

Is Dickie's Account of Aboutness-Fixing Explanatory?

by

JESSICA PEPP 

Uppsala University

Abstract: Imogen Dickie's book *Fixing Reference* promises to reframe the investigation of mental intentionality, or what makes thoughts be *about* particular things. Dickie focuses on beliefs, and argues that if we can show how our ordinary means of belief formation sustain a certain connection between what our beliefs are about and how they are justified, we will have explained the ability of these ordinary means of belief formation to generate beliefs that are about particular objects. A worry about Dickie's approach is that the explanation it offers is circular and thus not a genuine explanation of mental aboutness. This article develops a version of that worry in detail and turns it aside. Nonetheless, I argue that the explanatory value of the account remains unclear. While it does promise a dialectical advance over traditional theorizing about aboutness, it does not reveal how our ordinary means of belief formation make beliefs be about what they are about.

Keywords: intentionality, aboutness, justification, Imogen Dickie, reference, belief, explanation, circularity

1. Introduction

IMOGEN DICKIE'S BOOK *Fixing Reference* (2015) aims to break new ground on the question of what it is for a thought (or, at least, a body of beliefs – Dickie limits her topic to these) to be about a particular object. In doing so, she aims to move discussion of this question past the back-and-forth between descriptivists (who hold that aboutness is a relation whereby an object satisfies a descriptive condition appropriately related to the thinker), causalists (who hold that aboutness is some sort of causal relation between the thinker and an object), and those who take a hybrid approach between causalism and descriptivism (Dickie, 2015, p. 5).¹ The escape from the traditional debate is to be achieved by recognizing that it has been carried out at the wrong explanatory level. Theorists have proposed various causal or description-based relations between thinkers and objects that they claim obtain if and only if those thinkers are thinking about those objects. Such proposals are inevitably counterexamples, leading to refined proposals, leading to more counterexamples and so on. To break this cycle, Dickie proposes, we should postpone debate about which specific relations between

1 The hybrid approach Dickie discusses is that of Gareth Evans (1982) and (1985).

thinkers and objects are aboutness relations until we have answered the question of what it is for a relation to be an aboutness relation. Dickie sets out, first, to answer this question and, second, to use her answer to identify the features of certain relations between thinkers and objects (some causal, some description-based) that make them be aboutness-fixing relations.

The promise of an entirely new approach to explaining mental aboutness (and perhaps, derivatively, reference in language) is tantalizing and worth taking seriously. But it can be difficult to understand what sort of explanation Dickie's account ultimately offers. The account is complex, as is the argumentation whereby Dickie tries to show that it does, in fact, explain aboutness. Despite a recent exchange about the account's explanatory value between Dickie and critics,² work remains to be done to make clear both what the approach is aiming at and what it achieves with respect to explaining aboutness. This article aims to make progress on sorting this out.

To a substantial extent, my aims are exegetical. Sections 2 and 3 are devoted to setting out Dickie's explanatory strategy. Section 2 describes the overall strategy, as well as the connection between aboutness and justification that is at the heart of the account. Section 3 focuses on Dickie's use of this connection between aboutness and justification to explain why certain relations between beliefs and objects make those beliefs be about those objects. A central example is the relation of a belief being formed by uptake from a perceptual link to an object (e.g., as a result of seeing an object). Dickie's explanation of how this relation fixes the belief's aboutness (i.e., makes it be about the perceived object) takes the form of an argument. The argument proceeds from the premises that (i) a body of beliefs stands in this relation to a particular object, and (ii) aboutness and justification are connected in a certain way, to (iii) the conclusion that the beliefs are about the object. In sections 4 and 5, I develop and then turn aside an objection to Dickie's explanation of perceptual demonstrative aboutness. The objection is that the argument which constitutes the explanation appears to be circular, implicitly assuming its conclusion that the beliefs are about the object.³ But in fact, Dickie's argument goes through without presupposing its conclusion, as long as the principle connecting aboutness and justification to which she appeals is understood properly. (This is shown in section 5.) The exercise of raising and turning aside the circularity objection is a useful one, as the objection is not directly answered by Dickie's own remarks on circularity and explanation. In addition, answering

