FREGE ON TRUTH, JUDGMENT, AND OBJECTIVITY

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Summary
In Frege’s writings, the notions of truth, judgment, and objectivity are all prominent and important. This paper explores the close connections between them, together with their ties to further cognate notions, such as those of thought, assertion, inference, logical law, and reason. It is argued that, according to Frege, these notions can only be understood properly together, in their inter-relations. Along the way, interpretations of some especially cryptic Fregean remarks, about objectivity, laws of truth, and reason, are offered, and seemingly opposed “realist” and “idealist” strands in his position reconciled.

I.
In Frege’s writings, the three notions mentioned in the title of this paper—truth, judgment, and objectivity—are all prominent and important. They are also closely related to each other, as is made explicit at various places. In “On Sinn and Bedeutung”, Frege relates the first two as follows: “Judgments can be regarded as advances from a thought to a truth value” (Frege 1997, p. 159); at other places, including the late article “Thought”, he also characterizes judging as “the acknowledgement of the truth of a thought” (ibid., p. 329). Relating the second and third notions, he remarks in The Foundations of Arithmetic: “What is objective … is what is subject to laws, what can be conceived and judged, what is expressible in words” (Frege 1994, p. 35).

As these initial quotations already indicate, it is not just truth, judgment, and objectivity that are connected for Frege, but also several other notions, including those of thought, law, conceivability, and expressibility; and among the relevant laws, those of logic are especially important. Thus, in Foundations Frege advises us “always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective” (Frege 1994, p. x);
and in “Thought” he adds: “I assign to logic the task of discovering the laws of truth. … The meaning of the word ‘true’ is spelled out in the laws of truth.” (Frege 1997, p. 326) Occasionally the notion of reason is thrown into the mix as well:

It is in this way that I understand objective to mean what is independent of our sensations, intuitions, and imagination, and of all construction of mental pictures out of memories of earlier sensations, but not what is independent of reason. For what are things independent of reason? To answer that would be as much as to judge without judging, or to wash the fur without wetting it. (Frege 1994, p. 36)

The purpose of this paper is to explain, or better to elucidate, all of these notions as understood by Frege, including providing interpretations of the passages just quoted, cryptic as some of them are.¹ It will become apparent that, according to Frege, a proper elucidation of them will require exactly paying close attention to their inter-relations. Crucial in this connection, since centrally related to all the others, is the notion of judgment. Its centrality has been pointed out before, in particular by Thomas Ricketts.² My discussion will build on some of Ricketts’ insights and arguments, not just concerning the notion of judgment, but also those of truth and objectivity. On that basis, I will attempt to clarify further some relatively neglected aspects of Frege’s position, including especially cryptic remarks about objectivity, laws of truth, and reason.

II.

It will help to begin by reminding ourselves, briefly, of the broader context in which Frege brings up the notions mentioned. Throughout his work, Frege’s main interest is in the foundations of mathematics, and especially in the foundations of arithmetic. What he intends to investigate in this connection, clearly and in depth, are the following issues: What are the fundamental concepts and principles of arithmetic; what does their ulti-

¹. This paper complements Reck (1997) and (2000/2005); see also Reck (forthcoming). With respects to my considerable debts to other Frege scholars, especially Thomas Ricketts, see the following footnotes.

². See Ricketts (1986) and (1996), as well as the summary of Ricketts’ interpretation in Kremer (2000). A similar emphasis on judgment in connection with Frege can be found in Sullivan (2005).