REVIEW

Imogen Dickie, *Fixing Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), x+333 pp., £37.50 hb. *Ratio,* published in Early View on 7 June; 2017 DOI:10.1111/rati.12172

Imogen Dickie's *Fixing Reference* is a spirited and persuasive account of how the 'aboutness' of our ordinary thoughts concerning particular concrete objects is both secured and justified. What makes my thought 'that cup is dirty' about the particular cup on my desk rather than about anything else, and what justifies my belief as true?

For Dickie, three kinds of relation to ordinary objects (cups, oranges, people but not *extra*ordinary objects such as electrons or puffs of smoke) enable us to think about them, thereby securing aboutness. The first of these thought-enabling relations is direct perceptual contact with the object itself (a dirty cup, an orange rolling across a table). The second is grasp of a proper name ('Bertrand Russell') by uptake from a stream of testimony. The third is grasp of a description with which the attended-to object is appropriately related (though not necessarily a description which the object must satisfy). These three relations each involve a distinct kind of 'information-marshalling' activity whose purpose is to achieve what Dickie calls 'cognitive focus' on a particular object. The information-marshalling activity provides a 'proprietary means of justification' which converges on the object. If the subject forms a body of beliefs justified by one of these proprietary means, it will not be by mere accident that she gets them right most of the time, thus achieving cognitive focus on the intended object. Since aboutness is secured by achieving cognitive focus, argues Dickie, cognitive focus is aboutness.

Dickie's first three chapters spell out in detail the arguments defending her reference-securing and reference-justifying framework. These require careful attention: an overall grasp of this framework (summarised below) is essential to appreciate fully the originality of the book and the many insights it offers. Dickie helps the reader along with her uncluttered and meticulous prose, her jokey side-swipes at opposing views and her imaginative illustrative examples. Her central chapters apply the framework to our perceptual demonstrative thoughts, to our thoughts mediated by grasp of a proper name and to our description-based thoughts, showing how the justificatory pathways work in each case. There is a wonderful clarity of exposition summing up rival views in these chapters, which readers will surely find helpful. Dickie's final chapter, 'Thought and Consciousness', will be of interest to philosophers of mind, though I shall not discuss it. The 'cognitive focus' approach to reference-fixing is what is original in Dickie's work. It enables her to stand back from the endless example and counterexample-driven debates between descriptivists and causal theorists regarding the reference of proper names and account for the phenomena cited by both parties, as well as offer new angles on direct perception and singular descriptive thought. Although Dickie skirts round metaphysical questions, a picture emerges of the strong realist presuppositions underpinning our thoughts about ordinary objects.

To substantiate the claim that singular thought, including singular thought mediated by description, is possible, Dickie must clear the way to show that we *are* acquainted with ordinary objects and that perceptual demonstrative thought – the most basic kind of singular thought – does take place. She rejects the empiricist sense-datum theory of perception and its precursors as empirically false, citing compelling evidence from cognitive science research (Ch 4.1). She also rejects those of its successors which commit what she

calls the 'fallacy of projection'– the assumption that justification of 'basic beliefs' must follow the same justificatory pattern as that of more reflective, non-basic beliefs. For example, if perception of an orange object justifies the belief 'that is orange', it must do so by providing a premise for an inference of which 'that is orange' is the conclusion. This was a key assumption of McDowell's argument for the conclusion that perceptual experiences have propositional contents (p.16 & fn). Dickie argues instead for an acquaintance-theoretical account of how our perception-based thoughts are fixed (Ch.4), built on her REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION framework (Chs. 2 & 3).

There are two components to this framework: the claim that aboutness *is* cognitive focus and the claim that the subject is engaged in an information-marshalling activity aimed at *securing* aboutness. Each requires some unpacking. The first claim boils down to the idea that there is aboutness *iff* there is justificatory convergence of a body of beliefs on a particular object. It is summed up in Dickie's 'REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION' principle:

> S's <α is Φ> beliefs are about object *o* iff, for all <Φ>, justification that secures the rationality of the belief that <α is Φ> eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where *o* is not *Φ.* (p. 48)

