

For a symposium on Imogen Dickie's book *Fixing Reference* to be published in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

Aboutness and Justification*

Dilip Ninan
dilip.ninan@tufts.edu
September 2016

Al believes that Marie Curie was a chemist. That is: Al has a belief he could express by saying, *Marie Curie was a chemist*. Here is a fact about Al's belief: it is *about* someone, namely Marie Curie. Betty has a belief that she could express by pointing to a particular cup and saying, *That cup is empty*. Betty's belief is also about something: the particular cup she is pointing at. These beliefs are both beliefs that are, in some sense, about objects. Let us call such beliefs *singular beliefs*. The general question Imogen Dickie addresses in *Fixing Reference* (Dickie 2015) is this: what makes it the case that a given singular belief is about the object that it is about? What makes Al's belief a belief about Marie Curie? What makes Betty's belief a belief about that particular cup?

Dickie's answer to this general question is not easy to summarize quickly, but the rough idea is that the object that a singular belief is about is the one that plays a certain role in the justification of that belief. Aboutness is to be explained in terms of justification. This is a novel and interesting idea. But there is potential worry for how Dickie develops it. Dickie understands doxastic justification in terms of truth-conduciveness. And given the close relationship between the conditions under which a belief is true and what the belief is about, one might be concerned that her account is circular. This issue is discussed at greater length below.

Dickie adopts a broadly Fregean approach to beliefs (although this is perhaps mostly for the sake of smooth exposition). Belief (types) are individuated by propositions, where propositions are structured entities consisting of 'conceptual representations' (1, 25). Where α is a singular term, and Φ a one-place predicate, the content of the belief that a particular agent could express by uttering the sentence " α is Φ " is denoted by " $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$ ".

Dickie restricts her discussion to what she calls "*ordinary* thoughts." An *ordinary* thought is a thought about "an ordinary material thing of the kind standardly made available by perceptual contact with such a thing; understanding of a proper name referring to it; or grasp of a mundane description that it satisfies" (22–23). This cup, Marie Curie, and the man who broke the bank at

*For help with this material, thanks to Mahrhad Almotahari and Ram Neta.

Monte Carlo are in; numbers, electrons, and the centre of mass of the universe are out.

The restriction to *ordinary* thoughts struck me as somewhat surprising. Causal theories of aboutness seem to be more or less automatically restricted to thoughts about concrete objects, given that *abstracta* do not enter into causal relations. One potential advantage of approaching aboutness via justification, I would have thought, is that such an approach promises greater generality, since justification is a general property of beliefs of all kinds. While numbers presumably do not cause beliefs about numbers, numbers may nevertheless play a role in the justification of beliefs about numbers. Be that as it may, beliefs about *abstracta* are not within Dickie's ambit.

In any case, using the above notation and terminology, we can state a simplified version of one of the central principles of Dickie's project (see p. 57):

REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION (*DN's simplified version*):

If S has an *ordinary* belief whose content is $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$, then S 's belief is about o iff: if S has rationality-securing justification for her belief, then this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ .

Chapter 2 of *Fixing Reference* contains a lengthy argument for a principle similar to this one from, among other things, a principle connecting aboutness and truth, and a principle connecting truth and justification.

But one thing to note is that there is something of a disconnect between the question we initially posed and the answer on offer. The question we posed initially was this: what *makes it the case* that a particular singular belief B is about the object o that it is about? That this is Dickie's question is clear:

What *makes* a thought... *about* a particular ordinary thing? (1)
(emphasis added to *makes*)¹

But the truth of REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION is compatible with it being the case that what makes it the case that a singular belief B is about o has nothing to do with how B is justified. The truth of a biconditional – even the necessary truth of a biconditional – is compatible with its being the case that neither side of the biconditional explains the other. The idea that claims of necessary equivalence and claims of explanation are distinct is familiar. Necessarily, the singleton set of Socrates exists iff Socrates exists. This claim is presumably true, but its truth leaves open which (if either) side of the biconditional explains the other, i.e. which (if either) side *makes it the case* that the other side holds.

