

## Does singular thought have an epistemic essence?

What is involved in having a singular thought about an ordinary object? On the leading epistemic view, one has this capacity if and only if one has belief-forming dispositions which would reliably enable one to get its properties right (Dickie, 2015). I first argue that Dickie's official view entails surprising and unpalatable claims about either rationality or singular thought, before offering a precisification. Once we have reached that level of abstraction, it becomes difficult to see what is distinctively epistemic about the framework. If we are to tease out the delicate connection between singular thought and knowledge, we should suspend the assumption that there is a homogeneous core, present in all cases of such thought, and that it is from there that its (univocal) epistemic character derives.

### 1 Introduction

What is involved in having a singular thought about an ordinary object? We can helpfully split this into two questions, a cognitive architecture question and a metasemantic question: (i) what sorts of mental representations or abilities distinguish singular from non-singular thinking?; (ii) what success must be attributable to an exercise of such representations or abilities in order to determine, of some particular thing, that it is the object of one's thought? Recent literature on (i) has been largely dominated by appeal to 'mental files' (e.g., Recanati (2012); see Murez et al. (2020) for a recent discussion). Regarding (ii), it is increasingly common to appeal to subjects' management of 'epistemically rewarding relations' to objects (Recanati 2012). That singular thought involves occupying a distinctive *epistemic* position (albeit less distinctive than Russellian acquaintance), sometimes but not necessarily achieved via a causal-informational relation to the object, may enable us to account for apparent cases of singular thought where there is no obvious causal link running from object to thinker (Hawthorne and Manley 2012: 27–35). It may also help

us to resolve the so-called *qua* problem, by explaining how the reference-fixing relation could privilege a statue over its materially coincident lump of clay (namely, by placing the thinker in a distinctive epistemic position with respect to the former but not the latter). Finally, and perhaps most pertinently for Dickie (2015), an answer to (ii) couched in epistemic terms should enable us to understand *why it is* that certain (e.g., causal) relations put us in a position to entertain singular thoughts. “The target of this project is the question [...]: How do the relations to ordinary things that enable us to think about them do their aboutness-fixing work?” (Dickie 2017: 748).

There are good reasons to be optimistic about this general line of inquiry. To support this optimism, it is natural to look for a more precise articulation of the ‘epistemic rewardingness’ involved. One way of sharpening the proposal is reliabilist in spirit (though note that this need not commit one to reliabilist analyses more generally): singular thought involves the presence of a means of forming beliefs which enables one to reliably get the object’s properties right. Dickie’s *Fixing Reference* (2015) describes a species of reliability she calls ‘cognitive focus’ and proposes that “the aboutness of our ordinary thoughts *just is* cognitive focus” (1). Not only does Dickie’s account look extendable to non-causal cases, and to lay the basis for a solution to the *qua* problem, but once we have a reasonably precise necessary and sufficient condition for aboutness in terms of ‘cognitive focus’, we can then use it to explain *why* the myriad relations to objects that we know do enable us to think about them (perception, testimony...), in virtue of their specific features, enable singular thought: namely, by variously meeting this unifying necessary and sufficient condition.

In this paper, I will first provide an approachable summary of the framework presented in Dickie’s (2015) rich, insightful, and difficult book (§2), before arguing that the way it officially proposes implementing its broadly epistemic picture of aboutness has bad consequences for either rationality or the scope of singular thought (§3). After considering two unsuccessful replies (§4), I offer a precisification of Dickie’s framework in §5 and also suggest that it can circumvent an objection presented in Barkasi (2021). Yet I will conclude that, under all this careful examination, it is not clear that Dickie’s framework can deliver on one of its principal ambitions: to elucidate

*what it is*, in *epistemic* terms, about the aboutness-fixing relations we know and love that *makes* them aboutness-fixing. It is unclear, that is, that Dickie’s framework offers substantial benefits over unsharpened, rough-and-ready talk of ‘epistemically rewarding relations’. I diagnose the problem as lying in an assumption that, to the extent that singular thought can be illuminated by its connection to knowledge, it is fundamentally the same story that is to be told in each and every case. Proponents of the idea that singular thought is in some sense, at bottom, an epistemic phenomenon, should suspend the assumption that there is a homogeneous core, present in all cases of such thought, and that it is from there that its (univocal) epistemic character derives.

## 2 Dickie’s official picture

The central thesis of Dickie’s (2015) is that the capacity for singular thought consists in having a *body of beliefs* which is *cognitively focused* on an object. §2.1 introduces Dickie’s notion of bodies of beliefs (corresponding to the ‘cognitive architecture’ question above), §2.2 her notion of cognitive focus (corresponding to the ‘metasemantic’ question). §2.3 brings these together to present the book’s core account of singular thought.

### 2.1 Bodies of beliefs

According to Dickie, beliefs (and other propositional attitudes) express structured propositions, constituted by “conceptual representations” (2015: 25). In the simplest case, one’s belief that  $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$  has the content  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ , where  $\langle \alpha \rangle$  and  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  are one’s conceptual representations of the object ( $\alpha$ ) and property ( $\Phi$ ) in question.<sup>1</sup> The conceptual representations subjects use to think

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Dickie’s (2015) notation for convenience. However, for perspicuity, readers may wish to read ‘ $\langle \langle \text{That} \rangle, \langle \text{is red} \rangle \rangle$ ’, for instance, as shorthand for ‘ $\langle \langle \text{That} \rangle, \langle \text{is red} \rangle \rangle$ ’.

singular thoughts about objects are *bodies of beliefs*.<sup>2</sup> Bodies of beliefs are unified in two key respects. First, subjects treat beliefs in the same body as being about the same thing. They are disposed to transition from beliefs of the form  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  and  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Psi \rangle$  to  $\langle \text{Something is both } \Phi \text{ and } \Psi \rangle$ —to ‘trade on identity’, as Campbell (1987) put it.

