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## CHATEAUBRIAND'S VIEW OF TRUTH AS IDENTIFICATION. SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

DIRK GREIMANN

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Federal University of Santa Maria*  
*Campus Universitário, Km 9, Camobi*  
*97150-900 SANTA MARIA, RS*  
*BRAZIL*

*greimann@dirk-greimann.de*

**Abstract:** Chateaubriand's view of truth as identification is based on the assumption that there is a close parallelism between sentences and definite descriptions with regard to their connection with reality. The paper aims to show that this parallelism does not actually obtain.

**Key-words:** Chateaubriand. Truth. Reference. Identification. Sentences. Definite descriptions.

In Part I of his opus magnum *Logical Forms*, Oswaldo Chateaubriand sketches a realist theory of truth whose core-element is what he calls “the view of truth as identification”. On this view, to be true is “to identify a state of affairs”, i.e., the truth of a sentence lies in the existence of a state of affairs (fact) that uniquely fulfills the identity-conditions for being the denotation of that sentence<sup>1</sup>. Without doubt, this view of truth is one of the most original and powerful approaches that have been proposed in the contemporary discussion about truth. It seems to me,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, Chap. 1 and Chap. 12).

however, that the conception needs further elaboration because, in its present form, it is open to some objections that have been raised against the assimilation of sentences to definite descriptions in Frege's similar conception of truth as the identification of a special object, the True. In section 1 of this paper, I shall briefly recapitulate the main ideas of Chateaubriand's conception of truth and, in section 2, I shall present the objections.

## 1

A "theory of truth", as it is understood by Chateaubriand, is a theory of the relation between statements (sentences, propositions) and reality. According to the "view of truth as description", which goes back at least to Plato, this relation is a kind of description: just as names, predicates and other subsentential expressions are used to describe objects, properties of objects, relations between objects, and so on, so too statements are used to describe states of affairs, situations and the like. To be true is, on this view, to describe something real, namely, an obtaining state of affairs.

The view of truth as description is rejected by Chateaubriand because it is unable to account for false statements: there is nothing which is described by false statements. To overcome this difficulty, which is a variant of Plato's problem of non-being, one might postulate merely possible (and impossible) state of affairs and say that a true statement describes an actual state of affairs and a false statement a merely possible (or impossible) one. However, a more natural solution to this problem would be, Chateaubriand suggests, to drop the view of truth as description altogether and to construe the connection between a statement and reality on the model between a definite description and reality. This approach leads to the view of truth as identification, which is guided by the following intuition:

My view ... is that what is involved in truth is *identification* and that the connection that statements have to reality is similar to the connection that definite descriptions have to reality. A statement is true when it identifies a state of affairs that is a combination of properties and objects or properties and properties; it is not true when it does not identify a state of affairs. It is false when its predicate negation identifies a state of affairs; otherwise, it is neither true nor false<sup>2</sup>.

The main advantage Chateaubriand claims for his approach is that it captures the realist “idea of truth as being” according to which what is true is what is real, without falling victim to the problem of non-being. For, according to the view of truth as identification, the truth of a statement lies in the existence of a corresponding state of affairs<sup>3</sup>.

## 2

This view of truth as identification is based on the assumption that there is a close parallelism between sentences and definite descriptions with regard to their connection with reality. The parallelism is supposed to be that (i) both sentences and definite descriptions are used to refer to something<sup>4</sup>, (ii) both sentences and definite description may have a referent (denotation)<sup>5</sup>, (iii) both sentences and definite descriptions are “identifiers”, i.e., they have a sense that determines a unique entity as their referent<sup>6</sup>, and (iv) both sentences and definite descriptions may lack a referent (denotation) when there is nothing that fulfills the corresponding conditions for being the reference of a sentence or a definite description<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Chateaubriand (2001, p. 57).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, pp. 57 f. and pp. 409 ff.).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, p. 57).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, pp. 57 f.).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, pp. 48, 68 fn. 4, 71 fn. 12).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Chateaubriand (2001, pp. 57 f.).

There is, however, considerable evidence that the alleged parallelism between sentences and definite descriptions does not actually obtain. This is shown by the following objections against the assumptions (i) to (iii) which are partly analogous to the objections that have been made against the Fregean conception of sentences as singular terms denoting truth-values<sup>8</sup>.

Ad (i). Obviously, sentences and definite descriptions belong to different pragmatic categories: whereas definite descriptions are used to refer to something<sup>9</sup>, sentences are used to assert something, and just as definite descriptions cannot be used to assert something, so too sentences cannot be used to refer to something.