Dickie is aware of these points, and she takes up the issue of explanation in §3.5 of *Fixing Reference*. Dickie considers three possible ways of understanding

¹More evidence that this is Dickie's question: in discussing the aboutness of 'proper-name-based' thoughts, Dickie argues that even if we could come up with a counterexample-free causal theory of such thoughts, "we would still need to establish that [the relevant causal relation] is the aboutness-fixing relation, rather than just a relation that happens to hold whenever there is proper-name-based aboutness" (170). And the causal theory is even initially stated using the *in virtue of* locution, rather than in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions (157).

REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION: on the first, the left-hand side of the biconditional is understood as explaining the right-hand side, but not conversely; on the second, the right-hand side is understood as explaining the left-hand side, but not conversely; on the third, each side explains the other.

It seems to me that the very project Dickie is engaged in rules out the first reading: if our question is what makes it the case that a particular singular belief is about the object that it is about, then a principle that tells us what makes it the case that a singular belief has the justification conditions that it has will simply fail to address our question.

That leaves us with two options: that the right-hand side of REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION explains the left-hand side, but not conversely; and that each side explains the other. Let S be an agent with a (token) belief B about o whose content is $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$. Then the first option says that (1) holds in part because (2) holds, but that the reverse is not true:

- (1) B is about o .
- (2) If S has rationality-securing justification for B , then this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ .

The second option says that (1) holds in part because (2) holds, *and* that (2) holds in part because (1) holds. I will first argue that the first option is untenable, and then consider the second option.

It is worth mentioning that the type of explanation at issue here appears to be what has sometimes been called *metaphysical explanation* in the recent literature. This is often held to be a relation between facts, and is associated with a variety of natural language expressions and constructions: *grounds, in virtue of, because, makes it the case that, etc.*²

According to the first option, (1) holds in part because (2) holds, but the reverse is not true. Now consider the *explanans* (2) here, which says that in order for j to count as rationality-securing justification for B , j must eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ . And let us ask: why is this the case? Why must j eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ in order to count as rationality-securing justification for B ?

Presumably, at least part of the explanation here is that, given the nature of B , circumstances where o is not Φ are circumstances at which B is not *true*. That is, (2) holds in part because B has the truth-conditions that it has – it holds in part because:

- (3) For all circumstances σ , B is true at σ iff o is Φ at σ .³

²See, for example, Schaffer (2009), Rosen (2010), and Fine (2012).

³Dickie herself appears to be committed to the claim that (2) holds in part because of (3), since her argument for REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION depends on, among other things, this claim:

TRUTH AND JUSTIFICATION

Justification that secures the rationality of a belief eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where the belief is not true. (44)

Now suppose we keep going and ask: why does (3) hold? Why is that B is true at a circumstance iff o is Φ ? Why does B 's truth depend on how things are with o rather than with how things are with some object o' that is distinct from o ? I, for one, am at least tempted to answer this question by saying: this is in part because B is about o (and not about o'). That is, it seems to me that (3) holds in part because (4) holds:

(4) B is about o .⁴

But (4), of course, is identical to (1), our initial *explanandum*.

We have an explanatory circle here. Where $x \succ y$ means x holds in part because y holds, we have:

(1) \succ (2) \succ (3) \succ (4)

Since (1) = (4), we have:

(1) \succ (2) \succ (3) \succ (1)

Thus, it seems that we must rule out the first option, i.e. the view that says that (1) holds in part cause (2) holds, but that the reverse is not true. We must rule this out because, *modulo* certain natural assumptions, it just seems that (2) holds in part because (1) holds. So only the second option – which says that (1) holds in part because of (2) and *vice-versa* – remains.

But the second option is, on its face, worrisome – worrisome because circular. In discussions of metaphysical explanation, it is often (though not invariably) assumed that \succ is irreflexive and transitive.⁵ If this is so, that would rule out the possibility of circles like the one above, since transitivity would give us (1) \succ (1), which would violate irreflexivity. But Dickie, at least, will have to reject one or more of these assumptions about the nature of explanation, since she embraces the second option, which she calls the *no-priority view* (108). ‘No-priority’ since if each side explains the other, neither is explanatorily prior to the other. But before turning to this view, I want to consider one possible way out of the foregoing argument.

Consider our claim that (3) holds in part because (4) holds. This is the claim that the fact that B is true just in case o is Φ holds in part because because B is about o . But I can envision an alternative answer to the question of why B has the truth-conditions that it does. The alternative answer says that (3) holds in part because (5) holds:

(5) The content of B is $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$, and $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$ is true iff o is Φ .

