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## **SENSES: RESPONSE TO MARCO RUFFINO**

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**Abstract:** Marco Ruffino compares the notion of sense developed in my book with Frege's notion of sense, and argues that whereas there are ontological similarities, my notion faces epistemological and semantic problems. In my response I discuss the various issues he raises, arguing that my notion of sense can confront them at least as well as Frege's notion.

**Keywords:** Sense. Frege. Russell. Description. Semantics. Kripke.

## **SENTIDOS: RÉPLICA À MARCO RUFFINO**

**Resumo:** Marco Ruffino compara a noção de sentido desenvolvida em meu livro com a noção de sentido de Frege, argumentando que mesmo havendo semelhanças ontológicas, minha noção está sujeita a problemas epistemológicos e semânticos. Em minha réplica considero os problemas levantados por Marco, argumentando que minha noção de sentido pode confrontá-los pelo menos tão adequadamente quanto a noção de Frege.

**Palavras chave:** Sentido. Frege. Russell. Descrições. Semântica. Kripke.

Marco compares the notion of sense I develop in my book with Frege's notion of sense, and argues that whereas there are ontological similarities, my notion faces epistemological and semantic problems. I will divide my response into several parts, not necessarily following the order of Marco's arguments.

## 1. FREGE'S SENSES

An important consideration behind my variant interpretation of Frege's notion of sense is that I find his notion ontologically obscure. As I point out in several places, Frege never tells us in an intelligible way what kind of entity senses are supposed to be. He does say, as Marco emphasizes, that senses of objects are objects (saturated), and senses of functions are functions (unsaturated). He also claims thoughts are saturated senses (objects) composed of other senses; but, again, he does not say what this composition is like—i.e., what is the structure of a composite sense in terms of its component senses. Moreover, senses are supposed to contain manners of presentation, but it is not clear what he takes a manner of presentation to be, and how it is contained in a sense.

Frege also says judgment involves an advance from sense to reference—namely, to judge a thought is to recognize it refers to the True. But if we do not know what kind of object a thought is, besides being a saturated sense, and we also do not know what kind of object the True is, how are we to understand this advance, or recognition?

Thus, whereas it is quite clear that for Frege senses are both language-independent and mind-independent, it is not at all clear how to construe senses as entities from a Fregean perspective. This is what motivated my own construal.

## 2. SENSES AS IDENTIFYING PROPERTIES

What is a manner of presentation? How can I present an object; say, the computer screen on which I am reading this text? Well, I just did it, using the definite description ‘the computer screen on which I am reading this text’. Since Frege (1892, p. 27) says something like this in the famous footnote about the name ‘Aristotle’, there has been a generalized tendency to think of manners of presentation, and of Fregean senses, as somehow related to singular descriptive terms. Of course, this is not the only way in which I can present the screen in question, for I can point to it and say “that screen”. This manner of presentation is context dependent, but so is the earlier one, because of the use of indexicals, present tense, etc. Leaving aside this issue of context dependency, however, at least for the moment, are we to say a sense is (contains, is given by) a definite description?

It is quite natural to reason along these lines, but one soon realizes that a definite description is a linguistic expression—a name, in Frege’s terminology—and to say that the (or a) sense expressed by the name ‘Aristotle’ is another name, say, ‘the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great’, will immediately lead us to an infinite regress. Besides, the description ‘the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great’ is a complex structure involving other names, relational terms, etc., and we would like to know how the sense it “expresses” (or “is”) is related to the senses expressed by these other names, relational terms, etc.

My way of avoiding this problem is to distinguish *descriptive terms* from *descriptive predicates*. A descriptive (singular) term is a term of the form ‘the *F*’, where ‘*F*’ stands for a predicate, simple or complex. A descriptive predicate is a predicate of the form ‘is the *F*’, with ‘*F*’ as before. As Marco points out (p. 301), I take such predicates

(1)  $x$  is the  $F$ ,

to have the logical structure

(2)  $x$  is an  $F$  and nothing else is an  $F$ .

This is expressed symbolically in my notation as

(3)  $[Fx \ \& \ \forall y (Fy \rightarrow y = x)](x)$ ,

and is abbreviated by

(4)  $[!xFx](x)$ .

Moreover, since I take predicates to denote properties, in an abstract intensional sense, I call the properties denoted by descriptive predicates ‘identifying properties’. The main characteristic of such properties is that, although they need not apply to anything, their logical structure guarantees that if they apply to anything they apply uniquely to that thing. These properties are what I take (singular) senses to be.

One advantage of this interpretation of the notion of sense is that whereas senses are (or contain) a manner of presentation, it preserves Frege’s view that a sense may be (or contain) a manner of presentation that does not present anything—of which he gives numerous examples. Another advantage is that it preserves the connection with the descriptive view of senses. Except instead of saying a sense is a descriptive term such as ‘the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great’, we say a sense is an identifying property, which can be denoted by a descriptive predicate such as ‘ $x$  is the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great’.