2 See Hofweber (2017) and Ninan (2017). Dickie responds in Dickie (2017).

3 Although Dickie (2015, 2017) discusses and addresses potential concerns about her account being circular, the worry I will develop is different, or at least differently formulated. I think it brings out why circularity worries about the account may not be assuaged by the responses to them that Dickie has offered.

the objection brings out more clearly the kind of explanation that is on offer. With this clearer picture in hand, section 6 asks in what way Dickie's account constitutes an explanatory advance over traditional accounts of aboutness. My answer is that the account does make an advance, but not in revealing what it is for a relation between a body of beliefs and an object to fix aboutness. Rather, the advance is in laying out a general, principled way to argue that claims that certain relations fix aboutness are not vulnerable to certain types of counterexample. Section 7 concludes.

2. The Explanatory Strategy of *Fixing Reference*

In the above-mentioned response to critics, Dickie (2017, pp. 749–750) summarizes her strategy for explaining aboutness as follows:⁴

- (1) First clarify a range of connections between aboutness, justification, and truth, without trying to reduce any of these to the others.
- (2) Then use these connections to establish a necessary and sufficient condition that a relation to an object must meet if it is to be an aboutness-fixing relation: the relation must make available a means of justification that converges on the object.
- (3) Finally, examine the features of the relations to objects that we know do enable us to think about them, and show how, in virtue of these features, the relations meet this necessary and sufficient condition.

The strategy is targeted at explaining the aboutness of beliefs, specifically. What beliefs are about is intimately connected to what is required for them to be true and justified. (This is not obviously so for the aboutness of desires, hopes, imaginings and many other types of thoughts, which Dickie sets aside.) By precisely articulating these connections (Part 1 of the strategy), Dickie aims to draw out (at Part 2) a necessary and sufficient condition on aboutness. This is not to be just any old necessary and sufficient condition on aboutness, but one that reveals what it is about any given belief–object relation that makes it be an aboutness relation. In particular, the necessary and sufficient condition is supposed to reveal that what makes a relation between a belief and an object be an aboutness relation is that it provides “justificatory convergence” on the object (more on this in a moment). The aim of Part 2 is supposed to be in contrast to the aims of the above-mentioned causalist and descriptivist approaches. According to Dickie, these approaches merely propose that the obtaining of certain types of description-involving or causal relations between thoughts and objects is necessary and

⁴ Numbers in brackets and line breaks between the sentences are my additions to the quoted text.

sufficient for those thoughts to be about those objects. They do not reveal what it is about these relations that makes them fix aboutness.⁵ By contrast, in her account, the appropriate explanatory role for the specification of such relations is in Part 3, where it may be shown how their obtaining satisfies the biconditional arrived at in Part 2.

I will begin by getting the biconditional in question on the table. It is:

Reference and Justification ("RAJ"):

A body of ordinary $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs is about o

iff

its proprietary means of justification converges on o , so that, 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 Φ . (Dickie, 2015, p. 57)

Roughly, RAJ says that a body of beliefs is about a particular object if and only if the beliefs' being justified would entail the non-actuality of a certain range of circumstances in which that object lacks the properties predicated (of something) by the beliefs. The basic idea is that if a body of beliefs are justified, then while they may be false, it cannot be (in some sense) very easy for them to be false. The fact that they are justified must rule out some important range of circumstances in which they are false. And of course, if these beliefs are about a particular object, o , then circumstances in which they are false are circumstances in which o does not have the properties they predicate of something. Thus, if the beliefs are about o , then the fact that they are justified entails that some important range of circumstances in which o lacks those properties are not actual. In broad outline, this is the left-to-right direction of RAJ. It is quite plausible on its face. The right-to-left direction is also plausible, though, as Dickie (2015, p. 49) points out, one might worry that a belief's justification would rule out important ranges of circumstances where objects other than the one the belief is about lack the properties the beliefs predicate. The details matter here, and Dickie (2015, pp. 48–57) provides a detailed argument for the right-to-left direction of RAJ. I am not going to discuss this argument here, however. That is because my focus is not on whether RAJ is true, but on the role it might play in Dickie's overall explanatory strategy, assuming that it is true.

