

*New Essays on Frege: Between Science and Literature*  
Gisela Bengtsson, Simo Säätelä and Alois Pichler (eds.)

Wim Vanrie

Bengtsson, Gisela, Simo Säätelä and Alois Pichler (eds.), *New Essays on Frege: Between Science and Literature*. Springer: Cham, 2019. ISBN 978-3-319-71186-7, 196 pp.

There is a well-known ambivalence to Frege's philosophy. On the one hand, Frege's *Begriffsschrift* is meant to provide a framework wherein all objective scientific thought can be perspicuously expressed, so that all science can henceforth be conducted according to the standards of objectivity and rigor which he has thereby introduced. On the other hand, Frege's own philosophical discourse in which he presents and discusses his logico-philosophical insights does not satisfy those standards. Frege employs metaphors, forwards statements that cannot be rendered in the *Begriffsschrift* notation, and generally approaches the relevant issues in ways that are markedly distinct from the sort of scientific practice he himself seems to envisage. How, then, are we to understand the status of Frege's own discursive logico-philosophical practice? The question is not new, and Frege was not himself oblivious to it.

That is why he characterizes his logico-philosophical discourse as consisting of *elucidations* (*Erläuterungen*), which are not to be taken as straightforward assertions. The precise nature of Fregean elucidation and thereby of his philosophical practice, however, has remained a vexed topic in the literature.

This volume aims to breathe new life into these debates by bringing in another Fregean notion: *Dichtung*. The guiding question behind the volume may be formulated as: what is the relation between Frege's views about *Dichtung* and his own discursive practice in philosophy? Answering this question requires getting clear both about Frege's conception of *Dichtung* as well as the nature of his logico-philosophical discourse, and seeing how they might inform each other. Each of the essays in the volume may be read as contributing to this overarching project. Along the

way, it becomes clear that no simplistic approach will cut it, and that we must be prepared to dig deep into such questions as: How does Frege conceive of the relation between *Wissenschaft* and *Dichtung*? What sort of understanding does Frege's logico-philosophical discourse aim to articulate? What is the significance of the Kantian and neo-Kantian background against which Frege was working? Can Frege's conception of *Dichtung* form the basis of an adequate account of literary and / or poetic discourse? In what sense might philosophy itself be conceived as a form of *Dichtung*?

I find myself in deep agreement with the spirit behind this volume: we cannot hope to come to an adequate grasp of Frege's philosophy unless we squarely confront the form that his logico-philosophical discourse takes, and this requires investigating such issues as how it relates to Frege's conception of *Dichtung*. The individual contributions, moreover, present interesting claims and suggestions, ranging over a wealth of issues. I found it all the more unfortunate, then, that these claims and suggestions often remain, to my mind, somewhat underdeveloped (I give some examples below). There is much food for thought in this volume, but perhaps more in the form of appetizers and starters than full meals. At the same time, I do wish to emphasize that my appetite has been whetted, and that this testifies to the philosophical interest and importance of the cluster of issues raised and discussed throughout the book.

I now present a brief summary

of each of the contributions in order, raising some critical questions.

Gottfried Gabriel defends a Frege-inspired cognitivist account of fictional discourse. In recounting particular events, Gabriel claims, a literary text imparts general knowledge of what certain situations, persons, feelings, etc, are like. This knowledge, moreover, is not the content of assertions made in the text (knowledge by description), but is rather shown by the text (knowledge by acquaintance). In this way, it should be tied to what Frege called the *colouring* (*Färbung*) of a text, rather than its meaning or sense, showing that Frege's own non-cognitivist construal of such coloring is mistaken.

I found most interesting Gabriel's argument that, because Frege's own elucidations of his logical categories employ figurative expressions, those elucidations themselves display a *cognitivist* kind of coloring. The argument relies on two suppositions: (1) Frege's notion of coloring can be suitably applied to his figurative elucidations; (2) The upshot of those elucidations is knowledge, so that they must be construed in a cognitivist way. Both claims, I feel, are insufficiently defended by Gabriel. With regards to (2), note that the issue is not so much whether we must instead be emotivists about Fregean elucidations, but rather to raise the question to what extent the dilemma between emotivism and cognitivism constitutes the right framework in which to situate an account of Fregean elucidation to begin with.

Jan Harald Alnes investigates

several aspects of Frege’s conception of logic as a science, defending a broadly epistemological reading of Frege (against more metaphysically oriented accounts) according to which, *inter alia*, (1) There is no thick notion of ‘self-evidence’ underlying the justification of Frege’s axioms, which are recognized as true solely on the basis of a grasp of their content; (2) Frege’s appropriation of the Kantian distinctions between analytic and synthetic, *a priori* and *a posteriori*, must be understood as a matter of epistemology external to the scientific enterprise.

My main qualm about Alnes essay is that it is hard to see the forest through its trees. Alnes discusses many aspects of Frege’s views, and it is not always clear to me how they are meant to relate or how they contribute to Alnes’ broader project. Two examples: (1) Alnes opens his essay with a discussion of the importance of applicability of science, but this seems peripheral to the rest of his discussion; (2) There is a rather long aside in which the claim that difference in epistemic value cuts orthogonally through the Kantian epistemological distinctions is defended, but the importance of this point remains unclear.

