

VU Research Portal

Nadine Gessler, Leśniewski, lecteur de Frege. Neuchâtel: 2007 [Review of: (2007) Leśniewski, lecteur de Frege (Nadine Gessler)]

Betti, A.

published in

History and Philosophy of Logic
2009

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1080/01445340802309949](https://doi.org/10.1080/01445340802309949)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Betti, A. (2009). Nadine Gessler, Leśniewski, lecteur de Frege. Neuchâtel: 2007 [Review of: (2007) Leśniewski, lecteur de Frege (Nadine Gessler)]. *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 30 (2), 200-201.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01445340802309949>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

N. GESSLER. *Leśniewski, lecteur de Frege*. (Introduction à l'œuvre de S. Leśniewski. Fascicule V) Avant-propos de Denis Miéville. Neuchâtel: Centre de Recherches Sémiologiques – Travaux de logique, 2007. ix + 119 pp. No price stated. ISSN 1420-8520.

Reviewed by A. BETTI, Faculteit der Wijsbegeerte, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, HV 1081 Amsterdam

[Work on this review has been supported by ERC Starting Grant TRANH Project No 203194. Published in *History and Philosophy of Logic* 30 (2) 2009: 200-201 at <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all?content=10.1080/01445340802309949>. This Open Access version corrects a broken link.]

The declared aim of this booklet is placing Leśniewski's work concerning the foundations of mathematics in its general context at the beginning of the 20th century and comparing it with Frege's work (p. 1). The aim is subsequently narrowed down to 'following Leśniewski in his references to Frege' (p. 3). The volume is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 ('Leśniewski and the discovery of the logicistic and set-theoretical paradigm', pp. 8-29) is devoted to Leśniewski's analysis of Russell's paradox; Chapter 2 ('The extensions of concepts and other sets', pp. 29-59) centres on the passages of *O podstawach matematyki* (*On the Foundations of Mathematics*, 1927-1931) containing Leśniewski's attack against Frege, Zermelo and Russell's 'unintuitive' way-outs, Leśniewski's criticism of the notion of distributive and empty class, of Russell and Whitehead's no-class theory, and of the notion of the extension of a concept in Frege. Chapter 3 (pp. 59-109) discusses Frege's 1895 criticism of Schröder and Leśniewski's reading of it, and is rounded off by a comparison of Schröder, Frege and Leśniewski on names, empty names and of Frege's and Leśniewski's 'extensionalist attitude' from a logicistic point of view (pp. 101-2).

Gessler quite literally follows Leśniewski as a reader of Frege. It is mainly on the basis of those passages of Chapter II and III of *On the Foundations of Mathematics* in which Leśniewski mentions Frege, that Gessler compares Leśniewski's work with Frege's and places it in its general context at the beginning of the 20th century. Many of these passages (sometimes exceeding a whole page) are transcribed or paraphrased in Chapter 2, and occupy in fact great part of it, without a real analysis or evaluation being offered, either from the systematic or the historical point of view. The elucidations and the examples given throughout the book are from Leśniewski himself (although it is sometimes unclear that this is so, see e.g. the example of the segment AB at p. 88 without reference to the source). Faced with passages in which Leśniewski confesses not to understand what Frege's 'extension of a concept' is (p. 46), Gessler's reminder that what we observe here is Leśniewski's radically critical attitude towards Frege is unhelpful. One would rather be interested in knowing whether this is just psychological stubbornness or there is, say, a methodological lesson to be learned about refusing *ad hoc* solutions in foundational enterprises. Also interesting would be to be told more on how Frege and Leśniewski relate from the perspective of the strong mereological tradition lying behind Leśniewski's notion of collective class - the tradition of

Bolzano, Twardowski and Husserl (to say nothing of the millennia-old tradition from Antiquity).

In other parts of the book Gessler does go somewhat beyond a superficial examination of the Leśniewskian passages just mentioned, like in Section 2 of Chapter 2 on the no class theory (pp. 50 and ff); in Chapter 1, where she integrates Leśniewski's 1914 analysis of Russell's antinomy with that of *O podstawach* and with the one presented by Sobociński; and in Chapter 3 where she offers some general information on Schröder's views and formal transcriptions of the steps of Leśniewski's informal proofs in Leśniewski's Mereology (like she does elsewhere in this work).

In the last 8 pages a Leśniewskian *pendant* of Frege's Basic Law V and a sketch of how arithmetic can be constructed in Leśniewski's logic are given. This part is interesting, but adds nothing to previously published work, i.e. Gessler's own 'Abstraction and Nominalisation in Leśniewski's Ontology' and Joray's 'A New Path to the Logicist Construction of Numbers' both in Joray, *Contemporary Perspectives on Logicism and the Foundation of Mathematics* (same series): 63-82 and 147-165, and both in turn based on Gessler, Joray & Dégrange's 'Une construction de l'arithmétique de Peano' in id., *Le logicisme catégoriel* (same series) 2005: 72-137, in turn based on Canty's dissertation *Leśniewski's Ontology and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem* (1967). As to the literature Gessler uses, in a booklet with a focus as small as this – Leśniewski's criticism of Frege – one would expect to find the whole literature relevant to the subject, but, surprisingly, the bibliography contains neither Geach's 'On Frege's Way Out' *Mind* 65 (1956), 408-409 nor one of the most important recent contributions, Woleński's 'The reception of Frege in Poland' (this journal, 25, 2004, 37-51).

Perhaps an advancement of scholarly research on Leśniewski is not what should be expected from a volume in a series that purports to be an introduction to Leśniewski (cf. the title above). But Gessler obviously writes for an audience that is already well conversant with Leśniewski's terminology and technicalities, so the book is hardly introductory in this sense. Moreover, for an introduction to Leśniewski's relationship to Frege this book has far too much emphasis on their different views on classes, as if this were all there is to know. A reader of this book might have serious difficulties believing that Frege arguably exerted the strongest influence upon the edification of Leśniewski's systems. So one is offered little help with understanding in full the significance of Leśniewski's profound admiration for Frege, which – in the light of Leśniewski's extremely trenchant critical judgementsⁱ – was something exceptional indeed.

ⁱ 'I inform you /discreetly/ that *Przegląd Filozoficzny* doesn't have many papers of any real worth in the editorial office. Warsaw coryphaes write little, being afraid of Leśniewski!/although the 'scourge of God' has also risen upon him, in the person of his pupil - Tajtelbaum [Tarski]' (Marjan Borowski to Kazimierz Twardowski, 24.2.1922, transl. by Arianna Betti and Jennifer Smith, *Polish Philosophy Page*, <http://segr-did2.fmag.unict.it/~polphil/polphil/Lesnie/LesnieDoc.html>)