If sentences could be used to refer to something, then expressions of the form ‘Snow is white = (3 = 3)’ or ‘Snow is white is the referent of “Snow is white”’ would have to be well-formed and significant, but clearly they are not. In order to refer to a state of affairs, we must rather use a definite description of the form ‘the state of affairs that *p*’.

Ad (ii). Semantically, definite descriptions belong to the category of names, i.e., they are expressions that stand in the name-bearer-relation to reality<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the name ‘Frege’ is a name of Frege, and the definite description ‘the first dog born on a ship’ is a name of the first dog born on a ship.

One might assume that predicates like ‘is white’ belong to the semantic category of names, too<sup>11</sup>. In this case, predicates are conceived of as a species of names, say, as names of properties. This approach leads

<sup>8</sup> For an overview, see Greimann (2000, p. 214).

<sup>9</sup> I am ignoring here the “attributive” use of definite descriptions. For details, see Donnellan (1966, p. 285 ff.).

<sup>10</sup> I am ignoring the “attributive” use of definite descriptions again.

<sup>11</sup> It is clear that predicates do not belong to the syntactic category of names, i.e., they do not have the syntactic properties of expressions like ‘Frege’.

to the platonic view that, just as 'Frege' is a name of Frege, so 'is white' is a name of whiteness. On this analysis, the sentence 'Snow is white' expresses that the object denoted by 'snow' possesses the property denoted by 'is white'.

For analogous reasons, the assumption that sentences belong to the semantic category of names implies that sentences are also a species of names, namely, names of truth-values or of states of affairs or the like. This *assimilation* of sentences to names, which has often been criticized as a fatal step in Frege's construction of logic<sup>12</sup>, is not acceptable, however. The problem is not that there is no appropriate category of entities of which sentences might be names; rather, the problem is that it does not make sense to consider sentences as names of something. Sentences do not stand in the name-bearer-relation to anything simply because they are not used and cannot be used to name something<sup>13</sup>. Definite descriptions are, therefore, the wrong model to analyze the relationship between sentences and reality.

Ad (iii). A semantic feature of definite descriptions is that there are identity criteria for being their referent. Thus, the definite description 'the first dog born on a ship' is associated with identity criteria that determine for every object  $x$  whether  $x$  is its referent, i.e., whether the sentence ' $x$  = the first dog born on a ship' is true. These criteria are that  $x$  is a dog, that  $x$  was born on a ship and that there is not another dog  $y$  such that  $y$  was also born on a ship and  $y$  is older than  $x$ .

Chateaubriand's view of truth as identification does not necessarily presuppose that sentences *refer* to something, but it does necessarily

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<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Dummett (1973, pp. 7, 184, 196).

<sup>13</sup> To this it might be objected that in modern logic it is common practice to ascribe a "denotation" to a sentence. This is true, but it does not imply that according to modern logic a sentence refers to its denotation. For a sentence to have a denotation in the sense of modern logic means to be true or false, not to stand in the name-bearer-relation to a certain object.

presuppose that sentences *identify* something in the sense that they too are associated with identity-criteria that determine to what entities in the world sentences are related. This assumption, however, seems to be doubtful, for two reasons.

a) Suppose that sentences could be used to refer to something, and, accordingly, that sentences like ‘ $x = \text{snow is white}$ ’ were well-formed. There are obviously no semantic facts determining what the truth-conditions of such sentences are; in particular, the sense of ‘Snow is white’ does not provide sentences of the form ‘ $x = \text{snow is white}$ ’ with clear truth-conditions. If sentences refer to their truth-values, then ‘Snow is white =  $(3 = 3)$ ’ is true, and if sentences refer to states of affairs, then it is false. Without saying to what kind of entities sentences are supposed to refer, the question whether ‘Snow is white =  $(3 = 3)$ ’ is true or false obviously has no answer. This implies, however, that sentences do not *identify* anything.

b) According to the Russell-Quine analysis, a sentence containing a definite description like ‘The first dog born on a ship was male’ refers, not to a particular object – say, Fido – but to all objects. The sentence says that among all objects there is one and only one that satisfies such and such conditions. Analogously, one could say that the sentences ‘The first dog born on a ship was male’ does not refer to (or identifies) a singular state of affairs, but refers to all states of affairs and says that among these states of affairs there is one whose content is that the first dog born on ship was male. In this case, all sentences have the same reference, namely, the totality of all states of affairs. Now, the problem is that there seems to be no semantic fact that decides whether sentences refer to a unique state of affairs or to all. The reference of sentences is indeterminate and for this reason it seems to be highly questionable that sentences are associated with identity criteria that single out a unique entity as their wordly relatum.

To overcome the above-mentioned objections, it must be made clear what exactly it is supposed to mean that a sentence “identifies” a

state of affairs. As far as I can see, this is an important task left to be done in Chateaubriand's work on truth.

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