Why is B true just in case o is Φ ? Because the content of B is $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$, and $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$ is true just in case o is Φ .

Now in order for this approach to avoid the circularity worry, it must be that the explanation of (5) does not itself appeal to the fact that B is about o .

⁴The *in part* qualification is important. The full explanation of (3) presumably also involves, among other things, the fact that B is about Φ .

⁵See, for example, Rosen (2010, 115–116).

So let us suppose that this is so. Note that on the present approach, we have the following explanatory chain:

$$(1) \succ (2) \succ (3) \succ (5)$$

The problem with this approach is not that this chain is circular; we have agreed to ignore that possibility. The problem is that we can simplify this chain, and when we do, the notion of justification drops out of our story entirely. Let me explain.

If it is legitimate to appeal to (5) in an explanation of why B is about o , then it would seem that a very direct explanation of (1) is possible: B is about o simply because the content of B is $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$, and $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ is true iff o is Φ . That seems like a perfectly reasonable explanation of why B is about o . But this means we can simply delete (2) and (3) from our explanatory chain, so that, rather than the above four-element explanatory chain, we simply have: (1) \succ (5). But if we take this route, then it seems that justification no longer has any role to play in the explanation of aboutness, for (2) is the only claim above that concerns justification. This route avoids the circularity of the no-priority view only by abandoning what is distinctive about Dickie's approach to aboutness.

As an aside, it is worth noting that there is a more general question here about whether we ought to try to explain claims like (1) in terms of claims like (5) or *vice-versa*. Should we seek to explain aboutness facts in terms of content facts or *vice-versa*? Conflicting answers to this question correspond to two different broad approaches to the 'problem of intentionality.' Some approaches to the problem of intentionality are 'top-down': they attempt to explain, in the first instance, what it is for a belief to have a certain content (or what it is for an agent to have a belief with a certain content).⁶ Facts concerning what a belief is about can then be explained in terms of facts about the belief's content. Other approaches are 'bottom-up': they attempt to explain, in the first instance, what it is for a belief to be about whatever objects and relations it is about.⁷ One then explains what is for a belief to have a certain content by appealing to the already established claims about what it is for the belief to be about whatever it is about.

I take it that Dickie is adopting this second, bottom-up approach to the problem of intentionality (pp. 26–27 are relevant here). For otherwise it would seem to me that the answer to our initial question – why is B about o ? – is simply this: because the content of B is $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$, and $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ is true iff o is Φ . All the hard work will be done in explaining what makes it the case that the content of B is $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ (or in explaining what it is for an agent to have a belief with that content). But Dickie takes the hard question to be: what makes it the case that a belief is about the things it is about?

⁶See, for example, Stalnaker (1984, Ch. 1).

⁷Often this approach assumes that token beliefs are, or involve, structured representations (e.g. sentences in the 'language of thought'), and one aims to explain how the constituents of such representations are about whatever it is that they are about. See, for example, Fodor (1990, Ch. 3).

In any case, the important point for us is that it appears that the only way to hold onto Dickie’s central claim that justification explains aboutness is to adopt the no-priority view, the view which says that (1) explains (2) and (2) explains (1). Justification explains aboutness, but aboutness also explains justification. As we noted, the obvious objection to this account is that it is circular. Dickie is aware of this objection, but she argues that not all explanatory circles are problematic, and that this particular circle is of the unproblematic sort (112–113).

Dickie’s account of why this circle is unproblematic relies on some further background. First, Dickie discusses the notion of a pattern of behavior being justified by a *need*. For example, my going to parties and other social events might be justified by my need for fellowship. Dickie distinguishes between a pattern of behavior’s being *weakly justified* by a need versus its being *strongly justified* by a need. A pattern of behavior is weakly justified by a need just in case it is guided by that need; it is strongly justified by a need just in case it is guided by the need, and is a reliable means to the need’s fulfillment. Second, Dickie holds that “the mind has a basic need to represent things outside itself” (103). This latter need is “the need for cognitive focus; the need to form bodies of belief whose means of justification converges on things outside the mind” (103).⁸ So a pattern of behavior will be weakly justified by the need to represent if it is guided by that need; strongly justified if guided by that need and a reliable means of the need’s fulfillment.