On p. 307, Marco speculates that my view is inspired by Russell's theory of descriptions. Although he is right, the inspiration came in a somewhat devious way. As I mention in Chapter 4 (pp. 150-151), my attention to Russell's theory of descriptions was drawn by a remark of Gödel in his examination of Frege's argument for truth-values as the denotation of sentences. It was in this connection I came to see the distinction between descriptive terms and descriptive predicates, and to realize that both Frege and Russell were right (and wrong) in their analyses of sentences involving descriptions. I have written extensively about this, and the view of senses as identifying properties surfaced in this discussion—see, e.g., Chapter 3 (p. 106), where, however, the idea is still not expressed in a very satisfactory way. I argued explicitly, and independently, in that chapter, against Russell's existence condition for descriptive terms, and also argued it has no role to play in connection with descriptive predicates.

Marco considers my characterization of identifying properties counter-intuitive, and gives several examples of identification of his daughter Daniela by means of properties that are not identifying in my sense. He suggests, following Frege, that uniqueness (and existence) should be presuppositions for the identifications. Part of my argument, however, is that there is a fundamental asymmetry between sentences involving descriptive terms as subjects and sentences asserting descriptive predicates. Thus, consider the pair

(5) The author of *Word and Object* taught at Harvard,

and

(6) Quine is the author of *Word and Object*.

I quite agree with Frege's claim that in asserting (5) we are *presupposing* the existence and uniqueness of an author of *Word and Object*; which, counter Russell, is not part of the content of (5). I also agree with Frege that if the presupposition fails, the assertion is neither true nor false. I maintain, on the other hand, that in (6) we are predicating 'is the author of *Word and Object*' of Quine—whose existence and uniqueness we are presupposing—and that it is part of our assertion that Quine is an author of *Word and Object*, and no one else is. This is clear from our use of the expression 'is the', and if Quine were not a unique author of *Word and Object*, (6) would be false.

In fact, Frege's argument was that the negation

(5') The author of *Word and Object* did not teach at Harvard,

is *not* equivalent to

(5'') Either there isn't a unique author of *Word and Object*, or there is a unique author of *Word and Object* and he did not teach at Harvard,

for if there were not a unique author of *Word and Object*, (5') would be truth-valueless and (5'') would be true.

I claim, on the other hand, that the negation of (6)

(6') Quine is not the author of *Word and Object*,

is equivalent to

(6'') Either Quine is not an author of *Word and Object*, or he is an author of *Word and Object* and someone else is also an author of *Word and Object*;

both being false.

But let us go back now to Marco's daughter Daniela. I quite agree that one can identify Daniela in the various ways Marco suggests, but I think this is highly context dependent, and it may also involve an equivocation on the term 'identify'. Being a US senator is clearly not an identifying property, but if I am told of someone whom I see on TV that he is a US senator, I can properly say he is being identified *as* a US senator. Similarly, Daniela may be identified *as* having brown hair, or *as* having a playful expression, etc., without any of these being identifying properties. And to identify her as Marco's daughter, one need not "presume that she is the only one having this property." I can certainly identify one of my daughters as my daughter without presuming I have only one daughter.

Although I agree intuitions may vary, I think my objective notion of identifying property corresponds accurately to what we may reasonably consider to be a manner of presentation.

### 3. JUDGMENT AND THE UNITY OF THOUGHTS

As Marco points out, I take thoughts to be certain kinds of  $n$ -ary ( $n \geq 2$ ) identifying properties. Thus, if

$$(7) [!xPx](x)$$

$$(8) [!xAx](x)$$

$$(9) [!ZTZ](Z)$$

are predicates denoting senses (identifying properties) of Plato, Aristotle, and (the relation) *taught*, then

(10)  $[[!ZTZ \ \& \ !xPx \ \& \ !yAy \ \& \ Zxy](Z, x, y)$

is a predicate denoting a thought that Plato taught Aristotle. I.e., (10) denotes an identifying property (a ternary sense) that can only be instantiated by the triple  $\langle \textit{taught}, \textit{Plato}, \textit{Aristotle} \rangle$ , if indeed Plato taught Aristotle.

At this point Marco raises an interesting objection, namely: how can thoughts in this sense (i.e., as relations) be objects of judgments? I must acknowledge this took me by surprise, and led me to consider his arguments in some detail.

