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## **IN DIALOGUE WITH FREGE: HOW HIS CONCEPTS OF SENSE AND REFERENCE INFLUENCED THE PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE**

**Abstract:** In this paper, I approach Gottlob Frege's fictional antirealism from the background of the discussion on cognitive value of literature in philosophy of literature, with particular emphasis on Frege's influence on Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen's (1994) theory of fiction. I claim that Frege's writings on fiction do not support the conclusion that we should reject literary cognitivism (the view that literature can provide cognitive benefits). I support this view by providing two lines of argument: 1) a disagreement with respect to the precise nature of Frege's fictional antirealism results in multiple interpretations of his thought, which is why the application of Frege's fictional antirealism in Lamarque and Olsen's theory is dependent on various incongruent assumptions (which I call 'multiple readings' of Frege) and 2) satisfaction of the conditions of a strict notion of truth is not crucially important for showing that literary fiction can have cognitive value. This is evident from the fact that the contemporary debates on aesthetic and literary cognitivism often depart from exclusive interest in (and dependence on) truth by appealing to the plurality of cognitive values, not all of which are dependent on truth.

**Keywords:** sense, reference, truth, aesthetic cognitivism, literary fiction

### **Introduction**

Fiction has always posed a puzzle for analytic philosophers: from metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language to philosophy of art, fiction's capacity to contain sentences about entities or objects we do not encounter in the physical world has produced continual philosophical interest. Gottlob Frege was one of the first proponents of fictional antirealism, the ontological view of fictional entities' nonexistence, due to his view that fictional names have only senses, i.e. modes of presentation, but not reference, objects to which those names point (Kroon and Voltolini, 2023). Frege's variety of fictional antirealism was later employed and built upon by Lamarque and Olsen (1994) to advocate against aesthetic cognitivism. Aesthetic cognitivism is the

view that art and literature can have a cognitive value and that this value can be a part of its aesthetic value (Gaut, 2007: 136)<sup>1</sup>.

To show how truth relates to Frege's fictional antirealism, I will focus on his concepts of sense and reference (truth value) in relation to fiction in the first section of this paper, before moving on to the question of how Frege influenced Lamarque and Olsen's *Truth, Fiction and Literature* (1994) in the second section. I argue that there is a fundamental disagreement ('multiple readings') in interpreting Frege's views on truth in fiction (which will be shown from the differences in interpreting his commitment to strict rejection of truth values in fiction), which results from the fact that Frege had not aimed to provide a comprehensive theory of fictional discourse. Paired with the fact that the contemporary discussions of fiction tend to depart from strict semantic, logic-based analyses that Frege employed, resulting in 'cognitive value plurality' in which the truth is not always part and parcel of the cognitive value of literature, the disagreement suggests that investigating sentences in fiction exclusively through the lens of their truth-bearing properties, or lack thereof, does not facilitate a deeper understanding of fiction's potential cognitive benefits. In the final section, I argue that Frege's fictional antirealism does not threaten the merit of literary cognitivism if we abandon the focus on propositional knowledge alone, suggesting that we can learn from literary fiction.

### **Sense and reference in Frege's views on fiction**

One of the most fruitful contemporary discussions in the philosophy of literature has been that of the cognitive value of literary fiction, i.e. its capacity to provide those who engage with it with cognitive benefits. At first glance, the question of truth value seems intimately connected to this discussion. Question of cognitive value of fiction, its capacity to provide knowledge or some other cognitive state such as understanding or appreciation, seems to be related to the issue of whether or not fiction has a more basic property: containing true sentences. Of course, if fiction can generate true sentences, then it can generate false ones as well. The dilemma then becomes: either the sentences in fiction can have a truth value (by virtue of which each of them can be either true or false) or they are truth-valueless and the question of truth does not apply to them. Despite not engaging in the discussion on cognitive benefits of art or fiction *per se*, Frege opted for the latter option and his fictional antirealism provided a basis for evaluating claims regarding fiction's cognitive value and was later implemented by philosophers of literature such as Lamarque and Olsen.

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of aesthetic cognitivism, see Carroll (2002), Davies (2007), Gibson (2008) and Young (2001).

Frege's fictional antirealism relies on his more fundamental concepts of sense and reference.<sup>2</sup> He classifies linguistic expressions, i.e. words and phrases as smaller units and sentences as larger, into three objective aspects: sign, sense and reference. On a word level, a sign is a written or spoken form of a word consisting of letters and sounds. A sense is a 'mode of presentation', the content of the linguistic expression that points to the reference. Finally, a reference is the object that the word designates<sup>3</sup> (Frege, 1960/1970: 56-57).