If a rational subject believes that a cup is dirty, she is required to eliminate 'rationally relevant' circumstances where she might be mistaken: the cup is clean but in shadow; she is not wearing her glasses. The subject is not required to rule out 'rationally irrelevant' circumstances where, unbeknownst to her, a hallucinatory drug has been slipped into her coffee or she is deceived by an evil demon; this would squander her cognitive resources. If despite precautions the subject's belief turns out false, it will be due to the intervention of some unlucky spoiler against which she was not required to be on her guard. What is 'rationally relevant' will depend on which 'proprietary means of justification' is being used to achieve cognitive focus on the object. In the case of the dirty cup, it is uptake from perceptual input: this will override the other proprietary justificatory pathways in cases of doubt. If someone whose testimony is normally reliable tells you 'the cup is clean – I washed it', you check to see whether you were mistaken. But you see a coffee ring in the middle, confirming your original belief.

The REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION principle is in fact built up from two more basic principles (Ch.2). According to the *aboutness and truth* principle, a thought about an object is true if it matches what the object is like – if the object has the property attributed to it by the thought. According to the *truth and justification* principle, justification is truth-conducive. A body of beliefs arrived at by an appropriately justified means – a 'proprietary means' – is likely to be true, thereby achieving aboutness or cognitive focus on the intended object. So REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION is a reliability thesis only.

A consequence is that we might sometimes have a rational yet false belief about a particular object, or that reference might fail completely. Dickie gives the example of 'Geraint the Blue Bard', a descriptive name used for over a century to refer to the otherwise unidentified author of a series of songs in mediaeval Welsh. However, in 1956 the 'Blue Bard' songs were shown to be the work of notorious 19C forger Edward Williams. The REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION principle explains why our intuitions lead us to think that 'Geraint' is an empty name. The scholars take the cognitive focus of their body of 'Geraint' beliefs, arrived at by painstaking analysis of the ballads and knowledge of mediaeval Welsh history, to be the author of the songs, supposing him to be the fictional Geraint. But given the means of justification for their 'Geraint' beliefs, it would be a matter of spectacular luck if they happened to match the properties of forger Williams (pp.3; 220).

The second element of Dickie's REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION framework is the claim that the subject is engaged in an information-marshalling activity aimed at securing aboutness. This activity is motivated and justified by what Dickie calls the mind's 'basic need to represent things outside itself' (Ch 3). A 'basic need', unlike an intention, is a *non-conceptual* motivational state, a mental state which moves the subject to action. Basic needs, says Dickie, are usually thought of as emotional (the need for security). But Dickie argues that the information-marshalling activities which generate bodies of belief that we express using singular terms are motivated by a *rational* need: the need to represent. The notion of a 'basic rational need to represent' is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Dickie's thesis, so why does she introduce it?

To further the case for singular thought, Dickie must address the problem of direct co-ordination: what makes it the case that my thoughts, say, about an orange rolling across a table (<that is orange>; <that is rolling>...) all converge on the *same object*? (Ch.3) Many have argued that there are pre-existing unity relations between token basic (non-inferential) beliefs about a common referent (p.83) which arise from the way in which the beliefs are formed – in this case, from a single perceptual channel. There will, moreover, be a factual story to tell about how our perceptual system achieves this feat (Ch 4.1). However, this story has no normative status as it stands. It explains how direct co-ordination *happens*, not, Dickie suggests, how it is *justified.* And this is where the mind's basic need to represent comes in. Direct co-ordination, says Dickie, is a behaviour. Whether or not a behaviour is justified depends on whether it is an apt and reliable means of fulfilling the motivational state that gives rise to it. The information-marshalling moves involved in direct co-ordination are caused by the mind's need to represent things outside itself, and justified because they are reliable generators of aboutness, that is, of the fulfilment of the motivational state (p.86).

As illustrative example, we are invited to imagine Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham aiming to shoot at a willow wand. Robin is a highly-skilled archer, the Sheriff a hopeless one. Both succeed in hitting the target. Tom Fool, who shoots an arrow into the air by accident, inadvertently hits the target too. Dickie now makes a distinction between *weak* and *strong* justification. Weak justification for behaviour is provided by a motivational state (intention or need), strong justification by selecting a reliable means to the fulfilment of the intention. Both the Sheriff and Robin are weakly justified by their intention to hit the target. Robin is strongly justified because he knows that his archery skills are a reliable means of achieving his aim. The Sheriff is not strongly justified because he knows his skills are insufficient for him to hope to hit the target except in freak circumstances. Tom Fool is neither weakly nor strongly justified: his hitting the target is unintentional and occurs by pure chance. Applying this picture to our referential practices, our object-directed thoughts are motivated, hence weakly justified, by the mind's need to represent. They are strongly justified if the pathway chosen for the information-marshalling activity is apt to the fulfilment of this need, i.e. the achievement of cognitive focus or aboutness.