We do need some details to see how Dickie's explanation of aboutness works. So let us add back some of the specific terms of RAJ to the rough gloss given in the previous paragraph. First, by "a body of ordinary $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs", Dickie means

⁵ See, especially, her discussion in Dickie (2015, ch. 5, section 5.1).

a group of beliefs that are about an ordinary material object and are unified by the subject's treating them as being about a single thing. That the beliefs are " $\langle \alpha \rangle$ beliefs" means that they have the form $\langle \alpha$ is $\Phi \rangle$, where the bracket notation indicates the concepts involved in the beliefs. " α " ranges over object concepts. " Φ " ranges over property concepts. So the conceptual form of $\langle \alpha \rangle$ beliefs is that of ascribing a property to an object.⁶

Second, the type of justification appealed to in RAJ is "proprietary, rationality-securing justification". Dickie takes justification, in general, to be conferred on beliefs by the way they are formed. For a given body of beliefs, a subject is disposed to treat one way of forming these beliefs as providing "proprietary" justification, which trumps any justification for forming the contradictory belief. For instance, for a body of perceptual demonstrative beliefs of the form \langle that is $\Phi \rangle$, subjects will be disposed to treat uptake from a perceptual link as justifying such beliefs in a way that overrides justification for contrary beliefs by, say, testimony. (In forming beliefs like \langle That is blue \rangle , \langle That is shiny \rangle , etc. about a cup on my desk that I am looking at, I will treat the justification provided by my visual perception as overriding whatever justification is provided by an informant's testimony to the contrary, unless I have reason to think my perception is compromised.) So the right-hand side of RAJ concerns justification that the subject treats as overriding for the relevant body of beliefs. It also concerns justification that secures the rationality of those beliefs. That is, the subject's having this justification – the beliefs having been formed in the relevant way – must entail that the beliefs are rational.

The last thing to add is the notion of a "rationally relevant circumstance". The rough gloss of the right-hand side of RAJ was that the body of beliefs' being justified entails the non-actuality of a certain range of circumstances in which a certain object lacks the properties the beliefs predicate. The answer to the question "which range of circumstances?" is: the rationally relevant ones; the ones that have to be ruled out by the way the belief is formed in order for the belief to count as rational.

Moving mentally from the rough gloss of RAJ to the official principle can blur one's understanding of the claim. I will continue to discuss the official principle, and some of the details will play a role in the arguments to come. But the reader is encouraged to revert to the rough gloss for keeping track of the basic idea behind the claim.

RAJ's prominent role in Dickie's explanatory strategy reflects her idea that justificatory convergence being necessary and sufficient for aboutness in some way

6 This interpretation of Dickie's notation is indebted to Hofweber's (2017, p. 729) comments on the notation.

explains or reveals the nature of aboutness.⁷ But as Dickie points out, if we were to take RAJ on its own as an explanation of aboutness, the explanation would be circular. For it seems unavoidable that the notion of justification invoked in the right-hand side of RAJ must itself be explained by appeal to aboutness (Dickie, 2015, p. 111). Dickie does not develop an account of justification for belief, but proposes that for a belief to be justified it must at least be formed by a route that is conducive to its truth. But what it takes for a belief to be true depends on what it is about. If explaining what it is for a belief's justification to converge on an object requires appeal to the fact that the belief is about the object, then explaining the latter by appeal to the former looks circular.

Given this, Dickie's idea is not that RAJ itself explains aboutness in other terms, but that it specifies precisely the interconnection between aboutness and justification. Its further role in explaining aboutness is to structure the task at Part 3 of the strategy. For a given belief–object relation, the task is to explain what makes that relation be an aboutness-fixing relation by showing how it makes available a means of justification for the belief that converges on the object. That is, the task is to show how the relation entails that RAJ is satisfied for that body of beliefs and that object.

There is a wrinkle in fitting RAJ into the explanatory strategy described by Dickie in the quotation at the beginning of this section. The wrinkle is that RAJ does not have the form described in Part 2 of the explanatory strategy. RAJ states a necessary and sufficient condition for a body of beliefs to be about a particular object – i.e., for the body of beliefs to stand in *some* aboutness-fixing relation to that object. But it does not state a necessary and sufficient condition for a given relation between a body of beliefs and an object to be an aboutness-fixing relation. Nor does RAJ entail a necessary and sufficient condition for a belief–object relation to be an aboutness-fixing relation. This means that when we move to Part 3 of the explanatory strategy and try to show how certain relations between bodies of beliefs and objects satisfy RAJ, we are not showing how those relations satisfy a necessary and sufficient condition on being an aboutness-fixing relation. We are, rather, showing how the obtaining of these relations between a belief and an object entails that a necessary and sufficient condition for the beliefs to be about the object is satisfied. We will return to this distinction in section 6.