Second, each body of beliefs has some unique *proprietary means of justification*. A means of justification, in general, is a token of a process by which one may form beliefs: for example, uptake from an attentional-perceptual channel, or uptake from a stream of testimony. While a body of beliefs will typically contain information delivered by a variety of means (and perhaps exclusively non-proprietary means), it will be “associated with a specific ‘trumping’ route to justification” (2015: 51). Beliefs formed in this proprietary way are privileged in that the subject is disposed to revise beliefs in that body formed by any other means according to the deliverances of this means.

## 2.2 Cognitive focus

We are told that the capacity for singular thought about an ordinary object  $o$  involves having a body of beliefs ‘cognitively focused’ on  $o$ . So what is *cognitive focus*? A body of beliefs is cognitively focused on an object iff its proprietary means of justification is truth-conducive with respect to its properties. Recent epistemology illustrates that there are various ways of cashing out truth-conduciveness. Though Dickie is officially neutral at the outset of the book’s project, in giving substance to the proposal she tells us that a means of forming beliefs is truth-conducive iff it *eliminates a relevant range of circumstances* at which the contents of those beliefs are not true (2015: 40).

Let us unpack this.

First, what is it to eliminate a circumstance (i.e., possible world)?

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<sup>2</sup> On the tension between thinking of beliefs as both vehicles of thought and instances of such thought, see Goodman and Gray (2022). Dickie provides a rationale for not packaging her account in terms of mental files in her (2020).

ELIMINATION: A means of justification *eliminates* a circumstance  $\sigma$  “iff the fact that the belief is formed by this [means] entails that  $\sigma$  is not actual” (2015: 41).

A circumstance  $\sigma$  is eliminated by a belief-forming process  $m$  iff  $m$  entails that  $\sigma$  is not actual (or, if it helps to think of it this way: iff  $m$  is impossible with  $\sigma$ ). The specific implications of this claim largely depend on how means of justification are individuated. For example, individuated purely by narrow, internal features, your current perceptual means of forming beliefs about your environment may not eliminate circumstances in which you are a brain in a vat. On the other hand, if partly individuated by wide, external features, your current perceptual means will eliminate circumstances in which you are a brain in a vat. We’ll return to this individuation question later.

Second, which circumstances are relevant? On the basis of the observation that truth-conduciveness of process is compatible with fallibility in outcome but incompatible with the process delivering truth by sheer luck alone, we are told that if  $S$ ’s belief-forming activities are truth-conducive throughout an interval  $t$  then  $S$  is to that extent *rational* throughout  $t$ . Specifically:

RELEVANCE: A circumstance  $\sigma$  is *rationally relevant* “to  $S$ ’s belief-forming activities over a time interval iff, for some belief  $S$  forms in the interval, the belief counts as rational only if formed by a route that eliminates  $\sigma$ ” (2015: 42).

The basic idea here is that the truth-conduciveness of a belief-forming process demands only that it produce true beliefs in all those cases where the formation of a *false* belief would be irrational for  $S$ . A truth-conducive process can result in false beliefs so long as in forming those false beliefs via that process the subject is not rationally culpable. So, as it is spelled out by RELEVANCE, a circumstance  $\sigma$  is rationally relevant to  $S$  during  $t$  if and only if there is some belief  $S$  forms during

$t$ , by some means  $m$ , the forming of which is rational for  $S$  only if  $m$  entails that  $\sigma$  is not actual. ‘Rationally relevant’ could therefore be read as *rationally threatening*.

There are lots of moving parts here, but we can summarise Dickie’s characterisation of reliability, or truth-conduciveness, as follows. A means of justification  $m$  for a token belief that  $p$  is truth-conducive when there is no rationally relevant not- $p$  circumstance at which  $m$  is present; in other words, when  $m$  eliminates all rationally threatening circumstances at which  $p$  is not true.

We now have all the materials we need to grasp Dickie’s analysis of singular thought. Before we press on, though, take a moment to notice that, as a way of cashing out the pre-existing notion of truth-conduciveness in epistemology, this story raises questions. Consider a brain in a vat whose experiences are subjectively indistinguishable from those of a person walking in a meadow. It essays beliefs which someone more fortunate would express by saying things like ‘I see a goldfinch’. It certainly seems like the brain’s way of forming these beliefs eliminates enough circumstances where the belief is false “that any ‘belief not true’ circumstance left standing may be ignored without undue risk” (2015: 43). Dickie would agree that actuality is a circumstance the brain is “not rationally required to anticipate” (2015: 43; 147). Yet none of its perceptual beliefs are true. There is at least *some* good sense in which its belief-forming practices are not truth-conducive. On the most natural way of putting it, its beliefs are not *safe* (Sosa 1999).<sup>3</sup>

This is perhaps the first indication of a worry which will be explored later: rationality is an uneasy notion to rely on in reconciling the necessity of truth-conduciveness for reference with the prospect of fallibility. On Dickie’s (2015) view, the actual poor quality of a means of justification has no impact on its truth-conduciveness if the subject cannot be rationally expected to recognise

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps individuating means of justification by ‘internal’ features could alleviate the dissonance here. If uptake from perceptual experience is a means present equally in the brain-in-a-vat case and in typical cases of veridical perception, this means may well be truth-conducive in the safety-theoretic sense. For it is safe in ‘normal’ conditions. However, Dickie needs to individuate means of justification more externally to underpin her ‘uniqueness lemma’ (2015: 52) and does so (2015: 49).

this. In §3, we will consider a worry that the *rich* quality of a means of justification can have *too little* impact on reference-fixing if the subject forms beliefs irrationally. In any case, what can be seen already is that Dickie's project is to articulate an intricate patchwork mediating the core notions of singular thought, truth-conduciveness (reliability), and rationality. The proposal's success rests on whether a delicate balancing act can be achieved which unifies these phenomena and, of course, provides insight into the phenomenon of singular thought by doing so.

### 2.3 Dickie's proposal

We are now in a position to digest Dickie's official analytical biconditional.

REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION (R&J):	A body of $\langle \alpha \rangle$ -beliefs is about $o$ if and only if “for all $\langle \Phi \rangle$ , if S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for the belief that $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$ , this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where $o$ is not $\Phi$ ” (2015: 57).
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The conditional on the right-hand side is to be read counterfactually: *were* the subject to form the belief  $\langle \alpha$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  via the means of justification which is in fact proprietary to  $\langle \alpha \rangle$ , this means would eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance where  $o$  is not  $\Phi$ . Roughly speaking, R&J invites us to consider the possible circumstances at which a subject makes rational use of some means she has of forming beliefs and to ask whether, so-used, that means would yield a true belief with respect to  $o$  (setting aside circumstances at which S is rationally blameless for its yielding a false belief).

If aboutness consists in an ability to reliably get a range of an object's properties right, which properties are they? First, Dickie tells us that the quantifier over  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  in R&J is to be restricted to conceptual representations of properties “for which believing  $\langle \alpha$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  *can* be

justified by the means proprietary to  $\langle \alpha \rangle$ ” (2015: 59). In the case of perceptual demonstrative bodies of beliefs this is said to restrict us to “observational” properties such as *red* and *round* (59). Second, Dickie suggests plausibly that there is a general variability in the domain of the quantifier over  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  in R&J. Singular thought about an object does not generally require that one have a means of reliably forming true beliefs to the effect that it is  $\Phi$  for some *specific*  $\Phi$  (e.g., colour, or location). Rather, one must have a means of forming true beliefs to the effect that it is  $\Phi$  for a situation-sensitive range of  $\Phi$ —a range partly determined by one’s belief-forming dispositions.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that although actuality cannot be eliminated (given ELIMINATION), it need not be *rationally relevant*. To see the significance of this for how Dickie accounts for the fallibility of reference-fixing relations, consider the following example.

### Case 1

Sally, a typical subject with good vision and no reason to expect any funny business is going on, is looking ahead at a sculpture, *O*, whose shape is misleadingly distorted by a funhouse-style mirror. From her perspective, it looks to be a thin, grey, Giacometti-style statue, but is in fact a red sphere.

According to R&J, Sally’s perceptual-demonstrative  $\langle \text{That} \rangle$ -thoughts get to be about *O* only if their means of justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance at which *O* is not thin, and every rationally relevant circumstance at which *O* is not grey, and so on. This might sound implausibly demanding. But since, in cases like this, actuality is not rationally relevant (2015: 139), Sally’s thoughts get to be about *O* in virtue of the quality of her perceptual means of belief formation with respect to various of *O*’s other properties. Sally’s errors are rationally acceptable, and so her capacity for singular thought is unaffected.

Before getting on to the problems for R&J, it is worth making a brief aside concerning the principle’s status. It is natural to think that, as a ‘reference-fixing’ principle, R&J ought to determine *which* object (if any) any given body of beliefs is about. This is the metasemantic question, (ii), I



posed in §1. Dickie is certainly concerned to ensure there *is* one unique object satisfying R&J in cases of singular thought (2015: 52). Reading ‘ $o$ ’ as a variable, then, the right-hand side of R&J should determine its value in an otherwise fully specified case. Yet it is somewhat difficult to read R&J in this way. Do we look at the circumstances which must on pain of irrationality be eliminated by proprietary means  $m$ , take those which are eliminated by  $m$ , and find the unique thing which is not  $\Phi$  at any such circumstance?<sup>4</sup> Surely there will be all sorts of objects which are *not*  $\Phi$  at the relevant circumstances (e.g., the empty set). Dickie proposes to smooth over this worry by requiring that there “be some  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  for which the question of  $o$ ’s  $\Phi$ -ness or not actually arises” (2015: 53–54, n. 19). On the most natural reading of this proposal, singular thought about  $o$  demands that there be rationally threatening circumstances at which  $o$  falls under  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  and rationally threatening circumstances at which  $o$  does not fall under  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  (where the range of  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  is determined as above). It remains counterintuitive to think singular thought requires the risk of irrational mistakes, and that in all cases of such thought there will be no other object in the universe which falls under all salient  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  if and only if the purported object of one’s thought does.

In any case, we can set worries of this sort aside to consider, in the next section, what broader problems might afflict Dickie’s project. Recall that the project is to construct an intricate patchwork mediating the core notions of singular thought, truth-conduciveness (reliability), and rationality, and its success rests on whether a delicate balancing act can be achieved so as to unify these phenomena and, of course, provide insights by doing so. Although Dickie is officially neutral at the book’s outset on what sort of view of truth-conduciveness or rationality she has in mind—with the idea being that readers can plug in their own views to the framework she offers—we will see that these notions make demands on one another given how they sit together in the proposed framework, and there are some reasons to doubt that a satisfying balance is really possible.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Don’t we need to know which object a subject’s beliefs are about *before* we know which beliefs it would be irrational for her to form?’ Dickie (2017) and Pepp (2020) discuss circularity worries in detail. I set them aside in this paper.

### 3 Can a balance between reference, reliability, and rationality be struck?

R&J entails a surprising incompatibility between singular thought and irrationality.

- R** For a subject  $S$  to have the capacity for singular thought about  $o$  via a body of beliefs,  $\langle \alpha \rangle$ , there must be no  $\langle \Phi \rangle$   $S$  is disposed to associate with  $\langle \alpha \rangle$  such that at some rationally relevant circumstance  $o$  is not  $\Phi$  but  $S$  believes  $\langle \alpha$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  via that body of beliefs' proprietary rationality-securing means of justification.

