

IS THE CONCEPT *HORSE* AN OBJECT?

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1. An Awkwardness of Language.

In his paper "Über Begriff und Gegenstand" ([1892] hereafter referred to as "On Concept and Object"¹) Frege replies to a number of criticisms of his views about concepts made by Kerry. The details of Kerry's criticisms of Frege's *Grundlagen* need not concern us here, but in the course of the discussion Frege [1892, 196] comes across what he calls 'an awkwardness of language' that arises when we try to talk about concepts. One of Kerry's examples was the proposition, 'The concept "horse" is a concept easily attained.' He said that the concept 'horse' was an object which fell under the concept 'concept easily attained.' This has the consequence that the concept 'horse' is not a concept, but an object, and this is the awkwardness that Frege refers to. This result has come to be known as Frege's paradox, but it is only a paradox in the sense that it is highly counter-intuitive; it is not — nor does it entail — a self-contradictory proposition.

Given that this result is counter-intuitive, why did Frege accept it? The answer lies in the criterion that he laid down in *Grundlagen* for distinguishing between expressions that stand for objects and those that stand for concepts. He, of course, expressed this for German phrases, but it can be reformulated for English phrases as follows: A singular substantival phrase governed by the definite article stands for an object, whereas a word 'used with the indefinite article or in the plural without any article' is a concept-word.² According to this criterion the expression 'the concept "horse"' is a singular term that stands for an object and as no object is a concept in Frege's scheme of things it follows that the concept 'horse' is an object and not a concept.

Dummett has claimed — on p. 54 of *Frege* [1973] — that Frege's criterion is inexact both ways and he adds that

Frege was perfectly well aware that there are expressions satisfying this criterion which he would not wish to admit as proper names, and others which fail the

¹Page numbers in the citations are to the German originals.

²Section 51. See also section 57 and the footnotes to sections 66 and 68.