Anssi Korhonen aims to provide an account of the normative and constitutive strands in Frege’s conception of logic through a proper appreciation of the Kantian and neo-Kantian background of Frege’s philosophy. Taking a cue from Hyder, Korhonen advances as especially crucial the contrast between Kant’s ‘normative

deduction’ of the categories – which centers on our *right* to apply them to experience – and his ‘structural deduction’ of the pure intuition of space and time – which are *internal* and thereby alethically necessary aspects of the structure of sensible intuition. Frege, Korhonen argues, conceives of logic as grounded along the lines of a normative deduction. As a contrast-case, early Wittgenstein is presented as grounding logic along the lines of a structural deduction.

Korhonen’s account renders palpable the fine-grained variety and subtle distinctions characterizing the historical positions discussed, although the precise relation between the couples normative / constitutive, normative deduction / structural deduction, and Frege / Wittgenstein remains unclear to me. As a specific point of criticism, I would interrogate Korhonen’s ascription to Frege of a distinction between what he calls ‘logic<sub>F</sub>’, consisting in the universal norms of thought, and logic<sub>T</sub>, consisting in particular formulations of such principles, as e.g. in the *Begriffsschrift*. To my mind, Korhonen does not succeed in clarifying the relation between the two. Two related questions: (1) How and to what extent does logic<sub>F</sub> determine the shape that any instance of logic<sub>T</sub> has to take? (2) In what sense does logic<sub>T</sub> allow for an articulation of the normative-constitutive role of logic<sub>F</sub>, as Korhonen claims, given that it seems to follow from Korhonen’s account that logic<sub>T</sub> can never lay claim to the universality that is characteristic of logic<sub>F</sub>?

Focusing mostly on the

*Grundgesetze*, Sören Stenlund investigates Frege's critique of Thomae's formalism and finds it wanting. Taking a cue from Wittgenstein, he criticizes Frege for posing a false dichotomy between signs being empty and signs having Fregean *Bedeutung*. The third option – which Stenlund finds in Thomae – is that signs acquire their meaning through their use in the operative symbolism of arithmetic.

It seems to me that Stenlund misses some aspects of Frege's critique of formalism which complicate the picture. Stenlund endorses Thomae's comparison of arithmetic to chess, where the chess pieces acquire content through the rules of the game, a possibility he blames Frege for not taking seriously. But it should be noted that a substantial part of Frege's criticism of Thomae consists precisely in showing that Thomae does not even come close to presenting a full set of rules for the game of elementary arithmetic (let alone more advanced mathematics), so that Thomae seems to be unable to cash in the comparison. This also complicates Stenlund's claim that the formalist does not treat of arithmetical signs as mere visual configurations, but as *used*. The problem is: if Thomae cannot provide an adequate account of that use, is he still entitled to this claim? Thomae could respond by gesturing towards existing mathematical practice, but it is precisely here that Frege would claim that he is now illicitly relying on *contentful* arithmetic, since only the content of arithmetic can account for that practice.

Martin Gustafsson investigates

the reasons why one might think – with Wittgenstein – that Frege's judgment-stroke is superfluous. Dismissing simplistic readings of Frege's judgment-stroke as demarcating serious from non-serious discourse, Gustafsson departs from a conception of the judgment stroke as marking a distinction between the content of an assertion and assertoric force, building up to a dilemma: either the judgment-stroke attaches to what does not yet have propositional structure, in which case it itself contributes to the content of the assertion, not just its force; or what the judgment-stroke is attached to already has propositional structure, in which case no judgment-stroke is needed to put it forward as true.

Gustafsson's core thought is this: when we put forward a content with propositional structure, that content is *already* being asserted, at least in the default case. What is needed, at most, is a convention to mark off content that is *not* asserted, rather than a judgment-stroke. My concern with this suggestion, however, is that it only seems to work if one limits oneself to two possibilities: non-asserted and asserted content. There are, however, different kinds of force with which to put forward a content, e.g. questioning. If all we have are signs to mark when a content is not asserted, there will be no way to mark the distinction between an assertion and a question. Using the judgment-stroke, however, leaves open the option of introducing other signs to mark other kinds of force. This would seem to justify Frege's conviction that we need a *pos-*

*itive* way of marking force, rather than a merely negative way of marking its absence.

Through an exploration of the relations and differences between scientific discourse, elucidations, and *Dichtung* in Frege, Gisela Bengtsson argues against what she calls the translatability criterion, according to which any thought must be expressible in the *Begriffsschrift* notation. Frege’s philosophical expositions involve figurative elucidatory discourse, but are surely meant to be rational. Therefore, Bengtsson concludes, the translatability criterion is inadequate, “at least if we use ‘rational’ in a wider and more general sense than the one that singles out assertions by which judgments are manifested” (115).