Restricting our attention to bodies of beliefs for which the proprietary means is perceptual for convenience, suppose that Boris takes a drug he knows will significantly affect his colour perception. We might imagine that it is a spectrum-inverting drug. Boris nevertheless goes about forming perceptually based colour beliefs about *that car*, *that coffee cup*, etc. His irrationality, even if it would lead to lots of false colour-beliefs, is surely compatible with his having singular thoughts about the objects in question.<sup>5</sup>

Now, there is a subtlety in R&J (and R, above) which answers to alleged counterexamples of this sort. R&J reads '*...if S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for the belief that  $\langle \alpha$  is  $\Phi \rangle$ ...*' (2015: 57; emphasis added). Dickie will reply that, when Boris forms the belief  $\langle$ That is red $\rangle$ , he lacks proprietary rationality-securing justification for that belief. Although he forms the belief via the means of justification which is proprietary to the relevant body of beliefs, this means *is not rationality-securing* for beliefs concerning the colour of perceived objects (given his knowledge about his circumstances). So Boris's irrational errors are irrelevant to R&J's explanation of his

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<sup>5</sup> Notice that it is no use suggesting in reply that limited fallibility is compatible with the reliability needed for singular thought, because Dickie's *account* of the kinds of mistakes compatible with reliability requires that those mistakes be rationally permissible.

referential success. It is the *rational* beliefs formed by the perceptual proprietary means of justification which do the reference-fixing work. R&J does not entail that those who form irrational beliefs by proprietary means fail to think about the relevant object.

One thing this brings out is that talk of ‘rationality-securing (proprietary) means of justification’ is, strictly speaking, imprecise. Boris’s means of justification secures the rationality of shape-beliefs, but it does not secure the rationality of colour-beliefs. So one can have ‘proprietary rationality-securing justification for the belief  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ ’ (2015: 57) while lacking, via that same (proprietary) means, rationality-securing justification for the belief  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Psi \rangle$ , including where both  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  and  $\langle \Psi \rangle$  express properties within the situation-sensitive, reference-fixing range.

As a corollary of all this, the capacity for a (proprietary) means of justification to enable singular thought depends on its capacity to enable *rational* beliefs of a certain, truth-conducive sort. I will now argue that common-sense claims about rationality quickly clash with common-sense claims about aboutness. And I will illustrate this clash using a case to serve as a counterexample. But I do want to stress that, though the case is somewhat contrived, the underlying dissonance between our notion of rationality and our notion of singular thought cannot itself be waved off as a theoretical contrivance. The dissonance in question means that there are cases in which subjects are able to think singular thoughts for which R&J—because it rules out the positive contribution made by means of justification which can only be used to form *irrational* beliefs in a given situation—provides no explanation. In some cases of singular thought, R&J offers no explanation of how the subject achieves cognitive focus with respect to the object in question.

## Case 2

Suppose that, as an apparent control study for their marvellous new Experience Machine, a volunteer, Halle, is told by researchers, whom she has every reason to trust, that, upon waking from an anaesthetic drug, she will have been successfully hooked up to their machine. While she will seem to have certain peculiar perceptual experiences, these will be entirely hallucinatory. She

will think she is sitting up and looking around a strange room, but she will still be lying down with her eyes closed. The twist, of course, is that Halle is never hooked up to the machine. Upon waking, she witnesses an elaborate performance staged by the researchers: dozens of butterflies fill the room, strange lighting dapples the walls, and a small elephant shuffles around in the corner.<sup>6</sup>

It is plausible that, upon waking, perceptual beliefs concerning the strange objects in her environment would not be rationally secured. Halle *should*, rationally speaking, suspend judgment about the existence of an elephant in the room—or, rather, a thing with such-and-such observational properties.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, let us suppose that Halle, being constitutionally stubborn, does go on forming such beliefs. Where Sally, in Case 1, is rationally responsible, Halle—like Boris—is rationally irresponsible. Yet, intuitively, she not only has true beliefs formed via well-functioning perceptual links, she is in a position to have perceptually based singular thoughts about the objects she sees. Of course, these singular thoughts—<That is moving>—will presumably be irrational, too. But there is no reason to think all singular thoughts must be rational thoughts. What intuitively matters, in this case, is the *actual* quality of the perceptual relation.

Though contrived, this case illustrates a simple point about the kind of truth-conduciveness which underpins the capacity for singular thought. If a means of acquiring information on an object is of a sufficient quality, it should not matter whether the beliefs one forms by means of it are, additionally, rational. What seems to matter is whether one is *de facto* in a position to reliably get the object's properties right in virtue of the relevant channel's quality in a sense which is independent of considerations of what it is all-things-considered rational for the subject to believe at that time. (And I will argue in §5 that this indeed points us towards a solution.)

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<sup>6</sup> A similar case is described by Pryor (2004) and also briefly discussed by Dickie (2015: 58), as we will see below.

<sup>7</sup> Someone might suppose that Halle's actual perceptual judgments are rational because they would, in an experience machine, succeed in picking out virtual objects. A reader so-inclined is encouraged to change the scenario to one involving the supposed administering of a powerful hallucinogenic drug.

Of course, an externalist about rationality (Williamson 2017) might understand that notion in reliabilist terms, so that Halle's beliefs are rational. But this option is unavailable to the defender of R&J. They are using rationality to reconcile fallibility with the capacity for singular thought. In Case 1, recall, Sally's errors are compatible with reference because they are not irrational. It is no coincidence, then, that Dickie (2015) writes: "it looks like unwarranted harshness to insist that *a situation indiscriminable by you* from many where you have done all that you should might, nevertheless, be one where you should have done something more" (147; emphasis added).

There may be nothing wrong with Dickie's (2015) intuitive gloss on cognitive focus, then. The capacity for singular thought may well involve an epistemic status conferred by one's dispositions to reliably ascertain an object's properties. The problem is that Dickie's proposed implementation of that gloss either has nothing to say about how reference-fixing works in Case 2, or makes unappealing commitments on our notion of rationality (in supposing some of Halle's perceptual beliefs to be rational). The lesson to be drawn, I take it, is that singular thought does not require rationality in the way Dickie's (2015) official theoretical package proposes. Before exploring the implications of the most promising avenues forward, the next section considers two unsuccessful lines of response to help clarify the force of the concern.

