

CDD: 160

## **THE REFERRING FUNCTION OF STATEMENTS: REPLY TO DIRK GREIMANN**

OSWALDO CHATEAUBRIAND

*Department of Philosophy*  
*Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro*  
*Rua Marquês de São Vicente, 225, Gávea*  
*22453-900 RIO DE JANEIRO, RJ*  
*BRAZIL*

*oswaldo@fil.puc-rio.br*

**Abstract:** In §1 I discuss the pragmatic and semantic objections that Dirk raises against the claim that sentences (or statements) refer to states of affairs. In §2 I explain in which sense I maintain that true sentences identify states of affairs.

**Key-words:** Reference. Identification. Truth. Description.

Dirk raises several objections to my assimilation of sentences to definite descriptions and concludes that in order to overcome his objections “it must be made clear what exactly it is supposed to mean that a sentence “identifies” a state of affairs.” I will discuss his objections in turn.

### **1. SENTENCES AND DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS**

Dirk says:

Obviously, sentences and definite descriptions belong to different pragmatic categories: whereas definite descriptions are used to refer to something, 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. (p. 82)

It seems to me that this view of sentences and definite descriptions is a bit simplistic, for it is quite clear that sentences are used for all sorts of things aside from making assertions, and that definite descriptions also have other uses aside from referring to things.

Thus, as Dirk well knows, sentences are used to give orders, ask questions, entertain possibilities and impossibilities, make assumptions, promises, pleas, pledges, excuses, etc. I maintain that they are also used to refer to aspects of the world.

Julia comes looking for my wife and I say 'She's at the pool'. It is true that I made an assertion, but I also referred to some aspect of the world. Julia is not going to go looking for my wife in the dining room, but will look for her at the pool. Why? Because with my statement I meant to refer to a state of affairs of my wife being at the pool. One might argue that what made Julia go looking for my wife at the pool is that I referred to the pool by means of the description 'the pool'. But this is obviously incorrect, because if I say 'She's not at the pool' I am also referring to the pool by the description 'the pool' and Julia would not have gone looking for her at the pool. One can say, of course, that what made Julia look for my wife at the pool was my *assertion* that she is at the pool *together with* the fact that 'the pool' refers to the pool, 'she' refers to my wife and 'is at' refers to a spatio-temporal relation. True enough, but precisely because of this my assertion that she is at the pool *refers* to her being at the pool.

Take another example. Suppose that one of my colleagues hit a student over the head with a chair, and that in another context I say 'He did something crazy'. A natural response to this is 'What are you referring to?' And the reply (equally natural) is 'I am referring to his hitting a student over the head with a chair'. Dirk claims that whereas the description 'the fact that he hit a student over the head with a chair'

refers to a fact, neither my original statement 'He did something crazy' nor the statement 'He hit a student over the head with a chair' do. I just don't see why not.

Let us look at descriptions now. We can certainly use a description to call someone, although as in the case of proper names it may depend on the tone of voice. A coach calling players for a game may say 'the first in line!', 'the third in line!', 'the last in line!', just as he may say 'John!', 'Peter!', 'Bob!', or (pointing) 'you!', 'you!', 'you!'. More importantly however, I can use descriptions to make assertions. You ask 'Who owns the shop?' and I reply 'The guy in the corner'. It is true that I am referring to someone, but I am also making an assertion.

Another point that Dirk makes in this connection is that a sentence like

Snow is white is the referent of 'Snow is white'

is neither "well-formed" nor "significant". Maybe so, but

'Snow is white' refers to snow being white,

and

that snow is white is what 'Snow is white' refers to,

seem to me well formed and significant, and both say that 'Snow is white' *refers to something*.

I do agree with Dirk that placing an identity sign between sentences is quite odd, but I also think that placing identity signs between descriptions is odd. Only logicians and (some) philosophers would write something like

the guy in the corner = the guy who owns the shop,

and if they mean that the guy in the corner is the owner of the shop, then they are writing the wrong thing – as I argue at length in Chapter 3 of my book<sup>1</sup>. One can say

the guy in the corner is the same as the guy who owns the shop,

but one can also say

snow being white is the same as snow reflecting light of such and such wave lengths.

In p. 83 Dirk formulates his objection in a different way as a *semantic* objection rather than as a *pragmatic* objection. He says:

... 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.

I did not claim that sentences are *names*, however. Names for me are words that get introduced into the language by more or less arbitrary decisions to the effect that these words will stand for something: objects, properties, actions, etc<sup>2</sup>. One of the characteristics of both sentences and descriptions is that they have *logical structure* and their referring properties are partly a function of their structure. Thus, whereas sentences are not names in the sense that I just mentioned, I have already argued that they *can be (and are) used to refer* to something.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also in this connection §3 of my reply to Marco Ruffino.