On a sentence level a sign is composed of signs of individual sentential components (individual words). Similarly, a sense of a sentence is composed of individual senses of the words that constitute it. The sense of a sentence is a thought, the objective content of a sentence "for which the question of truth arises" (Frege, 1956: 292). Reference of a sentence is its truth value, it being either true or false (Frege, 1960/1970: 56-63). For a complete picture of knowledge, both sense and reference are required: "the mere thought alone yields no knowledge, but only the thought together with its reference, i.e. its truth value" (Frege, 1960/1970: 65). Thoughts without reference are not bearers of knowledge. Furthermore, a single referent can have many different senses and, by extension, different signs. When two senses are used for the same referent, there is a difference in cognitive value (Frege, 1960/1970: 56)<sup>4</sup>. Cognitive values that are brought about by different senses of the same reference point to the fact that knowing the reference is not enough for acquiring cognitive value.

However, not all sentences have reference or truth value and those that lack it are neither true nor false. Such sentences, according to Frege, have only senses, which points to the fact that the above classification cannot be applied indiscriminately to all sentences. Broadly speaking, it is operative in *ceteris paribus* manifestations of language, when one uses sentences to describe reality and objects that exist in it, independently of one's success in doing so. For instance, the sentence "Pablo Picasso was a Spanish painter" is a true sentence which would become false if I accidentally

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<sup>2</sup> Frege's impact on subsequent theories of meaning and language use ranges from speech act theories to truth-conditional theories of semantics. Considering the relevance of theories of language on narrative art, Frege's impact on fiction can be explored very broadly. In the scope of this paper I will focus mostly on how his concepts of sense and reference contributed to the discussions surrounding truth value in literary fiction, with special emphasis on Lamarque and Olsen's (1994) theory.

<sup>3</sup> Since Frege understood reference (truth value) to be compositional (i.e. reference of smaller language units contributes to the truth value of the sentence), I will discuss word reference when relevant for the characterization of sentence reference. However, my main concern in this paper will be Frege's conception of sentence reference and its relation to fictional discourse.

<sup>4</sup> Frege's notion of cognitive value of sense is not to be equated with the aforementioned cognitive value of art and literature discussed by aesthetic and literary cognitivists. Frege uses cognitive value in relation to semantic properties of names and sentences that enable objective insight and new information, while the cognitive value of art is not necessarily connected with semantics and signifies ways in which art can be a source of learning.

wrote ‘Danish’ instead of ‘Spanish’. Nonetheless, according to Frege’s taxonomy, in both cases I would be producing sentences that are different from those in fiction in that they have truth value, while sentences in fiction lack it. Truth-valueless sentences are common in fiction, but should be avoided in the scientific discourse, where we are concerned with truth (Frege, 1956: 304).

What makes literature (and other artforms) significant, according to Frege (1960/1970: 63), is ‘aesthetic delight’ to which truth does not contribute due to its deeply personal nature. In turn, he argues that what is crucial for engaging with literature is that it is grounded in feelings brought about by “colouring and shading”, which “are not objective, and must be evoked by each hearer or reader according to the hints of the poet or the speaker” (Frege, 1960/1970: 61). Since sense is ‘mode of presentation’, it facilitates the focus towards aesthetic qualities of art (paying attention to the ‘colouring and shading’) and the way the content was presented in the work.

To summarize, Frege viewed sentences of scientific or other factual discourse as: 1) having senses, i.e. objective thoughts, modes of presentation that provide new information and cognitive value (Frege, 1960/1970: 57), 2) being either true or false in terms of having reference, truth value. By contrast, sentences of fictional discourse lack 2), which is why works of fiction should be viewed as expressions of thoughts that cannot be true or false (Frege, 1956: 301). It is, nevertheless, debatable how seriously Frege held the view that there cannot be truth value in fiction. As Zouhar observes, Frege offers only piecemeal comments on fiction without developing them into an elaborate and complete theory of fictional discourse (Zouhar, 2010: 103). Instead, he uses examples of sentences of works of fiction as antithesis to those of the sciences to show why he will *not* thoroughly investigate instances of language in fiction in the scope of his project, because in the fictional discourse the usual rules of reference are suspended, which is not something science can tolerate (Frege, 1960/1970: 57-62). Bar-Elli (1996: 65) notes that “Frege’s casual remarks about aesthetics”, used only for contrast between art and science, lead to complications in determining his views on fiction.