#### 4 Replies

In the sort of case just described, the subject's irrationality lies in their ignoring a potentially strong and salient reason they have to think their proprietary means unreliable within a relevant domain. Perhaps there is room for defender of R&J to reply here. For in cases where one forms a putatively irrational perceptual belief, it is generally because one is neglecting evidence one has against taking one's experience at face value. Given this common feature, what these cases often involve is neglect of so-called *higher-order evidence*: one is neglecting evidence about the quality of some of

one's other evidence. Dickie might reply that Halle's perceptual judgments are rationally permissible: nobody in her position is *rationally* required to make conciliatory moves in the face of higher-order evidence, no matter how compelling.

While there is certainly some controversy in the higher-order evidence literature, it is enough for us to worry about R that it be *possible* to irrationally ignore such evidence. There are debates as to which cases meet that description, and why, but it is widely agreed that some cases meet it. If it is possible to irrationally ignore higher-order evidence, then (even if Case 2 is not itself an instance) there are likely to be cases in which a subject irrationally ignores evidence purporting to undermine the deliverances of the proprietary means of justification for a body of beliefs. Given R, the body of beliefs will therefore fail to refer, even if the proprietary means of justification is in fact an excellent source of information about an object, so that R&J conflicts with a strong common-sense claim (or intuition) that the subject is in a position to have singular thoughts. For example, one might have apparent evidence purporting to show that one's successful episodic recollection of an event or object from one's past is in fact the product of confabulation. If there are any cases in which one would be irrational to be unmoved by such apparent evidence, then, given R, one is not in a position to entertain the memory demonstrative judgments about the event or object that, intuitively(!), one in fact is.

A defender of R&J may try to resist this line of thought by looking to a recent thread of discussion in the epistemological literature.<sup>8</sup> Some claim that misleading higher-order evidence is never relevant to rational evaluation in at least one sense (Lasonen Aarnio 2010; Williamson 2017). According to Williamson's (2017) distinction, it is *content-rational* to believe *p* if and only if one's evidence supports *p* (264). And it is *dispositionally rational* to believe *p* if and only if "in the same circumstances with the same evidence someone disposed to conform their beliefs to what their evidence supports would believe *p*" (266). These two notions come apart in settings where one's

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this potential reply.

evidence is the sort of thing to which one can fail to have transparent access—for instance, if one’s evidence just is one’s knowledge (Williamson 2002). In Case 2, the Williamsonian would say that it was content-rational for Halle to believe  $p$  even though she was dispositionally irrational to do so. The present defender of R&J may therefore try to avoid problem cases of the sort I have described by claiming that, in the sense pertinent to R&J, Halle’s perceptual beliefs *are* rational (i.e., content-rational), even if they are irrational in a different sense (i.e., dispositionally irrational).

The problem, however, is that by switching out the notion of rationality operative in R&J for a more externalist notion, the defender of R&J thereby loses their capacity to reconcile singular thought with fallibility. Remember, in Case 1 Sally gets to have singular thoughts about the sphere,  $O$ , despite getting many of its properties wrong, *because—in the sense relevant to R&J—her mistakes are rationally permissible*. But the sense in which her mistakes were rationally permissible is clearly the *dispositionally rational* sense: her errors were not *content rational*, for (according to the Williamsonian view) she failed to believe what her evidence in fact supported. And so the problem is that as soon as we adopt a notion of rationality of the sort that enables us to paint Halle rational (avoiding the problem cases discussed above, illustrated by Case 2), we will have thereby painted Sally (in Case 1) irrational, and we will therefore have no explanation of her capacity to think singular thoughts about the object she is intuitively in a position to think about, despite getting many of its properties wrong. If we say that it is, in the sense relevant to R&J, rationally permissible for Halle to form the problematic perceptual beliefs because her actual environment makes it so (so that we can explain her capacity for perceptual demonstrative singular thoughts), then there will, by that token, be *rationally relevant* circumstances at which Sally associates <...is thin, is grey...> with perceptual demonstrative body of beliefs even though  $O$  is not thin, grey, etc. As a consequence, R will entail that Sally does not have singular thoughts about  $O$  in Case 1. There is a conflict, then, between using a notion of rationality to allow for fallibility in singular thought and using that same notion of rationality to put a plausible limit on its scope.

A second reply is to lean on the interpretation of the counterfactual embedded within R&J. Suppose Halle is visually attending to the elephant, and suppose the defender of R&J wishes to accept that Halle is in a position to think perceptually based singular thoughts about it. R&J tells us that the key question is: are there observational predicates  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  which Halle is disposed to associate with her body of  $\langle \alpha \rangle$  beliefs such that, *were she to have rationality-securing justification* to associate  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  with  $\langle \alpha \rangle$  via the attentional-perceptual means of justification used in Case 2, this means would eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance where that elephant is not  $\Phi$ ? If, and only if, there are is Halle in a position to have the relevant singular thoughts. Now, the defender of R&J might emphasise the italicised portion of the key question. While Halle lacks rationality-securing justification for the relevant information-marshalling practices in the situation described in Case 2, if she *were* to have rationality-securing justification via that attentional-perceptual means, *then* this means would eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance where that elephant is not  $\Phi$ . And, presumably, Halle could achieve rational beliefs via that perceptual means of justification were the researchers to simply tell her the facts of their experiment. Since this is clearly a not-too-distant possibility, R&J allows that Halle is capable of singular thought after all.