Meanwhile, to see how Part 3 of Dickie's explanatory strategy is supposed to work, it will help to focus on the example of an aboutness-fixing relation that Dickie herself uses to illustrate the strategy. This is the relation of *being formed by uptake from a perceptual link to something*. Bodies of perceptual demonstrative

7 In the Introduction to Dickie (2015, p. 1), she even says, “I am going to argue that the aboutness of our ordinary thoughts *just is* cognitive focus”, where “cognitive focus” is another term for “justificatory convergence”.

beliefs (of the form <That is Φ >) typically stand in this relation to ordinary objects. (In what follows, I will sometimes refer to this as “the perceptual formation relation.”) For example, I presently have a body of beliefs that have been formed by uptake from my visual link to a cup I see before me on my desk. These include beliefs of the form <That is blue>, <That is shiny>, <That is cylindrical>, and so on. Intuitively, these beliefs are about the cup on my desk. What is it about the relation between these beliefs and the cup that makes the beliefs be about the cup? In the next section, I will work through Dickie's answer to this question.⁸

3. Part 3 of the Explanatory Strategy

To show how the perceptual formation relation fixes aboutness, Dickie appeals to three claims. The first claim is RAJ itself. As already mentioned, for purposes of this discussion I assume that RAJ is true.

The second claim is that “the mind has a basic need to think about things outside itself” (Dickie, 2015, p. 188). Dickie sees this basic need for thought about things as conferring a “weak” form of practical justification on belief formation activities that are motivated and guided by this need. This is in the same way that activities motivated by intentions are in a weak way justified by those intentions, even if the activities are not reliable means to fulfilling the intentions. For instance, an unskilled archer's intention to hit a target gives his arrow-shooting activities some weak sort of justification that similar random motions of someone not intending to hit the target would lack. The arrow-shooting activities of a skilled archer intending to hit the target would be “strongly justified”, since they are a reliable means to fulfilling the intention (Dickie, 2015, p. 94). According to Dickie, needs justify subjects' activities in a similar way, conferring strong or weak justification depending on whether an activity is a reliable means to fulfilling the need that motivates and guides it. In particular, our need to think about ordinary objects confers weak justification on our “most basic, information-marshalling routines”, including the formation of beliefs by uptake from perceptual links to objects (Dickie, 2015, p. 112). (In what follows, I will refer to the need to think about ordinary objects simply as “the Need”.) For present purposes, I will accept that these notions of weak and strong justification apply to perceptual belief formation.

⁸ Perceptual demonstrative beliefs formed through perceptual contact with objects are not Dickie's only explanatory target. She also aims to explain aboutness for beliefs formed through understanding of a proper name that refers to an object (“proper-name based” beliefs) and beliefs formed through grasp of a description that an object satisfies (“description-based” beliefs). I focus here on perceptual demonstrative beliefs because most of Dickie's exposition of her explanatory strategy, in both her (2015) and (2017), uses this category of beliefs as illustration.

The third claim Dickie appeals to is what I will follow her in referring to as the “Empirical Claim”:

Empirical Claim:

As a matter of fact, it is reliably the case that a body of <that> beliefs formed by uptake from the deliverances of a single perceptual channel tends to match what the object upon which the perceptual channel is focussed is like. (Dickie, 2015, p. 102)

Put simply, if you form beliefs like <That is blue>, <That is shiny>, and so on as a result of seeing an object, it tends to be the case that the object you are perceiving is in fact blue, shiny, and so on. (This is what Dickie means by saying that the beliefs tend to “match” the object: the properties the beliefs predicate of something tend to be properties that the object has.) This claim is intuitively plausible, and I will assume it is true.⁹