One of the issues that provoked the existence of multiple readings is the problem of sentences in fiction that do not contain empty names, i.e. names of entities that do not have referents. His statement that the sentence “Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep” has only sense but no truth value is in line with his view that the emptiness of names (in this case due to the fact that Odysseus does not exist outside of fiction) leads to the whole sentence lacking truth value (Frege, 1960/1970: 60-61). But Frege denies truth value to sentences that contain names that lack empty names as well. For instance, when Pierre says “There is a war against Napoleon” in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (2010: 26), the sentence contains no empty names because Napoleon was a historical person. Furthermore, there seems not to be a reason to regard the sentence as factually untrue, since it would be said as a fact, not fiction, in the present tense during Napoleon’s actual war with Russia. Even so, Frege argues that such sentences are not to be taken as true, even if they express mathematical truths: the sentence “5 is a prime number (...)” lacks its usual force, e.g. in the mouth

of an actor upon stage” (Frege, 1960/1970: 64) and these sentences have sense but lack reference, truth value (Frege, 1960/1970: 63). If the sentence occurs as an utterance of a theater actor on stage or on a page of a novel, then it is not to be declared true.

In the following section, I will discuss how Frege’s notions of sense and reference support ‘multiple readings’ of truth in fiction. I will do so in order to argue that Lamarque and Olsen’s (1994) understanding of Frege’s fictional antirealism, on which they base their theory, relies on adopting these ‘multiple readings’ (incongruent interpretations) to motivate their anti-cognitivist outlook on literature.

### **‘Multiple readings’ of Frege and their implications for Lamarque and Olsen’s understanding of truth in fiction**

Frege’s writings on fiction span many years and offer seemingly conflicting views. The most evident example is the contrast between three different views: 1) thoughts in fiction “do not *need* to have truth values” (Frege, 1979:194), 2) thoughts in fiction do not have truth values *at all*: „Of course in fiction words only have a sense“ (Frege, 1979: 130; 1969: 128) and 3) in engaging with fiction, we are *interested* only in sense, not in truth value (Frege, 1960/1970: 63) (my italics). Evidently, there is a discrepancy between these three views. According to the first one, truth value is not a necessary property of sentences in fiction. Nonetheless, the fact that thoughts that form the content of the sentences in fiction are not necessarily either true or false does not entail that they cannot have these properties. The second view is more resolute and excludes the possibility that the first view leaves open; thoughts in fiction form objective content that cannot be true or false. The third view shifts the attention from truth value itself to readers’ interest when dealing with fictional discourse. When we read fiction, Frege claims, we do not care about truthfulness of its sentences, only about their mode of presentation. Just like the first view, the third does not explicitly exclude the possibility that, despite our lack of interest in it, there is a truth value to sentences in fiction. Among these three views, the second one is the only view committed to the explicit lack of truth value of thoughts in fiction, which makes it the strongest one.

Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 120-122) develop a theory of truth in literature that endorses and expands on two standpoints: Aristotle’s view of universality of literature that sets it apart from history and views it as being about universals rather than particulars and Frege’s stance on lack of interest in truth in engagement with literature. To support their claim, they emphasize Frege’s view that in engaging with literature “we are interested in the sense of the sentences and the images and feelings thereby aroused. The question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for the attitude of scientific investigation” (Frege 1970, cited in Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 122). This is the view in which Frege qualifies our engagement with fiction as lacking interest in truth value, 3). Once again, the view does not suggest that there is no truth value in literature, only that our engagement with it is such that our attention is not drawn towards it.

Departing from the issue of engagement with fiction and focusing on the problem of faithfulness of fictional representation to the 'real' world and whether such faithfulness is possible or even intended (by the author) for certain genres, Lamarque and Olsen then focus on literary realism. Unquestionably, there is a discrepancy between literary works like H. P. Lovecraft's short stories and works of literary realism such as Dostoevsky's novels in the level of their correspondence to reality. When it comes to the latter, Lamarque and Olsen characterize literary realism (to which works by Dostoevsky, but not H. P. Lovecraft, belong) by using Frege's sense or mode of presentation to corroborate their claim that literature is not (primarily) concerned with truth or truth-telling:

Literary realism is a 'mode of presentation', to use our earlier Fregean vocabulary, not a kind of 'correspondence relation'. Any special 'positive relationship' which the realist novel is supposed to hold to something outside literature ('social reality') is better accounted for in non-referential terms, perhaps similarity or verisimilitude. (1994: 315)

