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Demythologizing the Third Realm: Frege on Grasping Thoughts¹

“Thus, let no one despise symbols!” (SJ 84).

This paper addresses some puzzles about the relationship that Frege describes between a thinker and the thought she thinks. He calls the relationship we have to thoughts “grasping” [*fassen*]. My treatment of this topic is oriented by a puzzling passage that appears near the end of Frege’s great essay “The Thought” where he writes about a “non-sensible something” without which “everyone would remain shut up in his inner world” (T 343).² Something non-sensible, Frege argues, both enables us to perceive the external world and enables us to grasp thoughts. These epistemological issues open up the ontological issue of Frege’s alleged platonism about thoughts and their ‘third realm’. After all, the urgency of the question concerning *how* we grasp thoughts issues from the requirement of bridging an ontological chasm between non-spatio-temporal thoughts and spatio-temporally bound thinkers.³

I first review the relevant passage about the non-sensible something. I then consider and criticize the interpretation of the passage and the related ontological and epistemological issues

¹ Abbreviations of Frege’s writings:

L “Logic,” in *The Frege Reader*, ed. Michael Beaney (Blackwell Publishers, 1997).
LTH Letters to Husserl, 1906 (in Beaney).
OCO “On Concept and Object” (in Beaney).
SJ “On the Scientific Justification of a Conceptual Notation,” in *Conceptual Notation and Related Articles*, trans. and ed. by Terrell Ward Bynum, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972).
SK “Sources of Knowledge of Mathematics and the Mathematical Natural Sciences” (in Beaney)
T “The Thought” (in Beaney)

² “Non-sensible something” is a translation of a single German substantive: *Nichtsinnliche*.

³ For an influential account of this worry, see Michael Dummett, “Frege’s Myth of the Third Realm,” in *Frege and Other Philosophers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), especially pp. 251-252. Tyler Burge also articulates a version of this worry in his “Frege on Knowing the Third Realm,” (*Mind*, 1992; 101: 633-650), particularly p. 645 (Burge’s paper also appears in his recently published collection: *Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, my references are to *Mind*).

offered by Wolfgang Malzkorn in his article “How Do We ‘Grasp’ a Thought, Mr. Frege?”⁴ Malzkorn reads Frege as arguing that it is by means of ideas [*Vorstellungen*] that we grasp thoughts—the ontological rift thus is bridged with ideas. On my view, language, or rather, our linguistic competence, enables us to grasp thoughts. This way of reading Frege neutralizes the threat of the ontological chasm. My interpretation provides support for reading offered by Thomas Ricketts who argues that we should not read Frege as a platonist about thoughts at all—as though he is presenting the ontological underpinnings of objectivity—but that we should rather read him as “systematically redescribing selected features of our linguistic practices.”⁵

Frege usually seems not to have much to say about the “how” of grasping. The “that” is established firmly enough by humanity’s common storehouse of thoughts, that is, by the very facts and practices of human communication, inquiry, and judgment.⁶ The question of how we grasp thoughts is sometimes brushed off as a psychological issue extraneous to logical considerations: “It is enough for us that we can grasp thoughts and take them to be true; how this takes place is a question in its own right” (L 246). Despite his ostensible attempts to distance himself from these considerations, Frege does have some provocative things to say about the ‘how’ of grasping. Hence, he writes: “Even the timeless, if it is going to be anything for us, must somehow be implicated with the temporal” (T 344). But what is the nature of this implication?

At the point in the “The Thought” where “the non-sensible something” comes up, Frege has been criticizing subjective idealism, which for him amounts to the view that everything is but

⁴ In *Building on Frege: New Essays on Sense, Content, and Concept*, ed. A. Newen, U. Nortmann, and R. Stuhlmann-Laeisz (Stanford: CSLI Publications, 2001), pp. 35-51. I refer to this essay below as ‘Malzkorn’.

