any, could come only from a specific combination of concepts into a single complex concept. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that the only hierarchy Moore would have allowed in the case of concepts would resemble the classical realist hierarchy of universals. The realists typically hold that universals directly related to particulars are also directly related to "higher" properties and relations, "higher" properties and relations to "still higher" properties and relations, etc. The particular apple, for example, is directly related to *redness*, *redness* to *colour*, *colour* to *monadic*, etc. Such a sequence would then constitute a hierarchy, but not the one resembling Frege's sense hierarchy.

Now consider the following case: Imagine a reformed Fregean whose metaphysical investigations lead him to conclude, plausibly or not, that senses and complexes of senses are all there is, that senses constitute the world the way Moore's concepts do, and that they are of the single level. No hierarchy of senses thus exists by that metaphysical account. But, for whatever reason, the reformed Fregean still holds that senses are constituents of propositions, just as an ordinary Fregean would. According to that "reformed" conception, propositions would actually be Russellian, not Fregean, even though they would have senses as constituents. Of course, one might protest at this point that such "reformed" senses would not really be *Fregean* because they would not do what Fregean senses are supposed to do, namely, (re)present items (including lower-level senses) in a unique manner. That is true (although Frege allowed senses that present nothing), but it does not undermine the point here: One might have entities that resemble Fregean senses in other respects save their function. For that reason alone, one would not have Fregean but Russellian propositions if such senses were their constituents.

4. *Mediation and the puzzling "concept"*

The existence of senses does not make a conception of propositions Fregean, but the particular assumption about what senses within propositions do. In the Fregean case, the assumption is that senses are *identifying mediators* between items and bits of language (or certain psychological states), which, *as mediators*, enter propositions that are themselves identifying mediators. If senses were not mediators but would still, for whatever reason, enter propositions as their constituents, such propositions would not be Fregean. Russell provides an example.

Up to now, Russell was identified as a classical proponent of—not surprisingly—Russellian conception of propositions. But there is a point at which Russell's (1992) conception turns roughly Fregean and where his position, unlike Moore's, might be classified as "broadly Fregean." This is precisely the point that nicely illustrates the proposed demarcation criterion governed by the question of what constituents of propositions do. Namely, early Russell seems to be on the same track as Frege when it comes to denoting phrases like "a man," "the present queen of England," "any number," or "all dogs" (cf. Hylton 2003: 214). Here is how Russell (1992: 53) puts it:

> A concept *denotes* when, if it occurs in a proposition, the proposition is not *about* the concept, but about a term connected in a certain peculiar way with the concept. If I say 'I met a man', the proposition is not about *a man*: this is a concept which does not walk the streets, but lives in the shadowy limbo of the logic-books. What I met was a thing, not a concept, an actual man with a tailor and a bank-account or a public-house and a drunken wife.

What makes this a Fregean addendum to Russell's otherwise Russellian conception of propositions is not the kind of entity that could now occur within some propositions—the concept—since entities of the same kind occur in cases of Russell's previously considered propositions, too (Russell 1992: 48). But in Russell's propositions considered so far, concepts as their constituents did nothing logically in addition to occurring within them. Indeed, in the case of the proposition *that Manhood belongs to Socrates*, the proposition is about the concept *man(hood)*. In denoting cases, however, even when concepts occur as subjects of propositions—as in the proposition *that a man walked into the bar*—the proposition is not about the concept *a man* but about what that concept denotes instead. And this case significantly differs from the proposition *that 'a man' is a denoting concept*. The latter proposition is about the denoting concept *a man* and, at the same time, contains another denoting concept, namely, the concept *a denoting concept*, which functions differently from the first one within this proposition. And one could go further along the same lines. For example, one could say (adopting Russell's italic letters convention), "*A denoting concept* does not denote in the proposition expressed by this very sentence, but *the proposition expressed by this very sentence* does."