As its name suggests, literary realism is generally regarded as a genre that aims at accurate representation of the subject matter in the greater degree than other fictional genres. However, Lamarque and Olsen emphasize the view that one does not need to appeal to truth conceived as correspondence between the 'world' and the 'work' to explicate this property, because that would entail the unfavorable requirement of a referential relationship between them. Namely, they claim that it is not a crucial aspect of literature, not even for the seemingly most 'truthful' genre of literary realism, that it conveys truth about the 'world' or supports referential relationships in terms of names corresponding to objects in the world (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 315). Referential relationships between names in a work of fiction and 'real' objects in the world are suspended because, according to Frege's view on fiction and Aristotle's universality thesis, names in work of fiction do not correspond to 'real' objects (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 314). This view is a version of 2), the strongest version of Frege's views, according to which there are no truth values in fiction. Echoing Frege in their view of reference of proper names in fiction, Lamarque and Olsen point out that the aboutness, i.e. what the work of fiction is about, does not rely on a fixed view of reference. Even when a work mentions a proper name, we should not approach it in extensional terms, searching for the object(s) it applies to, because names in fiction acquire their meaning relative to an interpretation one employs when engaging with the work (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 125-126). Furthermore, they adopt Frege's firm distinction between science and art when it comes to the role of truth, exemplified in their rejection of what they consider the common view that literature corresponds to science in having an aim to distribute generalized truths about human beings (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 6). According to them, it is not the intention of the artist to discover truth, but precisely that is of the utmost importance to the scientist, who strives for truth in her research.

Finally, although they acknowledge the robustness of Frege's notion of sense, they use it to motivate the view that "the primary response to fiction *qua* fiction is concerned with internal relations of sense rather than external relation of reference" (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 122-123). This claim is similar to 3) and is directly attributed to Frege's view on how we engage with fiction, but there is a crucial difference. While Frege emphasizes that our interest lies *only* in the sense of the sentences in fiction, not reference, Lamarque and Olsen qualify that interest as constituting the *primary* response to fiction, not the only one. As such, Frege's view is much stronger, since it characterizes our engagement as exclusively, not principally, sense-centered. Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 122-123) add, contra Frege, that it is sometimes appropriate to have an interest in truth value of sentences in works of fiction, but claim that it does not constitute a primary response to those sentences. However, this clashes with their endorsement of Frege's distinction between 'aesthetic delight' and 'attitude of scientific investigation' that they incorporate with Aristotle's view on universality of literature.

From the variety of opinions Frege expressed on the way sense and reference contribute to fictional discourse, Lamarque and Olsen integrated the following: the general idea of primacy of sense in our engagement with fiction (a less strict version of 3)), the rejection of the correspondence between fictional names and 'real' objects that results in the rejection of the possibility of truth value of sentences in fiction (variety of 2)) and the difference between science and literature in terms of the former, unlike the latter, aiming to convey the truth. However, the fact that views Frege expressed provoke multiple readings has resulted in Munton (2017) interpreting him as a speech-act theorist who believes that truth value is expressed only through assertion in factual discourse and Evans (1982: 27-28) proposing that, for Frege, there are two languages, one of factual and one of fictional discourse. Crucially, both Munton (2017) and Evans (1982) voice a popular opinion on Frege's views on fiction: that they express opposing views on reference because they were not a part of a complete theory that would potentially integrate them in a focused way. As they stand, they seem impossible to reconcile without further qualifications. Parts of Lamarque and Olsen's no-truth approach whose origins they attribute to Frege are thus susceptible to all the questions Frege's fictional antirealism begs, in particular the uncertainty on the precise nature of fictional antirealism and the scope of the view that engaging with fiction marks a loss of interest in truth value. Since these questions are closely related to the issue of cognitive value of literature, I will examine Lamarque and Olsen's aesthetic anti-cognitivism in the next section to show that their reliance on Frege in their no-truth account does not provide good reason to reject contemporary versions of aesthetic cognitivism.

### **Cognitive value plurality in debates on aesthetic cognitivism**

According to Berys Gaut, aesthetic cognitivism is generally understood as the view "that the cognitive (...) merits of works of art are, under certain conditions, aesthetic merits in those works or condition their aesthetic merits" (2007: 136). Anti-

cognitivist can reject the general claim (that works of art can have cognitive merit or provide cognitive benefits to those who engage with them) or the more specific claim that cognitive merits function as aesthetic merits in certain works. Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 1) claim that „the concept of truth has no central or ineliminable role in critical practice”. Thus, they affirm the view that truth is not essential for literature. One of the reasons many believe that literary fiction can be cognitively valuable is its ability to explore themes that are commonly understood as philosophical, such as the nature of human existence and morality. But, considering that they adopt Frege’s idea of lack of interest in truth in our engagement with literary fiction, exploring morality (which is concerned with truth) through literature is for Lamarque and Olsen (1994: 393-394) substantially different than doing so in a factual context and does not constitute “a standard governing literary appreciation”.

