
Matthias Wille, *Largely unknown. Gottlob Frege und der posthume Ruhm*.
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Today, Gottlob Frege is a prominent founding figure of modern philosophy, particularly so in modern symbolic logic and philosophy of language. But not only during his lifetime did Frege remain ‘largely unknown’ and deprived of proper acknowledgment. Even after his death, the road to success proved to be no less cumbersome. The appreciation he was due and the systematic integration of Frege’s achievements into the current discourse was beyond reach for quite some time, and it required substantial, coordinated effort to save Frege’s legacy from imminent oblivion. With his ‘posthumous biography’ – as one might accurately call it – Matthias Wille not only delivers a profound contribution to the historiography of symbolic logic, thoroughly

investigating an unsolved case and examining traditional misapprehensions concerning the creatorship of Frege's fame. He also provides insights into the historical conditions of institutionalization of logic and research on Frege, which proves not least to be a historical lesson about the fragility and contingency of scientific discourse.

Questions and methods

The primary question in Wille's study is how the Fregean phenomenon, that is an academic underdog practically forgotten after his death becoming the shooting star within a period of a few years, can be explained – a case quite unparalleled in the history of philosophy. In particular, Wille is concerned with comprehensively documenting the individual contributions of relevant actors and evaluating them with regard to their influence on the reception of Frege, while explicitly maintaining that the making of Frege's fame was unquestionably a collective achievement of many (9). However, it has to be possible to identify this group of people and, thanks to Wille, the individual contributions merge gradually into a clear overall picture. The study is not dedicated to the identification of influences with regard to the content of the systematic work of other scholars – or in other words: to a history of ideas. Rather, these sources are intended to trace which referrals and recommendations may have yielded a new readership (55). An important part of this task is to critically assess a central assumption already consolidated in the historical consciousness of academic philosophy, namely that it were the references of Wittgenstein, Russell and Carnap that had made Frege famous. This traditional view is not only impressive in its simplicity but in such a narrative, driven by such well-known protagonists, it is too easily trusted.

Wille offers a periodization of the reception of Frege in three phases in order to ascertain the effectiveness of each contribution within its respective state of awareness and also to provide the reader with orientation throughout the project (17). The first phase begins in 1879 with the publication of the *Begriffsschrift* and it ends in the late 1920s. The second phase covers the 1930s and 1940s. The third phase stretches from 1950 until today. Of course, the choice of these periods is based on Wille's research results: The phases can be distinguished by both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. In the first phase, the number of publications that deal with Frege's works can be estimated at about 30. Qualitatively, the references and reviews reveal that many of Frege's contemporaries cannot even properly assign his writings, especially the problems he raises, to a field of expertise. In the second phase, the publication density increases fivefold (17 f.). As mutual references gradually establish a state of discussion among a fledgling research community, more and more publications appear especially dedicated to Frege and these, in turn, receive reviews. In the third phase, the volume of publications exceeds any manageable amount and one can speak of an institutionalized Frege-research on the highest level.

Consequently, based on this periodization Wille addresses the following subtasks of his project: For the first phase in particular, it remains to be shown why certain exceptional efforts on the part of specific individuals, e.g. Russell, to ensure Frege's recognition did not come to fruition. In the second phase lies the core of the explanandum: Which historical circumstances caused the sudden 'goldrush' on Frege's insights? Which prerequisites were necessary and which hindrances stood in the way of setting a decisive course for a broad reception of Frege? Wille's criticism of the traditional narrative is again based essentially on his investigations of this phase. Once the traditional narrative has been revised and the relationships of dependence realigned in the light of it, only the *transition* to the third phase remains to be explained.

Central claims and the basic line of argumentation

I am going to present Wille's central results and assumptions regarding the project as well as the basic argumentative structure as they present themselves in the individual chapters. We have already covered the first chapter, because it outlines the problem and the periodization described above. It should be noted that the course of the chapters is not congruent with the mentioned periodization, but rather carries out the subsequent subtasks.