Denoting concepts thus do more than merely occur within propositions as inactive constituents on par with *Socrates* or (the number) *nine*; they denote. As constituents of propositions in which they actually denote, denoting concepts are about something other than themselves, something which is typically not a constituent of these same propositions.[10] As Russell puts it, denoting concepts "are symbolic in their own logical nature" (1992: 47; see Hylton 2003: 207ff. for a more detailed overview). Russell soon became discontented even with this restricted Fregean burden of his theory. A year later, he writes to Frege: "In the case of a simple proper name like 'Socrates', I cannot distinguish between sense [*Sinn*] and meaning [*Bedeutung*]; […] I see the difference between sense and meaning only in the case of complexes whose meaning is an object, […] But I admit that there are certain difficulties in this view" (Russell 1980: 169; cf. Russell 1992: 47). And a year after that letter, he completely eliminated the notion of denoting concepts as Fregean constituents of propositions from his explanation, supplanting it now with the well-familiar apparatus of contextual definitions accompanied by a cryptic criticism of the meaning/denotation distinction (Russell 1968; cf. Hylton 2003: 219–222).

In a sense, Frege's analysis of the attitude or indirect speech sentences supports that, too (e.g., Frege 1980b: 163–165). When a sense becomes the object of discourse or thinking, it no longer performs its function relative to that context. The sense to which a word refers within an indirect construction (e.g., "Plato" in "Aristotle claimed that Plato was on the wrong track," or the whole "that"-clause "that Plato was on the wrong track"), although by its nature still a mediator, that is, a (re)presentation of something, its representational character is irrelevant relative to that particular case. Therefore, the customary sense of "Plato" does not enter the proposition expressed by the whole sentence "Aristotle claimed that Plato was on the wrong track." And one can quickly think of a sentence in which tokens of the same name within the same sentence are not coreferential, say, "Aristotle believed that Plato was dead, although at that time Plato was still alive."

Therefore, drawing the distinction between Fregeans and Russellians is not primarily about what the constituents of propositions *are* but what such constituents within propositions *do*. This is where Russellians and Fregeans primarily disagree. I will point out another example to support the claim further.

The point about what-constituents-do-rather-than-what-they-are also gets supported if one considers Kaplan's characterisations of singular (i.e., Russellian) propositions (which are opposed to Fregean propo-

---

[10] Again, one could think of examples where precisely the untypical happens (adopting Russell's italic letters convention): The sentence "A man is not a denoting concept, but *a men* is" expresses the proposition containing the concept *a man* both as a denoting concept *and* as an inactive item (analogously to sentences such as "A man is not a denoting phrase, but 'a man' is"). That, however, in no way goes against what I have said here. For a related discussion, see Russell (1968: 45–51).

sitions). One can detect a number of places in Kaplan's writings where he expresses it clearly. Here are several examples: "[…] certain singular terms refer directly without the mediation of a Fregean *Sinn* as meaning. […] the proposition expressed by a sentence containing such a term would involve individuals directly rather than by way of the 'individual concepts' or 'manners of presentation'" (Kaplan 1989a: 483). Or: "Directly referential expressions are said to refer directly without the mediation of a Fregean *Sinn*. […] the relation between the linguistic expression and the referent is not mediated by the corresponding propositional component, the content or what-is-said" (Kaplan 1989b: 568). Or: "The 'direct' of 'direct reference' means unmediated by any propositional component, not unmediated *simpliciter*. The directly referential term goes directly to its referent, *directly* in the sense that it does not first pass through the proposition" (Kaplan 1989b: 569). Notice that Kaplan mentions no metaphysical feature (such as *abstract* or *concrete*) in his characterisations of singular propositions.

Then, according to Fregean conception, constituents of propositions are *mediators* between referents and expressions; it is what they do. They (re)present referents in a certain way. For the Russellian conception of propositions, there is no *such* mediation. Rather, Russellians will typically hold that the directly referential terms within a sentence refer to objects (referents) via causal or historical chains which do not enter the propositions expressed by the sentence. Constituents of propositions are referents themselves and do nothing in addition to that. In the three quoted passages, Kaplan does not mention other features of propositional components for a good reason.