⁵ Thomas Ricketts, “Objectivity and Objecthood: Frege’s Metaphysics of Judgment,” in L. Haaparanta and J. Hintikka (eds.), *Frege Synthesized* (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Co., 1986), 65-95. This particular remark appears on p. 72.

⁶ On the notion of a common stock of thoughts, cf., e.g., OCO, note G, pp.184-185 in Beaney.

an idea of mine. It is essential to the protection of the objectivity of judgment and human knowledge that Frege establish that “not everything is an idea” (T 341, 342). Frege uses the term “idea” [*Vorstellung*] to cover a wide array of inner states and internal phenomena:

Even an unphilosophical man soon finds it necessary to recognize an inner world distinct from the outer world, a world of sense impressions, or creations of his imagination, of sensations, of feelings and moods, a world of inclinations, wishes and decisions. For brevity’s sake I want to use the word ‘idea’ to cover all these occurrences, except decisions (T 334).

According to Frege, we *have* ideas: we neither perceive them or grasp them. We own them: they are ontologically dependent on our minds. Hence, a visual impression is the private internal result of my looking at something: “I see a green field, I thus have a visual impression of the green” (T 334).

The non-sensible something emerges in Frege’s argument against a descendent of subjective idealism, a position Malzkorn calls “a strong sensualist position,” and which he helpfully characterizes as involving the following two claims: (1) that thoughts are only a species of idea (and thereby subjective), and (2) that the ideas of the external world provided to us by sense impressions are our sole source of knowledge.

Frege’s argument against this view hinges on a distinction between sense impression and sense perception. He writes that “sense impressions alone do not reveal the external world to us” (T 342). Sense impressions, on Frege’s account, are necessary conditions of our perceiving things, but are not sufficient conditions (T 343). Indeed, internal sense impressions are only “constituents” of sense perception. This distinction between impression and perception is a little hard to grasp. Frege explains it with reference to a case of vision.

Frege writes: “To have visual impressions is not to see things. How does it happen that I see the tree just there where I do see it? Obviously it depends on the visual impressions I have and on the particular sort which occur because I see with two eyes” (T 342-3). Next Frege

imagines that “someone else sees the tree in the same place,” and notes that this other perceiver must have his *own* visual impression which is determined by his *own* retinal images of the tree (T 343). Frege then adds: “And yet we move about in the same external world.” At this point Frege claims that our impressions must be supplemented in some way order for us to count as perceiving (here, seeing) the tree: “What must still be added is not anything sensible. And yet this [the non-sensible something] is just what opens up the external world for us; for without this non-sensible something everyone would remain shut up in his inner world” (T 343). Frege then goes on to add that “something non-sensible, even without the cooperation of sense-impressions, could also lead us out of our inner world and enable us to grasp thoughts” (ibid).

According to Malzkorn Frege means to strike a blow at the sensualist “by showing that even our knowledge of the external world relies on more than sense-impressions” (Malzkorn 45). Thus, Malzkorn takes Frege to be showing that sensualist position is untenable in that it involves a faulty (even self-undermining) view of perception: it is ignorant of the fact that “sense perception cannot simply be construed as a kind of wax impression of actual objects” (Malzkorn 45). So far, so good. I think this is correct.

But what *is* the non-sensible something? Malzkorn argues that it is “a certain faculty to process sense impressions of actual things and thus turn them into sense perceptions of those things” (Malzkorn 45). This is not a sustainable reading. Malzkorn does not specify what this ‘processing’ involves, taking it that the example that Frege gives about having two retinal images which yield the perception of a single tree to speaks for itself. The point for him is that you’ve got to get from the ‘raw data’ of two retinal images to the single processed-perception. But this actually misses Frege’s point in talking about the retinal images in the first place. A close

reading of the text will show that the processing of sense impressions is not the issue here and that Malzkorn's interpretation thus lacks a sufficient textual basis.