The second chapter spans a wide timeframe and serves not least to zoom in on the turning point of the reception of Frege located in the second phase (52). It begins with a vivid depiction of Frege's isolated situation in Jena. On this occasion, Frege's relations to philosophical celebrities such as Edmund Husserl or the Neo-Kantians Cassirer and Natorp are also elucidated. According to Wille, however, the attention to Frege came either too early in the former's or too late in the latter's phase of academic productivity. The second part of the chapter is devoted to the publication of the first well-known translations of Frege's works into English: 1948 *Sense and Reference* is published in *The Philosophical Review*, translated by Max Black and the year after the corresponding translation by Herbert Feigl *On Sense and Nomination*. Both were published in *The Philosophical Review*. With Austin's much-praised bilingual 1950 edition of *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik), it was in the 1950s in Oxford that Frege was introduced into the canon of the history of philosophy. Wille's meticulous search for clues reveals that Austin does not undertake the translation because of his own research interest. Rather, given the Oxford curriculum at the time, he considers Frege to be one of the relevant 'origins of modern epistemology'. However, Wille argues, in line with the assessments of Frege's contemporaries¹, that all this could only happen against the background of a stable support for the appreciation of Frege's achievements within the scientific community.

In Chapter 3, Wille claims (in that sequence) that it was neither Wittgenstein, nor Carnap, nor Russell, who made Frege's comeback possible. Granted, all three are among the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. All three are clearly influenced themselves by Frege and well versed in his work. They also had personal contact with Frege in different ways and have certainly acknowledged in their writings that they owe much to Frege. However, Wille's argumentation is based on the hermeneutical sensitivity for how these acknowledgments had to be understood by their contemporaries. Methodically, in addition to the hermeneutic interpretation, the respective references to Frege are located relative to the state of contemporary problem awareness and the professional dissemination of attention to specific fields of research. Wille promotes and demonstrates a 'historical epoché', i. e. he consciously avoids systematic influences which are retrospectively evident in classical passages today (55). He regards this as a requirement for the consideration of these philosophical milestones from the perspective of the history of Frege's reception.

For example, the pointed reference to Frege in the preface of the *Tractatus* was simply not sufficiently informative to guide a reading of Frege's "great works" (54). Correspondingly, in the historical self-classification of the Vienna Circle and the early references by Carnap Frege appeared more like an outdated precursor of Russell.² The case of Russell is itself more complicated, as Russell not only discussed Frege thoroughly in *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and in the mature *Principia Mathematica* (1910–1913) in full knowledge of Frege's work, he also

¹ See Black, cited in Wille 2016, 50.

² For more detail, see Wille 2016, 58 and 66.

unequivocally acknowledges the decisive influence on his own project. In addition, for over 30 years Russell missed no opportunity to commend Frege's achievements to the learned professional public. The discussion in the *Principles* – which led to the discovery of the antinomy in Frege's system, which in turn was probably not helpful in advertising – had little effect, mainly because the *Principles* were not granted a reception comparable to the *Principia*. After all, there was no flourishing research community in logic at the time (74 f.). The *Principia*, on the other hand, established itself as a new groundbreaking standard work, which as such did not suggest the search for systematic improvements among historical precursors (81). The appreciation of Russell and Whitehead was not overlooked, but the thought of a systematic relevance of Frege's writings did not come up. Wille does not omit striking exceptions, such as the assessments of Jan Łukasiewicz and Kurt Gödel, proving the rule (80). These exceptions include in particular the professional efforts to promote Frege on the part of Philip Jourdain in England and of Paul Linke in Jena, to which a separate section is devoted.

The longer the list of individual efforts to promote awareness of Frege gets, the clearer becomes the realization that the posthumous Frege cannot live without an institutional foundation. Thus in chapter 4, the author traces the oldest testimony of institutional Frege Research, which began in Münster in the early 1920s and was closely linked to the name of Heinrich Scholz. There are remarkable individual achievements of the constituting 'Münster School', including the construction and processing of Frege's literary estate in 1935. It is at least plausible that Scholz also encouraged the republication of *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* – despite all risks – in 1934, the first ever new edition of one of Frege's works and the first posthumous publication of one of them (130 f.). Nevertheless, a sobering picture becomes apparent: Before World War II, these publications of the *Institut für Mathematische Logik und Grundlagenforschung* (Institute for Mathematical Logic and Basic Research) fell on deaf ears in Germany. This was to continue even after the Second World War, a period in which the gap between the degree of maturity of modern logic and the level of knowledge thereof among German academic philosophers could hardly have been greater (148).