However, this should not be the interpretation of the counterfactual as it appears in a biconditional like R&J. The main point of this counterfactual (Dickie 2015: 57–58) is to allow that the subject might not have actually formed the corresponding  $\langle \Phi \rangle$ -belief. They might only be disposed to do so. And yet that disposition could still partly account for (or discount) their ability to think singular thoughts. That is, the counterfactual provides flexibility over the extent to which the subject is actually taking up their opportunity to form justified beliefs. *It crucially should not* be supposed to provide flexibility over the extent to which the proprietary means of justification is actually rationality-securing for the relevant  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  belief.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which the proprietary

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<sup>9</sup> At one point Dickie (2015: 58) seems to suggest that a secondary role for the counterfactual in R&J is precisely to allow for cases in which “a factor that undermines rational entitlement leaves aboutness intact”. And so Dickie



means of justification is rationality-securing must be *fixed* when we evaluate this counterfactual. For, if it were not fixed, we would inevitably overgenerate on the availability of singular thought: there would be cases in which, while the subject has not actually done enough to achieve the capacity for singular thought, the nearest worlds at which the means of justification affords rational beliefs are ones at which she has done enough. The reason for this is that whether a belief is rational has implications for its truth-conduciveness.

...a belief is 'rational' iff it is formed by a careful enough justification-conferring route (where a route to belief formation that confers justification at least eliminates some reasonably wide range of circumstances where the belief is not true) (Dickie 2015: 42).

Enhancing a belief's means-of-justification-conferred rational status will at least sometimes enhance its truth-conduciveness. So if we allow ourselves to strengthen the degree to which a means of justification secures the rationality of the relevant  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  belief over close possible worlds when applying R&J to a given case, there will be instances where a subject comes out as having the capacity for singular thoughts about an object partly in virtue of the success they *could* have had (but didn't).

To give a toy example of this, suppose one is viewing an object, *O*, through some feature-distorting apparatus, so that one moment it appears green and spherical, the next moment it appears red and cylindrical, and so on. In the sense pertinent to R&J, it would be irrational for one to form a single body of beliefs, purportedly about *O*, into which one put these various changing beliefs and through which one was disposed to trade on the objects' identity. Is one in a position to have singular thoughts about *O*? Suppose one is also unable to 'track' *O* as it blinks into view

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herself may in fact have this approach in mind. While I think this is not entirely clear, I set exegetical matters aside here and simply illustrate that this line of reply to Case 2 is problematic and ought to be avoided.

from different locations and shows no motion between each of the points from which it appears. In this sort of setup, one should be agnostic about whether there is one object or whether there are many different objects, each popping into view one after the other. But suppose we consult R&J and ask, *if the subject were to have proprietary rationality-securing justification for her <Φ>-beliefs, would this then eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance at which O is not <Φ>?* And the answer would seem to be ‘yes’: at the nearest circumstances in question—at which her means of justification *secures* the rationality of her perceptually based beliefs—her means of forming those beliefs must be such as to make it clearer to her that there *is* just one object rather than many. And so because her means of justification for <That is red, that is cylindrical...>-beliefs is rationality securing at *that* circumstance, she comes out as being in a position to have perceptual demonstrative singular thoughts about *O* in her *actual* circumstances. But that was not the result we wanted! What this discussion shows, then, is that the extent to which a proprietary means of justification is rationality-securing must be fixed when we evaluate the counterfactual in R&J. If it is not fixed, then there will be cases where a subject comes out as having the capacity for singular thoughts about an object partly in virtue of the success they *could* have had (but didn’t). The suggested route out of the worry posed by Case 2, involving a re-interpretation of the counterfactual in R&J, is not to be taken.

## 5            **Reference, reliability, and *pro tanto* rationality-securing justification**

But this discussion might nevertheless open up a more promising line of reply. One might claim that Halle’s perceptual means of belief formation *does* ‘secure the rationality of her perceptual beliefs’ without claiming that her beliefs are, *all things considered*, rational. If that is right, Halle has proprietary rationality-securing justification for the belief <That elephant is moving>, and moreover this proprietary means of justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance

where the elephant,  $o$ , is not moving (and so on). Therefore, Dickie's framework can explain why, in Case 2, Halle is in a position to have singular thoughts about  $o$  by means of her body of perceptual <That> beliefs after all. The problem for Halle is not that she actually lacks rationality-securing justification for her perceptual demonstrative beliefs. Rather, it is that she has some other, testimony-based belief, which *defeats* the rationality secured by her perceptual proprietary means of justification (namely, the false belief that she is hallucinating).

On this view, one can have proprietary rationality securing justification for the belief that < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > even though forming the belief that < $\alpha$  is  $\Phi$ > via that means would be irrational. (Proprietary) means of justification provide *pro tanto* rationality-securing justification for beliefs rather than all-things-considered rationality-securing justification. Means of justification are not partly individuated by the subject's relevant background beliefs. Once their *pro tanto* character is clarified, the problem posed by Case 2 goes away. Halle's perceptual beliefs might all be (all-things-considered) irrational, but that does not vitiate our account of what makes them singular thoughts.

I think that this is an interesting manoeuvre, and one which helps to clarify the application of Dickie's framework. We may express this in the following modified characterisation:

REFERENCE AND	A body of < $\alpha$ >-beliefs is about $o$ if and only if for all < $\Phi$ >, if
RELIABILITY (R&R):	S has proprietary, <i>pro tanto</i> rationality-securing justification for the belief that < $\alpha$ is $\Phi$ >, this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where $o$ is not $\Phi$ .

This line of reply requires leaning on the notion of *pro tanto* rationality-securing justification provided by the proprietary means associated with a given body of beliefs. Given this, can we expect the bump in the rug to emerge elsewhere? Are there cases where we *do* want a subject's capacity for singular thought via a means of justification of one kind to be defeated by beliefs formed by other means? Dickie herself makes a point of noting that the R&J framework "allows

for cases where a factor that undermines rational entitlement [to beliefs formed by the proprietary means] undermines aboutness” (2015: 58). Yet it is not really clear that this ever happens.