The key sentence is this: "We must assume that these retinal images determine our impressions" (T 343). The point of bringing up retinal images at all is to provide an auxiliary argument establishing *the idiosyncratic privacy of impressions*, to play up *this* as their essential difference from perceptions. If both me and Jones are looking at the same tree, we each have our own retinal images, and therefore we each have our own ideas: "Consequently the visual impressions we have are not only not the same, but markedly different from each other" (ibid.).

Frege's argument for establishing that impressions are insufficient for perceptions goes like this: Premise 1: If all that we have are these distinct private impressions, we could neither agree with nor contradict one another about certain public facts about this tree, particularly in Frege's example, its specific location. Premise 2: But we are in fact able to agree with and contradict each other about facts about the tree. *Therefore* private impressions are insufficient to explain perception. Let me put this reading of the argument on firmer textual footing. I need to describe in more detail what is involved in Frege's conception of the distinction between impression and perception. There are three observations we need to make here.

(1) Recall the remark from early in "The Thought" (partially quoted above, p. 3): "I go for a walk with a companion. I see a green field, I thus have a visual impression of the green" (T 334). Notice that Frege, upon seeing this field, has an impression just of the green: *not* of the green field itself, and more specifically, not *that* there is a green field there, in that particular place, in front of me. It is only a perception that would involve the content of this "that..." clause. For Frege perception of the world has propositional content: perceiving something

involves grasping a sense (a thought).⁷ Hence impressions do not involve any objective, determinate fact independent of me, they are just about how things are with *me*. The point is that impressions are not able to be the subject of an assertion at all—taking assertion in Frege’s sense of being the expression of a judgment that a thought is true— because there is no thought involved. If sense-impressions cannot be the subject of assertion, then the sentences expressing them are not judgeable to be either true or false. Thus impressions are not be the kinds of things about which can agree with or contradict each other. I can say, “To me, there is a green patch,” while my partner could rejoin: “But to *me* there is a turquoise patch.” Adopting a phrase from Ricketts, we can say that sentences that express impressions are mere ventings of an inner state, like cries of pain and shouts of joy.⁸ The distinction between perceptions and impressions thus parallel’s Frege’s distinction between assertions (the manifestation of a judgment) and such ventings of inner states. This is reinforced by the next two observations.

(2) Frege’s examples in this context reveal that this possibility of agreement and contradiction is of central importance. On Frege’s account of ideas “it is impossible for us men to compare other people’s ideas with our own” (T 335).⁹ Different impressions are essentially incommensurable. Among them there is no standard of comparison, hence absolutely no hope at all for the adjudication competing claims. It is against this background that we can properly appreciate the importance of the fact that in Frege’s example’s of looking at fields, trees, and strawberries in the external world he always describes himself as being with another person, an

⁷ This comes out explicitly in the “Logic” manuscript: “But do I not then see *that* this flower has five petals? We can say this, but if we do, the word ‘see’ is not being used in the sense of *having a mere visual experience*: what we mean [*meinen*] by it is bound up with thinking and judging” (L 238, my italics). That perception for Frege involves grasping a thought is also pointed out by Burge, “Frege on Knowing the Third Realm,” n.6 p. 635, and by Dummett, “Thought and Perception: The Views of Two Philosophical Innovators,” in *Frege and Other Philosophers*, p. 273. We will return to this point shortly.

⁸ Ricketts, “Objectivity and Objecthood,” pp. 68-72.

⁹ This sentence makes two appearances in the same paragraph. Frege was clearly concerned to emphasize it strongly. He writes several lines above the sentence just cited: “For it is impossible to compare my sense impression with someone else’s” (T 335).

interlocutor. Hence: “I go for a walk with *a companion...*,” “*My companion* and I are convinced that we both see the same field, but each of us has a particular sense impression of the green” (both from T 334); “I pick up a strawberry, I hold it between my fingers. Now *my companion* sees it too, this same strawberry” (T 335); “...I see the tree...*Someone else* sees the tree in the same place” (T 342-343, all emphasis is mine). Perceptions, then, are not mere inner states, for they involve judgments about how things are in the world, they contain an implicit claim to truth: they are assertable to an interlocutor, who can either agree with my assertion (“Yes the tree is over there”), or contradict it (“No, the tree is not over there, but is over *there*”). In such cases, it makes no sense for my companion to say, “Well, the tree is over there only for *you*.”

