

# BOOK REVIEW

---

## Fixing Reference

By IMOGEN DICKIE

Oxford University Press, 2015. x + 334 pp. £37.50.

I can't do any better than the author herself: 'This book is about how we manage to represent ordinary objects in thought and speech' (1). Ordinary objects 'are all the things you would name if you were giving a non-philosophical and non-facetious answer to the question of which things there are in a room' (27). This characterization is further developed over the course of several pages until we arrive at the idea that ordinary things are 'macroscopic objects having boundaries sufficiently precise and unity relations sufficiently strong to determine an equivalence class of [...] objects indiscriminable relative to the properties attributed by our *ordinary* thoughts' (34). An example may help here.

Consider my dog, Finnegan. He occupies a certain imprecisely bounded region of space. Within this region, there seem to be many distinct composite objects that differ from Finnegan in no way relevant to being a dog – that is, if Finnegan is a dog, so are they. (This is the central claim that generates The Problem of the Many, made famous by Peter Unger. I take it for granted in this context because the author does (31).) These 'dog-shaped' and 'dog-unified arrangements of atoms', which largely overlap with Finnegan, are called 'atomic dogs'. 'Generalizing from the case of the dog, we get the following picture of the relationship between ordinary objects and atomic ordinary objects. It is a contingent fact that an ordinary object's boundaries [...] are precise enough to determine a class of atomic ordinary objects which roughly fill them. Every atomic ordinary object is a member of exactly one such class [...]' (33). So, anything whose components fail to exhibit enough unity in order to determine a class of 'atomic objects' that are indistinguishable by means of unaided observation is not an ordinary object, and thus not the sort of thing whose representation in thought and speech will be explained. This includes clouds, mountains, puffs of smoke, forests, countries, systems of government, and theoretical entities. 'From this standpoint, the question of [how we manage to represent] non-ordinary things belongs at a later stage of investigation – a stage that will be reached only with the account of ordinary aboutness already in place – so I shall not try to address it here' (34).

So, how *do* we manage to represent ordinary objects in thought and speech? 'What makes a thought or utterance *about* a particular thing?' (1). Imogen Dickie's answer, in *Fixing Reference*, is initially presented as an approximation, which she calls REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION. 'A body of beliefs is about an object iff its means of justification converges on the object, so that, given how the beliefs are justified, the subject will be unlucky if they do not match the object and not merely lucky if they do' (2). Much of the first three chapters of the book is devoted to

unpacking, refining, and arguing for this approximate formulation of her central thesis.

An important assumption is needed to state the official version of the view: '[...] a body of ordinary beliefs is associated with what I shall call a 'proprietary' means of justification' (50). The idea of a propriety route to justification is illustrated for the case of perceptual belief and then generalized.

'[...] though you may form <that> beliefs justified by means other than uptake from perception, you will – unless there is some unusual reason not to – treat perceptual justification for <That is  $\Phi$ > beliefs as trumping non-perceptual justification. [...] Preparedness to revise <that> beliefs in the direction of the information delivered by perception – letting perceptual justification override non-perceptual – is a mark of perceptual demonstrative thought [...]. The notion of 'proprietary justification' for a body of *ordinary* < $\alpha$ > beliefs is associated with a specific 'trumping' route to justification – a route to justification for < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > beliefs such that the subject is disposed to treat justification for believing < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > generated by this route as overriding justification for believing < $\alpha$  is not  $\Phi$ > generated by any other' (51).

With this assumption in the background, we can appreciate the idea that Dickie is trying to capture with REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION: '[...] an aboutness-fixing relation does its aboutness-fixing work by putting in place a route to justification for a body of < $\alpha$ > beliefs such that if the subject *were* to form < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > beliefs justified by that means, these beliefs *would* tend to get *o*'s properties right' (57, italics in original). So, I would paraphrase the official statement of REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION as follows:

(R&J) A body of ordinary < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > beliefs is about *o* iff its proprietary means of justification is such that it eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where *o* is not  $\Phi$ .

There's a worry about circularity in the offing, and Dickie is aware of it. She spends some time discussing it (108–13) and concludes by arguing that neither side of the biconditional has explanatory priority over the other. Consequently, one might wonder whether R&J can plausibly be viewed as answering the initial question that got us going in the first place: 'What *makes* a thought or utterance about a particular thing?' (my emphasis)

A second key thesis is defended in Chapter 3, where the aim is to account for the cognitive value of recurrence in speech and thought – the sort of recurrence that guarantees sameness of reference without the help of an explicit identification. John Campbell (1987) calls reliance on this sort of recurrence 'trading on identity', and Kit Fine (2007) calls the special sort of co-reference that accompanies it 'strict co-reference' or 'strict co-representation', while Dickie uses the term 'direct coordination'. (To illustrate the phenomenon, contrast a discourse in which there are two occurrences of 'Barack', self-consciously used to make two statements about the forty-fourth President of the United States, with a discourse in which the use of 'Barack' is accompanied by a use of 'Barry'. The first discourse permits one to make inferences that the second discourse wouldn't permit one to make, unless one were to explicitly

add ‘Barack is Barry’ to the record.) According to Dickie, our justification for direct coordination can be explained by acknowledging that the mind has a ‘basic need to represent things outside itself’ (6), where ‘a basic need is a personal-level mental state which, like an intention, can guide action, but which, unlike an intention, does not have propositional content’ (100). The goal of Chapter 3 is to use R&J, along with this further claim about our basic need to represent, to offer an epistemology of direct coordination. The discussion in this chapter will be especially useful to those interested in ‘relationism’ about cognitive value. (For an excellent introduction to relationism – one that clarifies its relationship to more traditional approaches and distinguishes subtle variations on the view – see Aidan Gray (forthcoming).)