Regarding the Fregean/Russellian distinction, all other features of such components are irrelevant unless they have direct bearings on the question of what propositional components do. And whether propositional components are abstract or concrete certainly has no such bearings. Moore, for example, thought that the world and propositions consist of concepts; concepts are abstract, yet Moore's propositions are not Fregean but Russellian.

However, I do not think the mischaracterisation of Fregean and Russellian propositions is the only reason why McGrath and Frank characterise Moore's propositions as "broadly Fregean." I believe they would characterise them in the same way even if their characterisation of Fregean and Russellian propositions would be entirely in order and in complete accordance with Kaplan's characterisation. The main reason they characterise Moore's propositions the way they do, I suspect, is that Moore's characterisation of propositions—especially his "concept" talk—*sounds* much like something some later Fregeans would say. It was already mentioned that Kaplan (1989a: 483) characterised Russellian propositions as entities that "involve individuals directly rather than by way of the 'individual concepts' or 'manners of presentation.'" And "individual concept" is the term taken from Carnap and Church, not Frege.

Carnap (1956), for example, distinguishes the extension of an expression from the expression's intension (the former is an entity to which the expression refers, the latter the concept of that entity expressed by the expression). Thus, the distinction is intended to be an adaptation of Frege's sense/meaning (reference) distinction. Then he introduces the term "concept" "as a common designation for properties, relations, and similar entities," which are intensions of expressions (Carnap 1956: 21). And then he writes things such as: "let us look for entities which we might regard as intensions of individual expressions. […] Now it seems to me a natural procedure, in the case of individual expressions […] to speak of concepts, but of concepts of a particular type, namely, the individual type" (Carnap 1956: 40–41). And Church (1964: 438–439) writes along similar Fregean lines:

> A name is said to *denote* its denotation and to *express* its sense, and the sense is said to be *a concept of* the denotation. The abstract entities which serve as senses of names let us call *concepts* […] Thus anything which is or is capable of being the sense of some name in some language, actual or possible, is a concept. The terms *individual concept*, *function concept*, and the like are then to mean a concept which is a concept of an individual, of a function, etc. A *class concept* may be identified with a *property*, and a *truth-value concept* (as already indicated) with a proposition.

Thus, both Carnap and Church take *concepts* to be precisely what Frege called "senses" or "modes of presentation."[11] Reading Moore not too carefully with the intensional semantics tradition in mind easily leads to interpreting his position along these lines. All one needs to do is to combine McGrath and Frank's characterisation of Fregean propositions "as complexes of senses or abstract entities" with Church's stipulation that concepts will be "abstract entities which serve as senses of names" and then note that Moore treated propositions as entities composed of concepts. But, as I have argued, such identification is licenced by nothing Moore says about concepts in his paper. Indeed, as one can notice, what is indicative in Church's quote is the repeating phrase "concept of," which displays the representational nature of Fregean senses. No phrase of this kind (in this context, at least) ever occurs in Moore's paper.

In addition, one should consider Russell's (1992: xxiii, 24, 44) repeating acknowledgements to Moore's (1993a) conception as the source of influence.[12] These acknowledgements, too, support the claim that

---

[11] One should note, however, that, from Frege's perspective, both Carnap and Church would make sort of a category mistake here since they identify some of the concepts with properties and relations. But, strictly speaking, properties and relations are at the same level as objects (*Socrates*, for example). They are all *items* (as previously defined). Frege avoids this by distinguishing concepts from *senses* of concepts, and only the latter ones enter propositions according to him. For related point, see Gabriel (2004: 2, 12).

[12] For example: "On fundamental questions of philosophy, my position, in all its chief features, is derived from Mr G. E. Moore. I have accepted from him the non-existential nature of propositions (except such as happen to assert existence) and

