

Tyler Burge

Truth, Thought, Reason: Essays on Frege

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REVIEW

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The volume under review reprints Tyler Burge’s well-known historical papers on Frege with a good deal of supplementary material in the form of lesser papers, postscripts, and a long introduction. To keep this review of manageable length, I will focus on just a handful of items that give a good indication of the diversity of the issues Burge addresses.

“Frege on Truth” is a practical demonstration of the maxim that the best way to understand a philosopher is often to see how one might defend his least attractive views. Burge undertakes to defend three unpopular claims of Frege’s: (1) that the denotations of sentences are their truth-values; (2) that these truth-values are objects; (3) that each of these objects is identical to its unit class.

An unsympathetic view of Frege’s case for (1) would go as follows. Frege begs half the question by assuming sentences *have* denotations, then offers the pitifully weak argument for the claim that these denotations are truth-values, that we are interested in the existence of a denotation for a singular term in a sentence only when we are interested in the truth-value of the sentence: If we are interested in the *Iliad* only as literary art, we may be content with the sense of “Odysseus;” only if we are interested in its historical truth must we seek after a denotation for “Odysseus.” This is an interesting choice of example, when one considers that Frege is writing a year or two after the death of Schliemann, whose claims had kept the German academic world in ferment for decades; but how is (1) supposed to follow?

Burge makes two effective points in defense of Frege. The first point is that the word translated as “denotation” is an ordinary German word that is unmistakably being used with an extraordinary Fregean meaning. One should not, therefore, think that there is some intuitive,