Marco begins by saying that “thoughts are normally taken to be objects of judgment” and “there is no judgment regarding a ternary relation *simpliciter*, just as there is no such thing as judging *red simpliciter*, but only whether *John is red*.” My first reaction to this was that I am not worse off than Frege, who takes thoughts to be objects. Because just as there is no such thing as judging *red simpliciter*, there is no such thing as judging *John simpliciter*. In fact, it seems quite clear that to say thoughts are objects of judgment is not tantamount to saying thoughts are certain kinds of *objects* that are judged. So, unless one has a theory of the nature of thoughts as objects, which makes it clear why they are appropriate as objects of judgment, this is as much a problem for the Fregean account as for my account. The interesting question, however, is how to understand judging in relation to thoughts.

As I mentioned earlier, for Frege judging involves an advance from a sense (thought) to a reference (truth-value). He says (1892, p. 35):

Judgments can be regarded as advances from a thought to a truth-value. Naturally this cannot be a definition. Judgment is something quite peculiar and incomparable. One might also say that judgments are distinctions of parts within truth-values. Such distinctions occur



by a return to the thought. To every sense belonging to a truth-value there would correspond its own manner of analysis.

Since I do not postulate truth-values, but take a thought to be true when it is instantiated, I take the advance to be an advance from a thought to the world. In particular, to judge a thought to be true involves judging that the various senses composing the thought succeed in presenting objects and/or properties standing in the relations specified in the thought. This is precisely what my formulation suggests. To judge the thought denoted by (10) involves judging that the senses denoted by (7) and (8) present objects, and that the sense denoted by (9) presents a relation relating those objects, in that order. Such is the advance from the thought to the world, and it should be the case in any conception one may have as to the nature of senses and of their composition.

Marco raises two objections against this view. One is that it “seems odd”, because “intuitively, we do judge that Plato taught Aristotle *simpliciter*”. But what does this “simpliciter” mean? We certainly do not judge the thought *as such*, independently of its connections to the world. Frege is quite explicit about this (1892, pp. 32-33):

The sentence ‘Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep’ obviously has a sense. But since it is doubtful whether the name ‘Odysseus,’ occurring therein, has reference, it is also doubtful whether the whole sentence has one. Yet it is certain, nevertheless, that anyone who seriously took the sentence to be true or false would ascribe to the name ‘Odysseus’ a reference, not merely a sense; for it is of the reference of the name that the predicate is affirmed or denied. Whoever does not admit the name has reference can neither apply nor withhold the predicate.

But, of course, we do judge that Plato taught Aristotle. What this means, however, is that the sentence ‘Plato taught Aristotle’ expresses a thought we judge to be true. This thought involves (in

some way) senses expressed by the names ‘Plato’ and ‘Aristotle’, as well as a sense expressed by the relational term ‘taught’, and it is part of our judgment that these senses present something—i.e., that the terms (singular and general) denote. Since we take it for granted (in this case) that the terms denote, it seems we are merely judging that the relation *taught* holds between Plato and Aristotle. This is obviously not the case in Frege’s example above, if we take it as involving a fictional account, but it is also not the case when there is doubt concerning an allegedly “real” person. Whoever judges that Homer was a Greek poet must also judge that the name ‘Homer’ expresses a sense presenting a reference.

Marco’s second objection that my view leads to an infinite regress reminds me of Frege’s argument against a correspondence account of truth. A similar argument could be given against a formulation of Frege’s view that to judge a thought is to recognize it refers to the True. For we would then have to judge that the thought does refer to the True, which seems to be a different thought; and so on. This may be why Frege talks of judgments as “advances”, “distinctions”, and as “quite peculiar and incomparable”. In fact, throughout his life Frege held judging to be an *act*, not a function or a relation, and insisted that the judgment stroke had an altogether different nature than the other notions in his system. I do not agree with Marco that my view commits me to treat “the world ... as an element” of the judgment. Perhaps I cannot do better than Frege on this score, but I would say that we judge *in the world*—or, perhaps, that we judge *with respect to the world*; though, as Frege says, we must return to the sense(s) in order to discern *what* we are judging in the world.

Thus, although I agree with Marco there are difficult issues involved in Frege’s notion of judgment, I do not think they are peculiar to my construal of his notion of sense.

#### 4. CONNECTIONS WITH KRIPKE'S PICTURE OF NAMING

Frege's account of sense and reference is usually held to be incompatible with Kripke's account of reference, and Marco questions my attempt to integrate them into a more general account. I think there are several different issues involved.

According to Frege, a name is not a mere sequence of marks expressing a sense, but is a *sign* "containing" a sense. The question for the Fregean account is: how does a sequence of marks become a sign? My answer is that a sequence of marks becomes a sign by *coding* a sense, and I see this coding taking place by means of acts along the lines of Kripke's baptisms. A baptism, formal or informal, by ostension or by description, must involve an identifying property purporting to present an entity being baptized. This identifying property is what I call the 'semantic sense' of the name.

