

Arbitrary Reference

1. Quick quiz. Let John be an arbitrary French man. (a) Is John French? (b) Is John Human? (c) Is John Tim Williamson? (d) Is John Jacques Chirac?
2. We think that we use 'John' here to refer to a particular French man. Which one? We do not know, because the reference was fixed *arbitrarily*. We propose:

There is such a thing as *arbitrary reference*; we can *arbitrarily* fix the reference of our words.

3. We do not know who John is. In fact we *cannot* know who John is. But there is, we claim, a fact of the matter about who he is. And we do know some things about him.
4. So what if we can – we would never do such a thing. But we think we actually do it, and sometimes have to do it (2nd half).
5. Objections:

- a. We cannot refer in this way, because there are necessary conditions on reference which we do not satisfy. Example: to refer to *a*, a speaker must stand in an appropriate causal connection to *a*.

Change the example.

- b. If we do succeed in referring to a particular French man, something must determine who it is. What?

Nothing. (It is not speaker intentions.)

- c. Then meaning does not supervene on use.

That's right.

- d. So why can't we know who John is?

Because nothing determines who John is; because it makes no non-semantic difference to the world.

- e. If we do succeed in referring, it cannot be to a particular French man: we might do this instead: "Let John be a French man, no particular one."

'Particular' here qualifies the way of fixing the reference. We can do it either *particularly* or *arbitrarily*. Compare: "In no particular order, the winners are...".

- f. If we do refer, it is to a special kind of thing – an *arbitrary French man*.

An arbitrary French man is just a French man who has been referred to arbitrarily. Compare: making an intentional mistake.

6. An actual case of arbitrary reference: Instantial reasoning.

Let n be a multiple of 4. Since n is a multiple of 4, $n = 4k$ for some k . So $n = 2(2k)$. So $n = 2k'$ for some k' . So n is even. So every multiple of 4 is even.

Us: ' n ' refers to a particular multiple of 4 (it could be 28). We can take the last step because we've proved haven't appealed to any facts about n that aren't true of all multiples of 4 (in fact, we don't know any!). if $\vdash f(n)$ then $\vdash \forall x f(x)$, if $\vdash p$ then $\vdash \Box p$

Fine: ' n ' refers to a special kind of thing – an arbitrary multiple of 4. It has all and only the properties that every multiple of 4 has. That is why we can take the last step in this proof.

Problems: (complicated)

It is a multiple of 4, but not in the same sense. Arb 1-10.

Two kinds of properties – generic conditions, classical conditions.

There is only one (or else he has to agree with us). Then why 'let a be an arbitrary person', rather than 'the'?

Let a be a number and b be a number greater than a . He claims that a and b are both arbitrary numbers, but distinct ones. They have the same range, but different dependency relations. b depends on a , but not vice-versa.

Variable view: ' n ' is a variable. Let n be a multiple of 4. Since n is a multiple of 4, $n = 4k$ for some k . So $n = 2(2k)$. So $n = 2k'$ for some k' . So n is even. So every multiple of 4 is even.

Problem:

Each line in the proof expresses a generalisation – that seems wrong; it also makes it strange that we take the last step in the proof.

King: ' n ' is a context dependent quantifier. Let n be a multiple of 4. Since n is a multiple of 4, $n = 4k$ for some k . So $n = 2(2k)$. So $n = 2k'$ for some k' . So n is even. So every multiple of 4 is even.

Problem:

Each line in the proof expresses a generalisation – that seems wrong; it also makes it strange that we take the last step in the proof.

7. Another case of arbitrary reference?: Vagueness

Proposal: the reference of 'tall' was fixed arbitrarily. Thus 'tall' refers to a particular property, and has a sharp cut-off point. But we do not and cannot know which property, and hence we do not and cannot know where the cut-off point is. But we do know some things about it: an 8ft man is above it; a 3ft man is below it.

Why fix the reference in this way? Perhaps because there is no natural choice, so would be too hard for a listener to work out which property we meant.

Note: maybe this means that the epistemic part is not what's distinctive about vagueness – is it vague who John (above) is? We have a different idea – bell curve, or infinitely arbitrary boundaries (perhaps equivalent).