(3) Finally, we should note explicitly the important role that spatial location plays in Frege’s examples. The emphasis is not, as Malzkorn has it, on the fact that I have a perception of just one tree even though I have two retinal images. Rather, the point is that I have a perception *that* the tree is there, in that particular place, in front of me. My statement expressing this perception is not just about *me*: it makes a claim about how things are independently of me. Hence the emphasis Frege puts on spatial positioning in his examples: “How does it happen that I see the tree *just there* where I see it?” (T 342); “Someone else sees the tree *in the same place*” (T 343).

With the foregoing discussion I have tried to call into question the textual basis for Malzkorn’s interpretation on which Frege’s non-sensible something is capacity to process ‘raw’ perceptual impressions into unified perceptions. But what, then, are we to say about this non-sensible something? In a way my view is somewhat close to Malzkorn’s. Like him, I think we have to see the non-sensible something as capacity—but I see it as a rational capacity at work in

our linguistic and communicative competence; a rational capacity manifested in our basic ability to recognize the difference between an assertion and a venting, that is, our ability to make and understand claims to truth.¹⁰ Hence Frege writes: “to the grasping of thoughts there must correspond *a special mental capacity, the power of thinking*” (T 341, my italics). Frege posits a non-sensible something not only for our perception of the external world, but also for our grasping of thoughts.¹¹ I will further develop my interpretation in the course of examining and criticizing in more detail Malzkorn’s view, specifically his claim that, according to Frege, we grasp thoughts means the *ideas* we have of them.

Malzkorn begins his argument by investigating what Frege has to say about the term he uses to characterize our relationship with thoughts: ‘grasp’. There are two footnotes in “The Thought” in which Frege discusses this term.¹² Malzkorn mines a lot from the second footnote:

The expression ‘grasp’ is as metaphorical as ‘content of consciousness’. The nature of language does not permit anything else. What I hold in my hand can certainly be regarded as the content of my hand; but all the same it is the content of my hand in quite another and a more extraneous way than are the bones and muscles of which the hand consists or again the tensions these undergo.

¹⁰ It is this very capacity that enables the logician’s task of correcting our colloquial language to suit scientific purposes, because, although the distinction between assertion and venting is embedded in our communicative abilities and we therefore learn this elementary logical distinction in our learning a natural language, natural languages themselves do not always respect the distinction. So this capacity is linguistic, but not essentially bound to grammatical distinctions characteristic of natural languages. On this point, cf. e.g., BS pp. 50-51 and LTH 303.

My interpretation is perhaps closest to Eva Picardi’s, who leaves unanswered the question “whether this non-sensible element is to be construed as a thought-like ingredient, or as the faculty of reason *tout court*,” cited by Malzkorn, p.42. See her “Frege’s Anti-Psychologism,” in *Frege: Importance and Legacy*, ed. M. Schirin, 1996. The view that the non-sensible element is a thought, or thought-like, is put forward by Dummett, in his “Thought and Perception,” p.273, p.277 and p. 280. Dummett does not like the ability/capacity view, because he thinks it calls realism into question, cf. p. 278. But, as Malzkorn rightly points out, since Frege has it that a non-sensible something is required for us to be able to grasp thoughts, Dummett finds himself in the uncomfortable position of maintaining that grasping a thought is what enables us to grasp thoughts. This point comes out in Malzkorn’s discussion of Wolfgang Carl’s interpretation, see Malzkorn pp. 41-42.