Russell is Moore's heir on this point, not a proponent of the rival conception. Russell also remarks that "[t]he notion of a term here set forth is a modification of Mr G. E. Moore's notion of a concept in his article "On the Nature of Judgment, […], from which notion, however, it differs in some important respects" (1992: 44, footnote). The modification, i.e., difference, Russell had in mind here concerns the nature of constituents of propositions, not what these constituents do and how they figure into propositions.[13] In particular, Russell allows constituents of propositions, which are neither concepts nor bundles of concepts, namely, *things*. But he also allows propositions consisting only of concepts, and all such propositions are on par with Moore's propositions (unless, of course, a denoting concept occurs in them). A previously considered example was the proposition *that redness is not relational*. Thus, the denoting cases aside, Russell's departure from Moore has nothing to do with the issue concerning the nature of the propositions from the perspective of the Russellian/Fregean distinction. Both Moore's and Russell's propositions are Russellian. Not that it matters much now, but given the characterisation of Moore's and Russell's propositions, as well as the fact that they were first proposed by Moore (1993a) in 1899 and only then adopted by Russell in the short period to come, *Russellian* propositions would be more appropriately labelled "Moorean."[14]

References

Berkeley, G. 1998. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. J. Dancy (ed.). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Caplan, B. 2007. "On Sense and Direct Reference." In M. Davidson (ed.). *On Sense and Direct Reference: Readings on the Philosophy of Language*. Boston and Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2–16.

Carnap, R. 1956. *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*. 2nd ed. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Cartwright, R. L. 2003. "Russell and Moore, 1898–1905." In N. Griffin (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 108–127.

Church, A. 1964. "The Need for Abstract Entities in Semantic Analysis." In J. A. Fodor and J. J. Katz (eds.). *The Structure of Language: Read-*

their independence of any knowing mind" (Russell 1992: xxiii; for a more detailed discussion, see Cartwright 2003).

[13] It should be noted that, as one of the reviewers remarked, Russell's biggest departure from Moore is his theory of *denoting* concepts—and denoting concepts differ from other concepts precisely on the account of what they do, namely, denote. Cartwright (2003: 120) notes Moore was dissatisfied with Russell's theory of denoting concepts from the start.

ings in the Philosophy of Language. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 437–445.

Frege, G. 1980a. "Frege to Russell, 28.7.1902." In G. Gabriel, H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, C. Thiel, and A. Veraart (eds.). *Gottlob Frege: Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 139–142.

———. 1980b. "Frege to Russell, 13.11.1904." In G. Gabriel, H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, C. Thiel, and A. Veraart (eds.). *Gottlob Frege: Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 160–166.

———. 1984a. "On Sense and Meaning." In B. McGuinness (ed.). *Gottlob Frege: Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 157–177.

———. 1984b. "On Concept and Object." In B. McGuinness (ed.). *Gottlob Frege: Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 182–194.

Gabriel, G. 2004. "Introduction: Frege's Lectures on *Begriffsschrift*." In E. H. Reck and S. Awodey (eds.). *Frege's Lectures on Logic: Carnap's Student Notes 1910–1914*. Chicago and LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1–15.

Hylton, P. 2003. "The Theory of Descriptions." In N. Griffin (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 202–240.

Kaplan, D. 1989a. "Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals." In J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein (eds.). *Themes from Kaplan*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 481–563.

———. 1989b. "Afterthoughts." In J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein (eds.). *Themes from Kaplan*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 565–614.

Loux, M. J. and Crisp, T. M. 2017. *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 4th ed. New York and London: Routledge.

McGrath, M. and Frank, D. 2023. "Propositions." In E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman (eds.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Winter 2023 edition.

Moore, G. E. 1993a. "The Nature of Judgement." In T. Baldwin (ed.). *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. London and New York: Routledge, 1–19.

———. 1993b. "Truth and Falsity." In T. Baldwin (ed.). *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*. London and New York: Routledge, 20–22.

Russell, B. 1961. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. London: George Allen and Unwin LTD.

———. 1968. "On Denoting." In R. C. Marsh (ed.). *Logic and Knowledge*. London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 41–56.

———. 1980. "Russell to Frege 12.12.1904." In G. Gabriel, H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, C. Thiel, and A. Veraart (eds.). *Gottlob Frege: Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 166–170.

———. 1992. *The Principles of Mathematics*. London: Routledge.

Schiffer, S. 2006. "Propositional Content." In E. Lepore and B. C. Smith (eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press, 267–294.