Drawing on these three claims, Dickie summarizes the story she wishes to tell about how the formation of beliefs by uptake from a perceptual link to an object secures justificatory convergence on that object, and thus makes the beliefs be about that object, as follows:¹⁰

Given the framework elements and this empirical claim, we can explain aboutness-fixing and justification for perceptual demonstrative beliefs like this:

- (1) The mind needs to think about things outside itself.
- (2) Formation of a body of <that> beliefs in response to attentional perceptual input is an information-marshalling strategy guided by this need. Because the information-marshalling strategy is guided by a motivational state of the subject, it is a justified strategy.
- (3) Given the empirical claim and 2, uptake from an attentional link¹¹ with an ordinary object is a route to formation of justified beliefs that reliably match what this object is like.
- (4) Given the aboutness and justification principle [i.e., RAJ], these beliefs are about the object.
- (5) Given that in most cases where we get as far as forming <that> beliefs, the attended object is an ordinary object, the beliefs are also “justified” in a stronger sense than is registered at 2: the strategy by which they are formed is not just guided by the need at 1, but is a reliable generator of this need’s fulfilment. (Dickie, 2017, p. 746)

9 Dickie (2015, pp. 115–122) argues for the claim.

10 A note about labelling: in the rest of this article I will make reference to two numbered lists of explanatory stages. The first is the three-part articulation of Dickie’s overall explanatory strategy, quoted at the start of section 2. The second is the five-step explanatory story she wishes to tell at Part 3 of the overall strategy, reproduced in the text following this note. To distinguish between the two lists, I will refer to the items in the overall strategy as Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3, while I will refer to the five steps of the story that is told at Part 3 as Step 1, Step 2, etc.

11 Dickie describes the relevant belief formation route in different ways throughout *Fixing Reference* and in her subsequent response to critics. For instance, she describes it as formation by uptake from a perceptual link, formation by uptake from the deliverances of a single perceptual channel, and formation by uptake from an attentional link. For present purposes there is no important difference between these formulations.

Let us simply accept Steps 1 to 3 of this story: assuming that the Empirical Claim is true and that guidance by the Need confers a form of justification on perceptual demonstrative beliefs formed by uptake from a perceptual link, these are fine.¹² Questions arise when the story moves from Step 3 to Step 4.

The claim at Step 4 is that if forming beliefs by uptake from a perceptual link to an object is a justified belief formation strategy (as claimed at Step 2) and if it produces beliefs that reliably match the perceived object, then the beliefs are about the object. This is supposed to follow from Step 3 plus RAJ. The rationale seems to be as follows: The beliefs are formed by uptake from a perceptual link, which is the proprietary means of justification for such beliefs. And the beliefs are justified, because their formation is guided by the Need. Moreover, the Empirical Claim implies that this way of forming beliefs reliably rules out circumstances in which the resulting beliefs do not match the perceived object. Putting these elements together, we get that the subject is forming beliefs by a proprietary means that confers rationality-securing justification, and that this means of formation also eliminates circumstances in which the perceived object does not match the beliefs. So it looks like the right-hand side of RAJ is satisfied for $o =$ the perceived object, and we can infer that the beliefs are about the perceived object.

Dickie flags one worry about the move from 3 to 4. This is the worry that the kind of justification referred to in RAJ is *theoretical* justification. So in order for 4 to follow from 3 and RAJ, the claim at 3 must be that belief formation by uptake from a perceptual link to an object confers *theoretical* justification on the beliefs so formed, and generates beliefs that reliably match the object. But what has been shown is only that this reliable matching is achieved by a belief formation route that confers a “weak” and in any case *practical* justification on the beliefs thus formed. Before the story can proceed from 3 to 4, it must be shown that the justification conferred on beliefs by being formed in a way that is guided by the Need should also be considered theoretical justification.