Dickie's arguments for the 'cognitive focus' approach to aboutness-fixing are detailed, subtle and persuasive; they deserve – and I'm sure will receive – proper engagement which cannot be supplied here. Since it is the reference of our ordinary *thoughts* which is at stake, emphasis throughout is on speaker reference not linguistic/semantic reference. However, there are clear implications for the reference-fixing of the terms that we use to express our singular thoughts. Perhaps the most notorious problem here has been the causalist/descriptivist debate, stemming from the work of

Kripke, regarding the reference of proper names – a debate characterised by games of example and counterexample. For Dickie, these games have taken place at the wrong level of explanatory depth (p.171). Causalists and descriptivists need to provide an account of *how* causal or descriptive factors – or both – secure justificatory convergence for a speaker's body of proper name (<NN>) beliefs on the targeted object. In the case of perceptual demonstrative thought, justificatory convergence is secured by uptake from a perceptual feed, so the relation between thought and object is a causal one. In the case of our <NN> (proper name based) thoughts, the relation is more complex, depending on which kind of participant in a name-sharing practice we are considering. The majority are *participating consumers*: these have no direct acquaintance (no direct causal contact) with the object on which their <NN> thoughts converge; they acquire their beliefs via careful uptake from testimony. Careful uptake from testimony is a more sophisticated cognitive achievement than uptake from perception and has three stages. The first is *initial acceptance* of various tokens of a proper name as all converging on the same referent; the second is *sensitivity to defeaters* of various kinds (p.174). The third phase, dubbed 'narrative construction', is the most interesting. In order for a subject to build a rational and coherent narrative which secures the aboutness of named object *o*, she must consider the non-freakish 'developmental trajectory' possible for the category to which *o* belongs (Ch 5.3). (Note here the metaphysical presuppositions, and implications for the epistemology of modality.) As illustration, Dickie cites 'Nicholas Bourbaki', the self-attributed name of a group of notable French mathematicians in the early twentieth century. A mathematician evaluating the theorems and proofs written by Bourbaki would achieve cognitive focus on their author, whether or not she knew that 'Bourbaki' was the name of a collective. However, someone misguidedly attempting to write a biography of Bourbaki, thinking the group to be one individual, would quickly come unstuck (p.167).

So how does the 'mind's rational need to represent' fit into this picture? Recall that weak justification for behaviour, in this case the information-marshalling activities aimed at achieving cognitive focus through careful uptake from testimony, is provided by a motivational state: an intention or a need. Intentions have a specified goal, are conceptually based. Needs do not. Most consuming participants in a name-sharing activity would lack the conceptual resources to spell out their intentions. This is why, according to Dickie, the motivational state providing the weak justification must be a need rather than intention. Dickie is surely right not to want to attribute to speakers 'profoundly implicit' propositional attitudes that they are not aware of, and could not articulate if called upon to do so (p.18; Ch. 5.4). But the notion of a 'rational need to represent' is a tricky one to swallow, despite Dickie's robust defence. First, why should the need be a *rational* rather than an emotional one? Dickie presents a picture of the mind casting around for something to think about. But this does not seem quite true to the phenomenology of thought. Our thoughts alight unbidden on objects and topics, and we must often make a conscious effort to direct them where we want. Second, if a 'need' is required to motivate the choice of appropriate justificatory pathway to aboutness, why not have a *need to get things right*? At the most basic level, creatures need to get things right in order to survive. For those with more highly-developed cognitive skills, the need to get things right is an emotional need and rationality is a key tool in fulfilling it.

Despite my reservations about Dickie's overall picture, I would like it to be true. *Fixing Reference* is a fruitfully provocative book which should be read by anyone working on theory of reference, perception or singular thought.

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