

## DISCUSSION

assurance that comes from reliable method is in the case of general semantics the assurance that comes from knowing *how* the frame of thought in which we evaluate contributes and shapes our evaluations. And this is what Professor Whitehead and Mrs. Langer have in mind in tracing the history of the way of thought that we call science. By showing that its generative ideas and its consequences in the canons of meaning and nonsense in language can direct as well as limit our investigations, they take us to the very center of our blindness. They ask us to extensionalize in earnest.

## THE 'IS' OF IDENTITY IN DEFINITIONS

LEONARD GREENBERG\*

THE CONTROVERSY over the question of whether or not analytical, or aristotelian, definitions are statements which can be true or false is one of our few heritages from the Middle Ages which still retains its vitality. Markedly nominalist in temper as our times are, they have not yet witnessed the emergence of any definitive nominalist solution of this crucial issue, on which hinges perhaps the entire character of our approach to the art of acquiring knowledge of the world. Those who favor a semantic treatment of definition say that definitions are merely agreements to use a certain word in a certain way; but the view that they are statements which reveal the nature of what is defined still persists. There are certain difficulties with this latter view, however, which in my opinion make it no longer tenable.

Let us imagine that while uttering the definition, 'man is a rational animal,' we halt just after having said the word 'is,' and ask ourselves, '*What is . . . ?*' The posing of this question in such a way might seem rather curious in that it is asked at a time when the definer is already on his way toward answering it; but the expression, 'man is. . .,' is in itself some sort of statement—a statement which contains as its 'verb' the copula 'is,' and which requires a 'subject' to which that 'verb' may refer. Just as ordinary verbs such as 'walk' and 'run' imply the presence of some entity which does the 'walking' and 'running,' the copula 'is' implies the presence of something which can, so to speak, 'do the being.' Now, in our definition we cannot be saying that the *word* 'man' is this something, that the *word* 'man' is a rational animal; the question therefore arises, *what* does the definition say 'is a rational animal?'—and our halting of the statement in mid-utterance is thus justified.

Imagine that during a conversation some sudden noise blots out part of a statement your companion is making, so that you hear only '. . . is a slab-sided baboon.' Naturally, you would immediately feel the necessity of inquiring, '*What is a slab-sided baboon?*' Now imagine further that the beginning

---

\* Mr. Greenberg is a student of philosophy at Roosevelt College, Chicago.

of his reply to your question is *again* blotted out, and that this time he gets only as far as '. . . is a . . .' before you quickly catch him up and, without waiting for the rest of his statement, ask again, 'yes, but *what* did you say ". . . is a . . .?" In this second case he would have employed *only* the 'is' of identity, and yet it would have been immediately clear that the 'is' had been said of *something*—something which was necessary, and yet not present, and without which both the 'is' and what followed it hung in the air, so to speak, and did not form a meaningful statement. It is this 'something' which is missing in the definition, 'Man is a rational animal,' and as it stands, therefore, that definition is meaningless.

A glance at the sort of 'somethings' of which the 'is' in our definition could be saying that they 'are a rational animal' will make this assertion clearer. As we have already seen, it cannot be the word 'man' itself of which the 'is' is being said. The 'is,' therefore, can only be referring, not to the word, but to its meaning. We will assume that as the word is uttered the mental image 'animated bi-ped' comes to mind. Our definition will then read, 'Man (animated biped) is a rational animal.' Now if the external reality which this image represents has *only* the characteristics 'animated' and 'two-footed' the statement will be false, for neither 'animation' nor 'two-footedness' is in itself 'rational,' or 'animal.' The external reality, then, must contain *other* features in order to make the statement true. What are these features? Plainly, as long as the features which we add to our external reality continue to be *different* from those symbolized by the words 'rational' and 'animal' the statement will remain untrue; for the same criticism will apply to the newly added features as originally applied to 'animated,' and 'two-footed.' Whatever may be the features which we choose to include in our mental representation, or in what it represents, it will not be true that '*it*' is a rational animal unless '*it*' *already* possesses the characteristics of being 'rational,' and 'animal.' In fact, such statements will always take the general form, 'Something-*not*-rational-or-animal (at the time of utterance) is a rational animal.' But the word 'is' is not equivalent to 'becomes'; and a something not animal or rational before the 'is' certainly cannot be rational and animal after it. Unless its subject-meaning is 'rational animal' itself, then, the statement is either false or, as previously indicated, simply lacks a subject-meaning.

**M**OREOVER, any attempt to correct the deficiency by actually inserting the entity requisite for the 'is' can only lead to further confusion. As a *definiendum* the word 'man' ought not to have a meaning until its definition is complete. By arbitrarily attributing meaning to it *at the time of its utterance*, therefore, *we* would be giving it its meaning; and giving it its meaning, indeed, while it is still in the process of being given a meaning by the statement; in effect, *we* would be defining the word before it has been defined. While the in-

## DISCUSSION

sertion in question would 'satisfy' the 'is' well enough, then, it would do so only at the cost of entangling the statement in the vicious circularity of *using* meaning X to get meaning X, thereby undermining the definitory character of the statement. Of course, a definition must not use meaning Y to get meaning X either, for that would be to employ a word in one sense in order to give it another. But whether X or Y is inserted the circularity introduced along with them remains. And whatever meaning and truth is secured for our definition by inserting 'rational animal' as its subject-entity cannot but be disastrously compromised thereby.

But leaving aside the question of circularity for the moment, the 'insertion' can in any case do little for the statement. At the utmost it merely transforms the latter from a statement with a concealed 'blank' in it into a statement which does not even pretend to say anything. Whatever the sort of 'meaning' or 'truth' a tautology may be capable of containing—I make no assertions either way in respect to that—it certainly has this deficiency, that it is a statement which *cannot be true or false* but can only be true; and the reduction of aristotelian definitions to tautology, if carried out by the 'insertion' spoken of, would therefore conclusively settle the question with which we began this inquiry.

Allowing it every possible benefit of the doubt, then, the statement nevertheless remains in almost as bad case as it was when there was no entity to which its copula could refer. And there is no escape between these two evils. Revised, the statement retains meaning and truth not only at the cost of no longer being a definition, but at the cost of no longer being a real statement. Left as it stands, on the other hand, it sinks into that state of meaninglessness which lack of a subject-entity confers on it. Clearly this difficulty is insoluble; insoluble in that internal application of the 'is' of identity to the subject-word results in the necessity of that word's having a meaning at a time when it *also* ought *not* to have a meaning; insoluble again in that the only meaning which *can* be inserted to 'satisfy' the copula is such that at best the statement can never express genuine knowledge. Condemned as they are to be either meaningless or circular-tautological, statements of this type are wholly unable to perform the functions for which they are intended. Only a form of definition which eliminates the 'is' of identity can hope to avoid the confusion inherent in the use of that word.