¹¹ There is an interpretive question about whether or not he meant to be positing one or two non-sensible somethings. Obviously my view is that he means to posit just one capacity, since, as we have seen, perception has propositional content and involves the grasping of a thought that such and such is the case in the world.

¹² In Beaney they are E and F on 337 and 341, respectively.

On Malzkorn's reading, Frege is here highlighting a "weak" sense of the word "contain." Thereby, his story goes, Frege is setting up an analogy between *grasping* a thought and *holding* something in my hand—both of these expressions employ a weak sense of "contain.". Hence, Malzkorn writes: "the thought is—according to Frege's comparison—a *content* of the persons mind in the same (*weak*) sense as what I hold in my hand is the *content* of my hand" (Malzkorn 47).

But Frege is not saying that to grasp a thought is to make it a content of one's mind, even in a weak sense of "contain," and he is not comparing grasping to containing in this footnote, as Malzkorn claims. Rather, with t his passage Frege means to flag the metaphorical nature of his terminology: both "grasp" (the relation of humans to thoughts) and "content of consciousness" (the relation of humans to ideas). The talk of holding something in one's hand is meant to show that even *this* relatively straightforward use of "contain" is metaphorical vis-à-vis a more literal (less "extraneous" in Frege's terms) understanding of what it means for a human hand to have contents (i.e., bones and muscles). *Taken literally*, Frege is noting, talk of "the contents of a human hand" refers to bones and muscles and, as he puts it, "the tensions these undergo" beneath the surface of the skin. As Frege frequently reminds his reader: human language tends to be metaphorical and pictorial—its nature "does not permit anything else".¹³ Rather than arguing that thoughts are contents in the mind, Frege is here noting explicitly his use of metaphorical and colloquial turns of phrase in a scientific context. Sometimes he feels the need to appeal for a pinch or two of salt from his readers. He does a similar thing at the end of "On Concept and Object," where he writes "'Complete' and 'unsaturated' are of course only figures of speech but all I wish or am able to do here is to give hints" (OCO 193). Hence, by shedding light on an

¹³ Cf. footnote D of T 333-334, and LTH 303

everyday occurrence of a metaphorical expression in this footnote (saying that my hand “contains” what I hold in it), Frege tries to comfort those who might wince at his use of metaphors such as “grasp” and “contents of consciousness.” Frege is not positing a weak sense of “contain.”

But Malzkorn finds other passages to support his reading that thoughts become contents of our consciousness when we grasp them. For example, Frege writes:

The grasp of the thought presupposes someone who grasps it, who thinks. He is the owner of the thinking, not the thought. Although the thought does not belong *with* the contents of the thinker’s consciousness, there must be something in the consciousness that is aimed at the thought. But this should not be confused with the thought itself. Similarly, Algol is different from the *idea* someone has of Algol. (T 342, Malzkorn’s italics)

Malzkorn takes this passage to argue that *ideas* are “something in consciousness that is aimed at the thought.” Specifically, according to Malzkorn, it is the thinker’s “idea of the thought” that is aimed at the thought (Malzkorn 47): “a person’s ideas(s) of a thought is/are the medium of his/her grasping of the thought” (48).

But again this is forcing too much upon Frege’s text. In this passage Frege is illustrating the analogies that hold among thoughts, ideas, and external objects (which is what he does throughout the latter part of the essay). Thoughts are independent of being grasped, just like Algol is independent of being perceived. The grasping (thinking) of a thought *is* a mental event ‘aimed at’ but not identical with the thought, as the idea (e.g., mental picture) one has of Algol is a mental entity distinct from, but related to Algol itself. When Frege says there must be “something” in the thinker’s consciousness *aimed* at the thought, he is talking about the *thinking* of the thinker. In other words, this expression is mostly a reformulation of and elaboration on the sentences that precedes it: “He is the owner of the thinking not the thought.” Frege is not

loading anything more into his use of “aiming.” Malzkorn, I think, is being misled by Frege’s use of colloquial turns of phrase.