Aesthetic cognitivists, on the other hand, can assert that we can acquire knowledge through art, but this is not the only way to motivate their claims. The question of whether fiction can have cognitive value has not focused exclusively on knowledge characterized by strict propositional conception of truth. Broadly speaking, Gaut (2007: 140) identifies “epistemic claim of cognitivism” as “artworks’ capacity to teach us, and therefore to exhibit a kind of understanding about certain matters, including psychology and values”. For instance, James O. Young (2001: 20-52) argues for the primacy of ‘illustrations’ to which the concept of truth does not apply based on literary fiction. Catherine Z. Elgin’s (2011) focus on understanding as exemplification, motivated by Nelson Goodman’s (1968) exemplification theory, also departs from prioritizing role of truth in her cognitivist approach. We can observe that Gaut’s use of the phrase ‘a kind of understanding’ suggests a cognitive state, process or ability that is too versatile to be equated with propositional knowledge traditionally conceptualized as justified true belief, from which it is distinct in the fact that understanding is a broader concept often conceived as entailing some type of ‘grasping’ and ‘systematizing’ of the subject matter at hand (Grimm, 2021). Considering this, it is not entirely clear that there is always a need for understanding to be related to truth, at least not in the same way it does to the traditional conception of knowledge. In the scope of discussing cognitive values of art, Gibson (2008: 13) characterizes aesthetic neo-cognitivism as a popular, contemporary variant of cognitivism that departs from the notion of propositional knowledge dependent on truth, claiming that truth is not an essential property of insight or cognitive benefits of art. Instead, cognitive values that art offers can take form of understanding and awareness that can provide the person who engages with it with “a valuable expansion of her cognitive capacities” (Gibson, 2008: 13).

Gaut (2007: 168) views truth as only one of the cognitive values in a larger pool covered by aesthetic cognitivists. In a similar vein (although endorsing a different perspective than Gaut on the general picture of cognitive value in literature), Lamarque (2009: 253) asserts that the fact that we can learn from ‘reflective’ literary works that discuss important subject matters does not necessarily entail that such works contain true sentences. This shows that, at least in some respect, these authors agree that the cognitive value is not *necessarily* tied to truth value. So does Rowe

(1997) in his criticism of Lamarque and Olsen's view of the cognitive value of literature.

For neo-cognitivist accounts, Frege's distinction between sense and reference will be of no particular use. We have already established that Lamarque and Olsen's (1994) adoption of many of Frege's views on sense and reference in literary fiction results in the inability to distinguish between variety of interpretations of his thought. Their view that, contrary to what Frege claimed, the interest in truth values "is at least sometimes part of the appropriate response to fiction" (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994: 122) poses a problem for their claim that truth is not essential to literature. If it is appropriate, in certain cases, to respond to fiction by inquiring into the truth value of its sentences, then it is unclear what makes this appropriateness inessential. Furthermore, as I have established, cognitivists do not necessarily have to defend their position against those that doubt that there is truth value or reference in fiction. In light of concepts such as understanding and appreciation, they can appeal to fiction's ability to provide insight and cognitive value without even discussing truth or approaching it in strict Fregean terms. Fiction's ability to provide us with valuable insight into subjects of great importance to us, such as human relationships and experiences, is cognitively valuable even in instances when it cannot be expressed in a sentence that passes the test of truth.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I claimed that Lamarque and Olsen's no-truth theory of literature relies on incongruent interpretations of Frege's fictional antirealism. Frege's views on fiction generate 'multiple readings' and disagreements in how to interpret them result in an unclear picture of his view of truth in fiction. As a consequence, Lamarque and Olsen's theory relies on statements of different level of commitment to the rejection of truth in fiction: fiction's inability to contain true sentences, lack of necessity of fiction to contain them and lack of interest in truth in our engagement with fiction. While they prioritize the third view, they appeal to the first two as well and they acknowledge that engagement with fiction is sometimes still appropriately concerned with truth value. I argued that this view is not in line with their separation of literature and science. Paired with the fact that the discussion on aesthetic cognitivism does not need to rely on truth, Lamarque and Olsen's appeal to Frege's fictional antirealism does not diminish the merits of the cognitivist view that we can learn from literary fiction. By appealing to concepts that do not necessarily rely on truth, such as understanding, newer versions of aesthetic cognitivism are not affected by Frege's fictional antirealism that Lamarque and Olsen employ, which is why I conclude that the problem of truth is not of crucial importance to the cognitive value of fiction.<sup>5</sup>

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