Consider the following case. As Bob is beginning his ascent of Helvellyn with his friends, he sees a sheep—call it Woolly—cough. Some time and many sheep sightings later, he notices on his return one and the same sheep lying in more or less the same location. He immediately allows the perceptual link to Woolly to fill the content of his body of beliefs: <‘That sheep coughed earlier, it has blue paint on its coat, and it is now lying under the oak tree...>. Just as he is doing so, however, his friends begin arguing over whether that really is the same sheep that they encountered earlier. According to some, the sheep from earlier was much fluffier and older-looking. Bob reflects that all the sheep look alike to him, that sheep are prone to move around, and that he would be none the wiser if it were a different sheep that was now in the same approximate location. Bob’s reasoning at this point, and the mixed array of testimony from his friends, arguably undermine his rational entitlement to beliefs formed by this perceptual-recognitional means—for instance, <‘That sheep coughed earlier>—in a similar way as Halle’s rational entitlement to perceptual beliefs was undermined by the researchers’ testimony in Case 2. The key question is: do such factors thereby make it so that Bob’s perceptual-recognitional body of <‘That> beliefs *fails to express singular thoughts about Woolly?*

It is not at all clear to me that Bob’s <‘That sheep coughed earlier>-thoughts *do fail* to express singular thoughts about that very sheep. And it is extremely difficult to devise a case in which rational entitlement to beliefs formed on the basis of a good quality informational relation does intuitively undermine their constituting a basis for singular thought. This is to say, R&R looks like an improvement on R&J. According to R&R—which emphasises the *pro tanto* rationality-securing justification provided by the proprietary means rather than whether the means would eventuate in the formation of an all-things-considered rational belief—what matters for Bob’s body of beliefs to express singular thoughts about Woolly is just that its proprietary means of

justification in fact eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance at which <That sheep did not cough earlier>, etc. And the proprietary means is in fact of a sufficient quality to do so.<sup>10</sup>

The lesson is that when determining whether a subject's body of beliefs is about an object, we need not consider the nearest worlds at which she *forms an all-things-considered* rational belief by the proprietary means and ascertain whether that rational belief is either true or false but rationally excusable. Rather, we just look at the proprietary means. Does *it in fact rationally entitle* S to form beliefs (with respect to each of the situationally relevant < $\Phi$ >) which, so-formed, *would be true* (unless something intervened for which S could not be rationally blamed for failing to recognise)?

Once we have come this far, I think we can see that the framework is less stringently 'epistemic' than it is sometimes taken as being. Barkasi (2021) criticises Dickie's (2015) view on the basis of the epistemic character of its requirements on singular thought. According to Barkasi, it does not matter if a perceptual link is *generally reliable* or *justification-affording*. What matters is simply that it *in fact*, on that occasion, carries good information. He notes that some dream experiences "put us in genuine perceptual contact with the world" (6119). When we undergo conscious dreaming, our sensory systems still function, albeit in an attenuated way. Suppose that,

As you dream, whatever else may be happening around you, you begin to hear the characteristic sinusoidal pitch changes of a siren. Although you can't be sure of the source from within the dream (and likely don't even ask yourself about it), the sound actually is from a passing ambulance. You attend to the sound and think '*that* is a siren'. Again, given that you actually are hearing a real sound, you succeed in selecting the sound and thinking the thought (2021: 6120).

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<sup>10</sup> Recognition is not essential to the problem. One could set the problem up with just perceptual means of belief formation involving tracking. In something like the classic 'cups and ball' trick, one could argue that the subject's proprietary means might be highly reliable in the operative sense despite its still being the case that she is not in a position to entertain perceptually based singular thoughts about the ball.

According to Barkasi, Dickie’s framework cannot accommodate such cases of perceptual demonstrative thought, for perceptual links in stimulus-incorporating dream experiences “do not confer any justification”: they “are systematically illusory and a matter of luck” (2021: 6132).

Conscious attention to a stimulus incorporated into a dream experience opens up a perceptual link to that stimulus which allows for demonstrative selection. But this attention does not constitute a belief-forming route which would, absent defeaters, provide justification or eliminate every rationally relevant circumstance. [...] attention to what’s presented in dream experience is a belief forming route which, in the normal course of its operation, gets things very wrong (2021: 6134).

Note that the intruding stimulus constitutes a perceptual link—“these are genuine perceptual experiences” (6132)—for Barkasi himself is careful to contrast sensory information links with perceptual links, the latter being required for perceptual demonstrative thought (6121).

At this point, there is a dilemma concerning what the relevant means of justification is in stimulus-incorporating dream cases. On one hand, stimulus-incorporating dream experiences can involve ‘genuine perceptual contact with the world’, and, when that occurs, one can entertain perceptual demonstrative singular thoughts about certain goings-on in one’s surroundings. The defender of R&R can claim that such cases involve a link which *in fact rationally entitles* the subject to form certain beliefs—e.g., <That is loud>, <That is a siren>—which, given how they are formed—i.e., *by means of a genuinely perceptual link*—secure the truth of the subject’s beliefs at the nearest worlds at which S would be rationally blameworthy for forming a false belief. This is all that Dickie’s framework, teased out at the level of detail here, demands.

On the other hand, insofar as the objector leans into the description of stimulus-incorporating dream experiences as involving a “systematically illusory” (6132) means of forming

beliefs, they are not genuinely perceptual links, and they do not intuitively provide a basis for genuine singular thoughts. It is true that “attention to what’s presented in dream experience is a belief forming route which, in the normal course of its operation, gets things very wrong” (6134). I think it is clear from the kind of case Barkasi has in mind that the relevant instances of stimulus-incorporating dream experiences are, at one level of description, not *systematically* illusory and a mere matter of luck. In the siren case, we can say that, to the extent that the subject is able to think about that sound, their means of forming beliefs is ‘genuine perceptual contact with the world’, not ‘attention to what’s presented in dream experience’. It might take a stroke of luck for the perceptual link to penetrate the sleeping subject’s sensory blockade, but, so long as it does, Dickie’s framework—as elaborated here—ultimately has the resources to accommodate it.

