



A Correction to the Translation of Frege's "The Thought"

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Mind, New Series, Volume 80, Issue 318 (Apr., 1971), 303.

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Mind

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A CORRECTION TO THE TRANSLATION OF FREGE'S
"THE THOUGHT"

THE translation of Frege's "The Thought" (MIND, lxxv (1956), 289-311) appears to contain an error that at one point obscures the sense of the argument.

Frege's thesis is that thoughts (propositions) belong neither to an "outer world" of public sensible objects nor to an "inner world" of private mental objects but to a "third world" of public non-sensible objects. In the passage in question he observes that sensible objects, such as trees, are public and that thoughts, of course, are not sensible objects; he then asks whether thoughts can nonetheless be public objects, as are trees.

The German text reads (*Beiträge zur Philosophie des deutschen Idealismus*, i (1918-19), 66):

Der von der Philosophie noch unberührte Mensch kennt zunächst Dinge die er sehen, tasten, kurz mit den Sinnen wahrnehmen kann, wie Bäume, Steine, Häuser, und er ist überzeugt, dass ein Anderer denselben Baum, denselben Stein, den er selbst sieht und tastet, gleichfalls sehn und tasten kann. Zu diesen Dingen gehört ein Gedanke offenbar nicht. Kann er nun trotzdem den Menschen als derselbe gegenüberstehn wie ein Baum?

The translation given (MIND, 1956, p. 29) is:

A person who is still untouched by philosophy knows first of all things which he can see and touch, in short, perceive with the senses, such as trees, stones and houses, and he is convinced that another person equally can see and touch the same tree and the same stone which he himself sees and touches. *Obviously no thought belongs to these things. Now can he, nevertheless, stand in the same relation to a person as to a tree?* (Italics mine.)

The problem is in the two italicized sentences. The first is open to misunderstanding: Frege here is simply saying that obviously thoughts (propositions) are not to be *counted among* sensible objects. The second makes the mistake of translating "er" (which can refer only to the masculine noun "Gedanke") as "he" instead of "it." As a consequence, the question Frege is raising—can the same thought nevertheless be thought by various persons, as the same tree can be seen by various persons—is entirely lost.

A revised translation of these two sentences might read:

Obviously a thought is not one of these things. Now can it, nevertheless, stand in the same relation to various persons, as does a tree?

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