<sup>2</sup> In Chapter 11 (pp. 381-88) I discuss the question of proper names and of natural kind names (which for me are names of properties) from this perspective and make connections with Kripke's views in *Naming and Necessity*.

## 2. IDENTIFICATION

Several of Dirk's objections are related to his concluding question concerning the notion of identification for sentences. As a matter of fact, I do not claim that *sentences* identify states of affairs in a direct way, but that statements and propositions (as well as some other things) do – but this will not affect our discussion.

Dirk agrees with me that there are identity criteria for the referents of definite descriptions but disagrees that there are identity criteria for the referents of sentences. What are the identity criteria for a definite description? Dirk says:

... 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 such that  $y$  is older than  $x$ . (p. 83)

He then objects:

Suppose that sentences could be used to refer to something and, accordingly, that sentences like ' $x =$  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 ' $x =$  snow is white' with clear truth-conditions. (p. 84)

Strictly speaking though, if we are talking about English, then neither sentences of the form

(1)  $x =$  the first dog born on a ship

nor sentences of the form

(2)  $x =$  snow is white

are well formed. What are well formed in English are sentences of the form

(3)  $x$  is the first dog born on a ship

and sentences of the form

(4)  $x$  is identical to the first dog born on a ship,

although it is not so easy to find English speakers who would use sentences like (4) over sentences like (3)<sup>3</sup>.

In any case, the view I defend in my book and in the *Synthese* paper on descriptions is that what is expressed by (3) is a complex *predicate* which can be formulated in logical notation as

(5)  $[x$  is a dog &  $x$  was born on a ship &  $\forall y((y$  is a dog &  $y$  was born on a ship)  $\rightarrow x$  is older than  $y)](x)$ .

The identity conditions that Dirk gives are precisely the identity conditions that must be satisfied for this predicate to apply to an object.

One can say, and I do, that those identity conditions are also conditions for the *singular term*

(6) the first dog born on a ship

or, in logical notation

(7)  $\iota x(x$  is a dog &  $x$  was born on a ship &  $\forall y((y$  is a dog &  $y$  was born on a ship)  $\rightarrow x$  is older than  $y))$ ,

to refer to (or denote) an object.

---

<sup>3</sup> Suppose that Fido is the first dog born on a ship. *Who* would say 'Fido is identical to the first dog born on a ship'?

Let us take the sentence

(8) Snow is white

now. The question that Dirk asks is: What are the conditions for (8) identifying a state of affairs? Consider the predicate (see p. 378):

(9)  $[Z \text{ is the property white} \ \& \ x \text{ is snow} \ \& \ Z \text{ applies to } x](\langle Z, x \rangle)$

This predicate identifies a state of affairs  $\langle Z, x \rangle$  just in case  $Z$  is the property white,  $x$  is snow and  $Z$  applies to  $x$ . If I were now asked whether milk being white is the same state of affairs as snow being white, I would confidently say that it is not because milk is not snow; and if I were asked whether snow being cold is the same state of affairs as snow being white, I would say that it is not because coldness is not the same as whiteness; and if I were asked whether blood being red is the same state of affairs as snow being white, I would say that it is not because redness is not whiteness and blood is not snow. I would not say either

(10) milk is white  $\neq$  snow is white,

or

(11) snow is cold  $\neq$  snow is white,

or

(12) blood is red  $\neq$  snow is white,

because they are bad English. But I would say

(10') milk being white is not the same as snow being white,

(11') snow being cold is not the same as snow being white,

(12') blood being red is not the same as snow being white.

In Chapter 12 (p. 420) I consider a variation on the previous idea for propositions. Instead of (9) let us take

(9\*) [Z is the property white & x is snow & Z applies to x](Z, x).

Instead of being a predicate that identifies the state of affairs of snow being white, (9\*) is a relation that holds between snow and whiteness just in case snow is white. Since snow *is* white, (9\*) applies to the pair (whiteness, snow) and *cannot* apply to anything else. Thus (9\*) *identifies* the pair of a property and a substance (say) that has this property. Now, this substance *snow* having this property *whiteness* is undoubtedly an *aspect of* the world, or a *state of* the world, or a *state of affairs in* the world. So even if we do not attribute an ontological unity beyond their constituents to states of affairs, it still makes sense to talk of propositions or statements as having an identifying function.

I do not mean to imply by the previous discussion that there are no problems with my conception of truth as identification, but I do not think that Dirk's considerations about language use show that there is anything especially problematic in saying that true statements refer to (or identify) aspects of the world.