In the fifth and final chapter, it is time to solve the riddle. Given the political situation in the 1930s, the necessary institutional conditions for a broad research community, in which a reception of Frege could have flourished, were no longer guaranteed in Germany and other European countries. When Carnap emigrated to the United States in 1936, the international situation had already changed fundamentally: Harvard and especially Princeton had replaced the European centers of logic research, namely Vienna, Warsaw and Göttingen. The institutes of these new centers on the East Coast have quickly provided top-notch staff since the early 1930s, providing best training conditions for a new generation of logicians. These institutes – as such already a fertile ground for the reception of Frege – should also form the basis for another, indeed decisive, institutional achievement: With the *Association of Symbolic Logic* (ASL) in 1935 a community of *international* format was established for the first time. Not only did common interests now take shape at local gatherings, but the magazine *Journal of Symbolic Logic* (JSL) also created "A Home for Logic",³ a common publication site entirely dedicated to logical research. This provided a place for common discussions to flourish, to secure achievements and to consolidate the self-understanding of an as yet young discipline through historical retrospectives. According to Wille's analysis, Alonzo Church emerged as the key figure in the institutional roles of the ASL and JSL, so that Wille is inclined to interpret Church himself as a sort of individualized institution (150).

3 Which is also the headline of Chapter 5.2. Cf. Wille 2016, 156 f.

The first volume of the journal JSL appeared in four issues in the years 1936 and 1937. The fourth issue was entirely devoted to a comprehensive bibliography: On 100 printed pages 547 authors were listed with a four-digit number of publications on the topics of logic and the foundations of mathematics since 1666, the year of publication of Leibniz' *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria*. In a second version two years later, there were 628 authors with about 2500 publications (164). Not only was Church centrally responsible for defining the selection criteria, such as selection by relevance of content rather than evaluative assessment, and for enforcing the aim of completeness, but he also reviewed and commented on a large portion of the texts, some of which were quite difficult to obtain.

Gottlob Frege was already represented in the first list with 23 entries – however, 23 out of thousands. Yet what influence can such a bibliography, based on documentary completeness, have on the reading behavior of experts? It should be noted that the bibliography became a standard work with immediate effect, an indispensable tool for anyone who wanted to seriously concern themselves with this field of research. In addition, the usefulness of the fourth issue of the JSL was not limited to a purely archival list, but Church made supplemental evaluative markings: Works of particular importance for formal logic – according to strict criteria – were marked with an asterisk * on the left margin and only a small number of such works, in which a basic idea was first developed, were marked with a double asterisk. Here the numbers speak a different language: A total of only eleven among thousands of works were awarded a double asterisk and of these three alone went to works by Gottlob Frege. In this way he clearly stood out among the other honorees: Boole, de Morgan, Hilbert, Russell, Zermelo, Brouwer and Gödel had each marked one work with a double asterisk. Along with three other marked papers by Frege, page 135 attracted attention because of the sheer abundance of stars. This attention was already reflected in the reviews of the fourth issue of the JSL, in which hardly any reviewer left Church's award ceremony unremarked. Church had thus made a commendation that could not have been more obvious and one that was to last for years (163).