The ‘at least’ here is telling, however. All would agree that we can call Frege’s elucidations ‘rational’ in a wide sense, but this hides the underlying issue: *given* that they are not expressions of *Begriffsschrift* judgments, how are we to conceive of the understanding they are meant to impart, and their role in imparting it? I would have liked Bengtsson to have elaborated more on how her deferral to “our ability to understand poetic language in the right way” (114) is supposed to address this issue. Here, I suspect, the comparison between *Dichtung* and elucidation runs up against its limits, since I do not see how our mode of understanding a sentence such as ‘Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep’ or ‘Juliet is the sun’ offers much to clarify our mode of understanding a sentence such as ‘Functions are unsaturated’.

Todor Polimenov aims to develop a Fregean framework for fictional discourse, based on Frege’s general semantic insights and his specific remarks about fiction (*Dichtung*). Polimenov’s two central claims are: (1) What characterizes fictional discourse is the pragmatic criterion that its sentences are not asserted as true, although they have a sense; (2) Claims about fiction are to be construed as claims about senses of fictional terms or about the fictional terms themselves.

I am not up to speed with the literature on fictional discourse, so what I am about to say may very well be old news. But it seems to me that, for (2) to work, one needs a worked out criterion for the identity of senses, which Polimenov does not provide. Otherwise, we have no firm grasp on the relations of substitutability *salva veritate* governing expressions in discourse about fiction, and thereby no firm grasp on such discourse itself. Polimenov does suggest that senses may be conceived as criteria for identifying objects (134–135), but this leaves many questions unanswered. How, for instance, is it to be determined what the criterion is for identifying Odysseus, and when are two such criteria to be counted as the same? May we substitute ‘Odysseus’ for ‘the father of Telemachos’ *salva veritate* but not for ‘The man who blinded Polyphemos’? For both? For neither? Such questions must receive principled answers if (2) is to count as a genuine philosophical option.

Allan Janik discusses Wittgenstein’s notorious remark, printed in

*Culture and Value*, that “Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur *dichten*” (CV, 28). Janik argues that, rather than poetry, as is often supposed, it is the sense of ‘*Dichtung*’ as *fiction* that is operative here. Akin to certain literary texts, the aim of philosophy is to retrain our imagination through the presentation of fictional examples that are constructed in such a way that they stand to unsettle certain self-imposed illusions. In addition to Frege and Kraus, Janik takes Wilhelm Busch – specifically his *Eduards Traum* – as an especially salient example of the sort of philosophical activity Wittgenstein has in mind.

Janik’s point that Wittgenstein did not aspire to be a philosophical poet is well taken. At the same time, however, I find the alternative suggestion that Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy as a form of fiction to still be somewhat uninformative. Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations* is not the same sort of text as, say, *Moby Dick*. Janik gives the suggestion more flesh through the comparison with Busch, culminating in the idea that “the use of nonsensical examples brings us to a profoundly *disappointing* insight that we would prefer to avoid” (155). Although this description may be aptly used with regards to both Busch’s text as well as that of Wittgenstein, I nevertheless suspect that further elaboration would reveal that we are dealing with quite different senses of ‘use’, ‘nonsensical’, ‘disappointing’, and ‘insight’ depending on which author we are concerned with. In other words, I would have liked Janik to have elaborated a bit more on how

he understands the above characterization as it is supposed to apply to both Wittgenstein and Busch.

Nuno Venturinha investigates the notions of the agrammatical / illogical / nonsensical (these seem to be regarded as equivalent) in Wittgenstein. Against simplistic views according to which Wittgenstein wanted to purge philosophy of nonsense, Venturinha claims that “Wittgenstein was much in favour of nonsense” (165). Departing from the same remark as Janik – “Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur *dichten*” (CV, 28) – Venturinha argues (unlike Janik) that poetry is, for Wittgenstein, the ideal form of presentation for philosophy because it is poetry (and, it seems, literature) that is most suited to help us “see beyond the customary way of looking at the world” (168), a claim he lends further support through Deleuze’s reflections on Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Poetic philosophical nonsense, then, is to be distinguished from, for instance, the babbling of a child, revealing that, for Wittgenstein, “there are indeed varieties of nonsense” (173).

Venturinha’s essay is pregnant with deep philosophical issues. Let me interrogate just one. Venturinha writes:

If we want to take a step forward, working not with *more correct thoughts* but with *other* or *new movements of thought*, we must cease to think of grammar and logic as impregnable. (168)

This is a surprising claim, because it seems that the very philosophical function Venturinha ascribes to

poetic nonsense depends *precisely* on grammar and logic being impregnable. Put differently: if they were not impregnable, we wouldn't need the poet to surpass our unquestioned standpoint to begin with. This tension, I believe, reveals that Venturinha is not fully clear about the exact balance he means to strike between the inviolability of logic in thought and the sense

in which poetic nonsense is nonetheless supposed to be capable of circumventing that inviolability, an issue that touches the core of Wittgenstein's philosophy, early and late.

Ghent University, Belgium  
Wim.Vanrie @UGent.be