So why is the circularity at issue unproblematic? Here is what Dickie says:

The most basic information-marshalling routines associated with formation and maintenance of bodies of $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ belief are guided by the mind’s need to represent things outside itself. The fact that they are guided by a need gives these moves one, thin, kind of normative status: the moves are weakly justified by the need that guides them. But, as a matter of empirical fact, these weakly justified moves tend to generate bodies of $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ belief that stand in ‘homing in’ relations to specific objects. A body of $\langle \text{That is } \Phi \rangle$ beliefs formed in the usual way on the basis of a perceptual link tends to match what the object at the end of the link is like... Given REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION, the fact that (weakly) justified moves made in maintaining a body of $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ beliefs home in on getting o ’s properties right entails that it is o that these beliefs are about. (112–113)

Dickie has more to say in the passage in question, but let us pause here, and move slowly through these points. The mind has a basic need to represent things outside of itself, i.e. a basic need to form ‘bodies of $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ beliefs.’ If the mind behaves in a way that is guided by this need, its belief-forming behavior is weakly justified. “But, as a matter of empirical fact, this behavior tends to generate bodies $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ belief that stand in ‘homing in’ relations to

⁸It is not at all obvious that ‘the mind’ is the sort of thing that has needs, nor that it should have this need in particular. But I set this worry to one side.

specific objects.” What does this mean? Well, for example, “a body of ⟨That is Φ ⟩ beliefs formed in the usual way on the basis of a perceptual link tends to match what the object at the end of the link is like.” Now what does it mean to say that a body of ⟨That is Φ ⟩ beliefs ‘tends to match’ what an object is like? Presumably, it means that, for each property (or most properties) Φ figuring in this body of beliefs, the object in question has Φ .

But it is hard to see how the final sentence in the above quotation follows from all of this. “Given REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION, the fact that (weakly) justified moves made in maintaining a body of ⟨ α is Φ ⟩ beliefs home in on getting o ’s properties right entails that it is o that these beliefs are about.” The mere fact that a body of ⟨That is Φ ⟩ beliefs tends to match what a certain object is like does not mean that those beliefs (or the behavior that generates them) “home in on getting o ’s properties right” (where o is the object at the end of the relevant perceptual link). Consider an analogy. I might produce a painting of a dog without intending to produce a painting of Rover, a dog with whom I am unacquainted. If my painting happens to look just like Rover, this doesn’t mean that I am ‘getting Rover’s properties right’. The fact that a body of ⟨That is Φ ⟩ beliefs tends to match what a certain object is like means that it is ‘getting that object’s properties right’ only if the beliefs in question are *about* that object. But I don’t see how it has yet been established that, for example, a body of ⟨That is Φ ⟩ beliefs formed on the basis of a perceptual link is about the object at the end of the link. I am not doubting that this is so; I just don’t see how that result falls out of the reasoning provided.

The crucial moves Dickie makes in defending her account from the charge of vicious circularity are not easy to follow, and this leaves one with the suspicion that the circularity at issue is a real problem for her approach. It is worth noting that alternative approaches to aboutness are less obviously susceptible to such circularity worries. If α is a proper name, then causal theories of ‘name-based thoughts’ would say that B is about o because B stands in the appropriate causal relation to o (157). The fact that a belief stands in a certain causal relation to a particular object doesn’t look ripe for explanation in terms of facts that are partially explained in terms of facts that are partially explained in terms of... the fact that B is about o . Even if we do not think that the circularity of Dickie’s approach automatically refutes it, one might think it an advantage of the causal theory that it at least allows us to stay out of these weeds.

References

- Dickie, Imogen. 2015. *Fixing Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit. 2012. “Guide to Ground.” In Fabrice Correia and Benjamin Schnieder (eds.), *Metaphysical Grounding: Understanding the Structure of Reality*, 37–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fodor, Jerry A. 1990. *A Theory of Content and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rosen, Gideon. 2010. “Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction.”

- In Bob Hale and Aviv Hoffmann (eds.), *Modality: Metaphysics, Logic, and Epistemology*, 109–136. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan. 2009. “On What Grounds What.” In David Manley, David J. Chalmers, and Ryan Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, 347–383. Oxford University Press.
- Stalnaker, Robert. 1984. *Inquiry*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.