Now Marco argues that this sense

drops out of the picture, i.e., it plays no relevant semantic role anymore since the name becomes a rigid designator. What is preserved from link to link in the communicative-historic chain is only the reference, but there is no sense accompanying the name.

In my view this is not so, because the reference of the name as used by a speaker at a certain time depends not only on the chain of transmissions, but also on the baptismal act. Hence, the identifying property used in the baptismal act cannot "drop out of the picture" in the semantic determination of the reference of the name. What is transmitted is the name as sign, not the reference, for the simple reason that the name need not even have a reference, and whether it does or not, and what it is, depends on the baptismal act. It is quite true that the speaker need not know—and generally does not know—the semantic sense of the name, but this does not mean it is semantically irrelevant. What does follow is Kripke's thesis that the senses a speaker associates with a name at a certain time—and, more

generally, the connotation of the name for the speaker at that time—is not what determines the semantic reference of the name as used by the speaker at that time.

Another objection Marco raises in connection with my discussion of Kripke's views concerns the use of indexicals in presenting identifying properties. He argues that the predicate involving indexicals

(11) [Z is the property common to the things in this sample](Z),

will designate different properties in different contexts, and, therefore, if (11) expresses a sense, this sense would have to vary from context to context. I agree, but the relevant question is not whether (11) expresses a sense independently of context, but whether in a specific context it can be used to designate a property. My view is that what characterizes a predicate semantically are its conditions of applicability, which can be more or less precise, depending on cases. Evidently, what predicate is given by (11) will vary with context—and in some contexts may not be a predicate at all. But in a specific context in which the conditions of applicability of (11) are reasonably well defined, it designates an identifying property (i.e., a sense).

## 5. AN ONTOLOGICAL ISSUE

Marco argues that my view of senses may lead to “ontological promiscuity”, because senses, being properties, may combine with other properties that are not senses. Moreover, as he says, any sense can also be a reference, in that it can be identified by a higher-order sense. I do not see any problem with this, but Marco suggests that on Frege's view

something that is a sense in transparent contexts can become the indirect reference in special (i.e., in oblique) contexts. But something that is originally a reference in transparent contexts can never be a sense.

Although I agree an object can never be a sense (in my sense of ‘sense’), I believe for Frege a sense can be a reference in transparent contexts. Presumably the context

(12) the thought in the sentence ‘The morning star is a body illuminated by the sun’ differs from that in the sentence ‘The evening star is a body illuminated by the sun’

is a transparent context; and in it the expressions ‘the thought in the sentence “The morning star is a body illuminated by the sun”’ and ‘the thought in the sentence “The evening star is a body illuminated by the sun”’ refer to senses (i.e., thoughts). So, unless I am misunderstanding Marco’s point, a sense can be a reference in transparent contexts.

Returning to the question of oblique contexts, however, I agree with Marco that Frege’s hierarchy of indirect senses is somewhat obscure, and I am not persuaded by his approach to intensional contexts. Nevertheless, in my construal of senses the hierarchy is quite natural, because for any object or property there are many identifying properties identifying that object or property—i.e., any object or property has many senses. In particular, any sense has senses, which also have senses, and so on, indefinitely.

## 6. AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUE

On this issue there seems to be a misunderstanding between us. Marco says I challenge the view that sees senses as “playing primarily an epistemic role.” Perhaps my remarks in Chapter 11 (p.

389) may be read that way, but what I am challenging is the view that the notion of sense is an epistemological notion, just as I challenge the view that the notion of sense is a notion of meaning. I maintain that the notion of sense is an ontological notion, totally independent of language and mind. Marco clearly agrees with this, but he thinks I am minimizing the epistemological importance and motivation of the notion, as well as its semantic role. Since I have already made some remarks about the latter, let me conclude by commenting briefly on the epistemological issue.

Different senses of an object—i.e., different ways of presenting it through identifying properties—give us different ways of “accessing” the object that may be very relevant to knowledge and action. If I am looking for a colleague and am told he is lecturing in the room at the end of the corridor, this gives me a certain kind of information as to his whereabouts, whereas if I am told he is lecturing in the room with the broken windowpane, it gives me a different kind of information. I am presenting the room where he is lecturing in different ways, which lead to different procedures to find him—because, of course, I need not know that the room at the end of the corridor is the room with the broken windowpane. I presume it is because of this we think of senses as containing information. Nevertheless, to say that senses contain information, have a cognitive function, etc., is not to say that senses are inextricably tied up to language and mind, which is what I deny when I say the notion of sense is an ontological notion. And I do emphasize the epistemological relevance of senses in Chapter 11, both on p. 389, and in notes 28 and 31.

Finally, I quite agree with Marco’s conclusion “that ontological, epistemic, and semantic issues come together, and the more a theory can account for problems of different fields, the better.” This is precisely what I tried to do in my book.

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