## 6 Conclusion

How explanatory is the epistemic character of R&R? Given a causal-informational (or some other) relation to ordinary objects of the sort we already know does enable us to entertain singular thoughts, does seeing how it satisfies R&R shed light on *why, by virtue of its epistemic credentials, it enables us to entertain singular thoughts?*

Insofar as it does, the response given to Barkasi’s (2021) case (§5) illustrates that the epistemic character of the explanation is very thin indeed, and so any distinctively epistemic explanation of how aboutness-fixing works will be correspondingly thin. The sleeping subject essentially receives a perceptual signal attributing *F*-ness and this gives the subject *pro tanto* rational entitlement to form a corresponding belief. Because beliefs formed via that link, given that it has penetrated the subject’s sensory blockade, will be true unless the subject cannot be rationally blamed for realising something has gone awry, we get the result that it constitutes a path to singular thought. Yet Barkasi was advocating for a simple, *epistemology-free* theory of perceptual

demonstrative singular thought. Why is it that Dickie's epistemic theory can accommodate the case he uses for his cause? It looks as though, by starting off one's theorising by identifying, *a priori*, a homogeneous core present in all possible cases of singular thought, any explanatorily illuminating epistemic notions that might have been present drop out.

It is an assumption of Dickie's (2015) overall project that, to the extent that there is something importantly epistemic about singular thought, it is fundamentally the same thing in every possible case, whether the thought's basis is perceptual, testimonial, or mnemonic in character. What R&J purports to give us is a biconditional *analysis* of singular thought, and so the epistemic character of singular thought is equivalent to the epistemic character of the right-hand side of R&J. What we have seen is that R&J should be rejected in favour of R&R in order to capture the proper scope of singular thought, accommodating the common-sense verdicts in Case 1 and Case 2. As a result, the epistemic character of singular thought, on the revised view, is equivalent to the epistemic character of the right-hand side of R&R. The question is then whether the right-hand side of R&R does—as we had hoped at the outset of this paper—enable us to understand why it is that certain relations put us in a position to entertain singular thoughts.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike R&J, R&R tells us not to look at the nearest worlds at which a subject forms an all-things-considered rational belief via the proprietary means. *What we scrutinise are not epistemic subjects but channels of rationally entitled belief formation.* And this is why—as we have just seen—R&R can accommodate the example that Barkasi (2021) argues *cannot* be accommodated by epistemic theories of singular thought. Having identified such a channel, we simply ask: does *it* provide rational entitlement for the subject to form beliefs (with respect to each of the situationally relevant  $\langle \Phi \rangle$ ) which, so-formed, would be true (unless something intervened for which the subject could not be rationally blamed for failing to notice)? And in asking this question we are evaluating the

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<sup>11</sup> “The target of this project is the question [...]: How do the relations to ordinary things that enable us to think about them do their aboutness-fixing work?” (Dickie 2017: 748).



quality of a means of acquiring beliefs, regardless of the subject who happens to be doing the believing. If the question is whether R&R enables us to see what virtue is possessed by the aboutness-fixing relations we know and love that makes them aboutness-fixing, is it enough to be told that they rationally entitle the formation of beliefs which would be true unless the subject were rationally blameless? To say of perceptual attention that it enables singular thought because it possesses this virtue is not obviously more illuminating than to say that it is an informational channel (an ‘epistemically rewarding link’ (Recanati 2012: 35)) with some caveats about rationality to guard against non-rewarding features of otherwise good cases (such as Case 1). This is why it can accommodate Barkasi’s (2021) purportedly *anti-epistemic* stimulus-incorporating dream case. According to R&R, the characteristic reward of an aboutness-fixing relation is reliably true belief, and it is as hard to see *a priori* why this feature should explain what it is that makes singular thought possible as it is to see why the causalist’s informational channels should do so (Recanati 2012). And so, in spite of our hopes at the outset that seeing how a relation satisfies R&R might lead us to understand *why*, by virtue of its epistemic credentials, it enables us to entertain singular thoughts, it seems that R&R ultimately leaves us no better placed than its competitors in this respect.

It might be replied that Dickie’s (2015) account could be perfectly right and that there simply is no answer to what we might call the ‘hard question of singular thought’: why do *these* channels of belief formation put subjects in a position to have singular thoughts about ordinary objects? But I suspect that those attracted to the venerable idea that there are deep, important, and explanatory connections between singular thought and knowledge will wish to look elsewhere for illumination before conceding that brute facts are all that are to be found.

Concerning his core claim about the enabling conditions for singular thought, Evans (1982) remarked that “[t]he difficulty with Russell’s Principle has always been to explain what it

means” (89).<sup>12</sup> Schiffer (1988), too, claims that “*Russell’s principle* [...] has a reading on which it is true and important” (36). That there is something intuitive about an epistemic acquaintance principle is hard to deny, and the converging lines of empirical research which emphasise knowledge as conceptually basic arguably provide grounds for pursuing the connection between aboutness and knowledge further (Phillips et al., 2021). There has been much pressure on defenders of epistemic theories of singular thought to give a detailed elaboration of the link between singular thought and knowledge in more basic terms—an elaboration of the sort that can be tested for adequacy against antagonists’ *recherché* counterexamples. The same cannot so obviously be said for defenders of causal theories of singular thought. Yet, once we begin to unpack what it might be for a means of forming beliefs to be ‘epistemically rewarding’ in such a way as to apply *across all cases of singular thought*, it is also natural to come away with the sense that . If we are going to thread the needle and tease out the distinctively epistemic character of singular thought, we may do better to suspend the assumption that there is a homogeneous core, present in all cases of singular thought, and that it is from there that its (univocal) epistemic character derives. We might do better, that is, to instead adopt a pluralist view, on which aboutness is made available by myriad means each of which might secure aboutness by achieving *distinctive* epistemic rewards, about which more can be said than merely that they rationally entitle subjects to form beliefs which would be true unless the subject were unlucky. I hope to have motivated that programme of research here, but of course it is far beyond the scope of this preliminary contribution to take on the task of carrying it out.\*

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<sup>12</sup> Russell’s Principle is the thesis that “in order to be thinking about an object or to make a judgment about an object, one must *know which* object [...] one is thinking about” (Evans 1982: 65).

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