There are several further problems with Malzkorn’s interpretation. One is that neither he, nor certainly Frege, gives any explanation of what an “idea of a thought” is and how it is supposed to function as the medium of grasping. This point is sharpened when we take into account Frege’s conception of ideas, as described, e.g., in the quotation above (p. 3) from T 334. Ideas, for Frege, are things like sense impressions, creations of imagination, feelings, moods, wishes and inclinations. Thoughts are supposed to be what we understand *independently* of such coloring [*Färbung*] and shading [*Beleuchtung*] that tend to attach to thoughts in colloquial language.

Let’s try to imagine a case that would fit Malzkorn’s interpretation. How could the thought expressed in the sentence “Jack Abramoff pleaded guilty to conspiracy, fraud and tax evasion charges” [this old example needs to be updated] be grasped by means of a feeling or a mood? Even if a vague sense of satisfaction and relief *accompanies* my grasp of the thought, it is hard to see how these feelings could be my *medium* for grasping the thought, the means by which I grasp it. Well, what if I imagine a picture of Abramoff walking out of the courthouse, wearing a grey trench coat and a fedora, his face holding a tight grimace: is *that* how I grasp the thought that Abramoff pleaded guilty? Is that an idea *of* the thought? It is impossible to understand how such mental pictures can be the medium of the relevant propositional content. No matter how detailed my mental image of Abramoff descending the courthouse steps, how could it convey the sense of the sentence “Abramoff plead guilty to ...”? This image could perhaps work for the thought “Abramoff descended the courthouse steps,” but then what are we to say about the thought that he pleaded guilty? Do I imagine a picture of his plea? Frege would

say that such mental images and moods are psychological concomitants of my grasping the thought. They are the *baggage*. Not the medium.

According to Frege it is human language that ‘implicates thoughts in the temporal’: human language is what enables us to grasp thoughts. Thoughts are the senses of sentences for Frege. To understand an assertoric sentence just *is* to grasp the thought it expresses.

It will help to examine further how Malzkorn supports his position. He quotes a passage from the section of the “Logic” manuscript called “Separating a thought from its trappings”:

In human beings it is natural for thinking to be intermingled with having ideas and feeling. Logic has the task of isolating what is logical, not, to be sure, so that we should *think without having ideas, which is impossible*, but that we should carefully distinguish between the logical and the **ideas and feelings which accompany** it. One problem is , that **we think [i.e., grasp] in some language** and that grammar . . . intermingles the psychological with the logical (L 243, Malzkorn’s translation and italics, my boldface and brackets—remember that Frege uses thinking and grasping interchangeably).

Rather than supporting the position that ideas are the medium of grasping, this passage supports my claim about language being the means by which we grasp thoughts. Malzkorn does not discuss language even though the passage above grants it a central role in our thinking and that ideas are mere accompaniments. Furthermore, by hinging the grasping of thoughts to the having of ideas, Malzkorn is in danger of blurring the line, most important to Frege, between an assertion and a venting of a subjective inner state, since ideas, according to Frege, are idiosyncratic and private.

As I have mentioned, on my reading, the non-sensible capacity we have to grasp thoughts is a kind of elementary rational capacity.¹⁴ Furthermore this rational capacity is a linguistic or

¹⁴ Many commentators agree that Frege grants a kind of elementary rational capacity to recognize elementary implications and contradictions. For example Ricketts, *ibid.*, p. 73, and Burge “Frege on Knowing the Third Realm,” p. 645.

communicative capacity: our communicating with each other involves effortlessly making the distinction what a person says and the words or symbols they use to express it.