The path to the universal appreciation of Frege was now prepared. But esteem by itself does not guarantee a thorough systematic debate. In addition to the star-awards, Wille identifies two additional levels on which Church made pertinent contributions to the proclamation of Frege's insights. For one thing, there is the editorial work of the JSL's review department, which has been under Church's stewardship for over four decades. In particular Church accompanied and promoted any engagement with Frege's work by discussing it at the level of his own Frege-expertise, and in his reviews he referred to Frege's accomplishments whenever it seemed relevant and appropriate to him (184 f.). Two cases are particularly enlightening and bring together some loose threads from the second and third chapter. On the one hand, this is the debate about the so-called 'paradox of analysis', which was essentially fought between Morton White and Max Black: If one presents a conceptual analysis, or rather a definition, in the form of an identity judgment, then it is apparently indistinguishable from an analytically trivial identity judgment of the form $a = a$. In a review, Church concisely pointed out that the controversial problem not only has a direct analogy to Frege's puzzle of identity in *Sinn und Bedeutung*, but can also be solved satisfactorily along Frege's lines (188). Due to Church's review, the entire debate made a qualitative leap, while the Church-induced reading of Frege prompted Black to publish his above-mentioned translation within two years. The second case has sharp contours also and again illustrates the contemporary state of public knowledge about Frege, and in what way and in which order the references to Frege worked: With his *Introduction to Semantics* in 1942 and *Meaning and Necessity* in 1947, Rudolf Carnap presented and specified the distinction between intension and extension. While in the former source Frege was not mentioned at all, not by

Carnap and accordingly not by any reviewer with the unmissable exception of Alonzo Church in his most influential review in *The Philosophical Review*, the situation in 1947 is exactly the opposite: There is hardly a reviewer who refused to respond to Carnap's extensive comparison of his own explication with Frege's, which Carnap now felt obliged to include due to Church's reminder (191f.). As a multiplier of impact, *Meaning and Necessity* thus helped to create the conditions that Wille indicated as 'phase 3'. Here again, however, Church should continue to participate on a third level, that is through his own research, in particular the intensional logic founded by him and inspired by Frege, for example in his *Introduction to Mathematical Logic* (1956).

Critical assessment

How convincing is the refutation of the traditional narrative that Frege's fame was due to Wittgenstein, Russell and Carnap, and correspondingly the counteroffer with the figurehead Alonzo Church? Overall, the argumentation of the study is plausible and stringent. Wille documents the sources carefully and thoroughly and he offers an impressive amount of detail in the presentation. In addition to the main line of reasoning outlined above, there are always other interesting and unexpected insights. The author thus fulfills his promise to tell a story about the milieu of symbolic logic in the second quarter of the twentieth century in addition to a contribution to the early history of the research on Frege (19).

The methodological question, to what extent the work on the history of the reception of Frege has to assess the individual references to Frege as well as the contributions of central players on *hermeneutical* paths, or to what extent a historical map of the *institutional* occurrences and the quantities of the readership has to be drawn, would have deserved a more explicit treatment. Although it is granted that in the end it was a collective achievement of many that helped Frege's renaissance, Wille's focus is definitely on the individual actors. But when, for example, in the context of the first phase of the Frege reception Wille states that "the time was not yet ripe" (89), it remains unclear whether this is to offer a summary explanation, a simple statement about a missing resonance or rather a confession, that we just can't say exactly why, with the help of a bibliography, Church could accomplish what Russell could not in 30 years. There was, after all, a professional audience for Russell and there were institutional centers emerging like Warsaw or Vienna. Still, in making the directions of the relational network explicit, i. e. who influenced whom or who convinced whom first of the importance of Frege, Wille hardly leaves any gap. If a finding can not be completely clarified or if a presumption or plausibility consideration is presented, this is noted with all due intellectual honesty (see for example 167 or 201).

The structure of the chapters is coherent and comprehensible – however, this only becomes apparent in retrospect, because the titles of the chapters and subchapters are cited commendations of those actors who represent the central protagonists of each section. As a corresponding overview does not appear in the introductory passages, the above summary may serve as an aid in this respect. The fact that the study is written in German certainly is an obstacle to an international reception, but obviously no shortage of the study itself. To sum up: Matthias Wille's most readable and also quite intriguing study has succeeded in making a well-founded historiographic contribution, not only by thoroughly dealing with a specific question of authorship, but also by uncovering some of the historical background for the academic field of philosophy as it is today.

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