Chapter 4 applies R&J to certain puzzling cases about demonstrative thought. Chapter 5 develops an account of proper names from within the framework of R&J. Chapters 6 and 7 are about reference by description and singular thought. The book concludes with an eighth chapter about the relationship between thought and consciousness: ‘[...] to have a thought is to be in a mental state fully characterizable only as a state of a subjectively conscious subject’ (273).

*Fixing Reference* is filled with subtle distinctions, crucial methodological observations, complicated arguments, and the careful consideration of various points and counterpoints, examples and counterexamples. The resulting picture has a lot of intricate detail, and I personally find it difficult to keep the whole thing in focus all at once, which makes writing a review as short as this one is supposed to be rather challenging. In order to convey an appreciation for the complexity of Dickie’s framework, and how high the quality of argumentation in the book is, I’ll focus on the central line of thought in Chapter 3.

Dickie begins by acknowledging three possible accounts of what justifies direct coordination in thought.

The first is to say that direct coordination can provide the required basis for [trading on identity] even though it is not itself justified. [...] The second is to say that direct coordination *just is* justified: it is justified, but its positive normative status is too basic to admit of explanation. The third is to provide an account of justification for direct coordination. And that is what I suggest that recognition of the mind’s basic need to represent enables us to do. (86)

Dickie then distinguishes between ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ justification, and claims that belief formation that’s guided by the need to represent things beyond the mind confers a weak justification. ‘Guidance’ here is a technical term: ‘[...] we can say there is ‘guidance’ where there is the kind of structure described at (A)–(C), and that ‘guidance leads to goal fulfillment’ whenever a system’s (A)–(C) mechanism leads to the result described in (D)’ (97):

- (A) There is a state of the system that represents a goal.
- (B) There is a feedback mechanism generating reports on the current status of the system vis-à-vis reaching its goal.
- (C) The moves made by the system are jointly determined by the goal represented and the feedback about its current status.
- (D) The system will tend towards fulfilment of its goal iff it moves in ways that minimize the difference between its goal state and its current state.

Weak justification is upgraded to strong justification when the specific sort of guidance is mediated by an information-processing mechanism that reliably fulfils the goal. (R&J is to be understood in terms of strong justification (113).)

A need is a personal-level [non-propositional] goal-representing state. So, where a need is guiding an agent's behaviour, the need provides a reason for the behaviour. In this case, the behaviour is 'weakly justified' by the need: it is justified by the need just in virtue of being guided by it. And, just as in the case of justification by intention, a behaviour that is *weakly* justified by a need may or may not be *strongly* justified by it: a behaviour is 'strongly justified' by a need iff it is both guided by the need, and a reliable means to the need's fulfillment. (101)

One might have thought that reliable information-processing that results in directly coordinated beliefs would be enough by itself to adequately explain how direct coordination can be justified. But Dickie believes that the reliability of an information-processing mechanism can't confer a positive normative status. 'We are looking for an account of how direct coordination is *justified*. The stories about underlying information processing offer (instead) accounts of how direct coordination *happens*. We should expect the two kinds of account to be related. But let us not be fobbed off with one when we are looking for the other' (84–5). 'The information processing has normative status in virtue of (a) being guided by a motivational state of the agent, and (b) being apt to [fulfill] the motivational state that guides it' (104). With these pieces in place, we can summarize Dickie's epistemology of direct coordination as follows. The direct coordination of a body of  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  beliefs is weakly justified when the direct coordination is guided by our basic need to represent things outside the mind. The direct coordination is strongly justified when this process is carried out in such a way as to reliably fulfil the goal that our basic need represents.

To what extent does Dickie's theory improve on a 'reliabilist' information-processing account? I regret that I'm not able to critically engage with Dickie's ideas here, but I've benefitted from her thought-provoking book and imagine that you would too.<sup>1</sup>

MAHRAD ALMOTAHARI  
*University of Illinois at Chicago*  
 Chicago, IL 60607, USA  
 almotaha@uic.edu

### References

- Campbell, J. 1987. Is sense transparent. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 88: 273–92.
- Fine, K. 2007. *Semantic Relationism*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Gray, A. Forthcoming. Relational approaches to Frege's puzzle. *Philosophy Compass*.

1 Thanks to Rachel Goodman and Dilip Ninan for discussion about these and related issues.