Language (either natural language, or an invented system of symbols like Frege's Begriffsschrift) is how we grasp thoughts. Hence Frege writes, rather picturesquely, "The thought, in itself imperceptible to the senses, gets clothed in the perceptible garb of a sentence, and thereby we are able to grasp it (T 328).¹⁵ Now, this grasping does not happen by merely perceiving the sensible character (whether written or spoken) of the sentence. The perceptible character bears non-perceptible content. Our sensory perception gives us the sentence (or in our minds we can imagine a sentence), and our non-sensible something (i.e., our capacity to think/grasp thoughts by means of such symbols) enables us to grasp the thought. Language, as a system of sensible symbols, is able to function as the 'medium' because it is not reducible to its sensuous character—it is compound, that is, sensible (spatio-temporal) and yet animated by (non-spatio-temporal) sense. Hence, the non-sensible something, our power of grasping, comes into play on the sensible forms of language that 'clothe the thought'.

This helps us say something about what in our consciousness is 'aimed' at the thought, and it in fact helps us put an acceptable spin on Malzkorn's view that ideas are the means by which we grasp thoughts. When I think the thought that $5 + 7 = 12$, what I am aware of in thinking it is an idea (mental image) of the sentence (in marks or sounds) " $5 + 7 = 12$." The

¹⁵ Of course the non-platonist interpretation is under pressure by Frege's language here. This is why Ricketts' strategy is to argue that such turns in phrase by Frege are not meant to be factual claims, but attempts to get the reader to appreciate salient features of our linguistic practice. This strategy is attacked by Burge in a long footnote (n.16, p. 644). Burge writes here that he "see[s] no evidence for a relevantly applicable distinction in Frege between factual and non-factual claims." But there is such evidence. The distinction between factual and non-factual claims tracks the distinction between metaphorical and non-metaphorical turns of phrase. Frege speaks metaphorically about a 'third realm' of entities which we 'grasp'. In fact, Frege often uses metaphorical turns of phrase, and, as we have seen above, even begs his reader's pardon for doing so. He refers to metaphorical turns of phrase he uses as being inappropriately pictorial. For example n. D on Beaney 331, he says "The pictorial aspect of language presents difficulties. The sensible breaks in and makes the expressions pictorial and so improper." In the "Logic" manuscript, Frege blushes over his use of the word 'grasp', saying "all metaphors go lame at some point" (Beaney 237).

thinking is aimed at the thought in virtue of the link between the sentence and the thought. Thus we can accept a modified version of Malzkorn's thesis if take Malzkorn's notion of the idea of thought to be an idea of a sentence bearing the sense that is the thought.

Elsewhere, Frege writes that "our thinking is closely bound up with language" and that "a thought of which we are conscious is connected in our mind with some sentence or other is for us men necessary" (SK 369). The foregoing citations are from Frege's later years. But this same position is put forward strongly in his early writings. In the early 1880's, trying to convince people of the importance of his Begriffsschrift for the perspicuous sensible representation of thoughts and their logical relations, Frege notes that "we have to use sensible symbols to think" and soon adds that "we think in words . . . and if not in words, then in mathematical or other symbols" (SJ 83-83).

Thus, the organically experienced connection of sense to symbols endemic to human linguistic practice is the means by which thoughts are grasped. We no longer have to take Frege literally about the 'third realm', just like he didn't want us taking him literally about saturation, contents of consciousness, or clothing for thoughts.

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“Demythologizing the Third Realm: Frege on Grasping Thoughts”

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some puzzles about the relationship of ‘grasping’ that Frege posits between a thinker and the thought she or he thinks. I pay particular attention to the passage that appears near the end of Frege’s essay “The Thought” in which he talks about a “non-sensible something” without which “everyone would remain shut up in his inner world.” I consider and criticize the interpretation of the passage and the related ontological and epistemological issues offered by Wolfgang Malzkorn. According to Malzkorn, Frege’s view is that ideas [*Vorstellungen*] are the means by which we grasp thoughts. My counter-proposal is that language, or rather, our linguistic-communicative competence, enables us to grasp thoughts.

One significant consequence of my interpretation is that it challenges the standard reading of Frege according to which he is a platonist about thoughts and meanings.