In response to this concern, Dickie does not try to show directly that the practical justification conferred by the Need satisfies some sufficient condition for (also) counting as theoretical justification. Instead, she starts from the supposition

12 There is a further assumption in moving from Step 2 to 3: that if the belief formation activity is weakly justified, then the resulting beliefs have the same weak form of justification. One might object to this on the grounds that it constitutes a slide from practical justification for an activity to theoretical justification for a belief. This is a concern that Dickie addresses, and I discuss it in the text immediately following. However, I am reading Step 3 as ascribing the same kind of justification to the beliefs themselves as is ascribed to the activity of forming them in Step 2. So if the latter is merely practical justification for the activity, then Step 3 ascribes merely practical justification for the beliefs. Then the problem about the slide from practical to theoretical justification arises at Step 4, in the way I discuss in the text. I do not think it makes a difference to the substance of the problem whether one sees it as arising at Step 3 or Step 4.

that it is warranted to treat the “positive normative status” conferred by the Need as a kind of theoretical justification for beliefs formed by perceptual uptake if and only if doing so “generates a coherent and explanatorily valuable account of how these beliefs meet whatever necessary conditions on theoretically justified belief we have succeeded in isolating” (Dickie, 2015, p. 106). The necessary condition on theoretically justified belief that Dickie isolates is that theoretical justification is truth-conducive. A belief formation route that confers theoretical justification must tend to produce beliefs that are true. Truth-conduciveness thus serves as a test that must be passed by any claim that a certain normative status (in this case, justification by the Need) is a form of theoretical justification (Dickie, 2017, p. 747) If we treat such a status as theoretical justification, doing so must enable us to explain how the status is truth-conducive.

Dickie argues that treating justification by the Need as theoretical justification passes this test. Her rationale is as follows: If perceptual beliefs’ justification by the Need is taken to be a kind of theoretical justification, then the move from Step 3 to Step 4 in her explanatory story is acceptable. And if the beliefs are about the perceived object (as concluded in Step 4), this together with the Empirical Claim implies that they tend to match the object that they are about. That is, they tend to be true. So assuming the beliefs’ justification by the Need to be a kind of theoretical justification has generated a coherent account of how the justification is truth-conducive. According to Dickie, the availability of this explanation licences treating the justification conferred on perceptual demonstrative beliefs by the Need as the kind of justification referred to in RAJ. This in turn licences the move from Step 3 to Step 4, so aboutness-fixing for perceptual demonstrative beliefs has been explained.¹³

It is certainly plausible that (absent unusual circumstances) beliefs formed by uptake from perceptual links have proprietary, rationality-securing justification. It is unclear, however, to what extent the plausibility of this assumption is independent of the equally plausible idea that such beliefs are about the perceived objects. Dickie’s appeal to the Need seems aimed at giving some aboutness-independent motivation for the assumption that such beliefs are justified in the sense required for RAJ. But the real, load-bearing support for that assumption seems

13 Since my focus is on Dickie’s explanation of aboutness rather than justification, I will not discuss Step 5 of the explanatory story in the text. Briefly, though, Step 5 notes that an assumption of Step 3, that the attentional link from which the beliefs are formed is a link to an ordinary object, is true in most cases of forming perceptual demonstrative beliefs. That is, usually when one forms perceptual demonstrative beliefs by uptake from a perceptual link, one is seeing an ordinary material object rather than a shadow, ripple, raindrop or the like. Given that this is so, most instances of forming perceptual demonstrative beliefs, by the argument of Steps 1–4, result in beliefs about the perceived object, which means that this way of forming beliefs reliably fulfils the Need (for beliefs *about objects*) that guides the activity of belief formation. Thus the activity is not just weakly justified by the Need, but strongly justified, in the way explained in section 2.

not to be that the beliefs are weakly justified by the Need, but that if we assume that the beliefs are justified in the sense required for RAJ, we can show why their justification (conferred by the way they are formed) is truth-conducive. It is not clear why we could not make the same case for assuming that the beliefs are justified in the sense required for RAJ without appealing to the Need at all.

In any event, let us allow that it is legitimate to make this assumption. Still, the explanatory story can seem puzzling. It is easy to get the feeling that the conclusion of the story, that the beliefs are about the object, is being implicitly assumed somewhere along the way.¹⁴ But if there is an implicit step between Step 3 and Step 4 that says something like, “assume that the beliefs are about the object”, then the 1–5 story does not look like much of an explanation of aboutness-fixing for perceptual demonstrative thoughts.

In the next section, I will develop this worry.¹⁵ Then in section 5, I will argue that the worry can be assuaged by clarifying the proper understanding of RAJ.¹⁶ I think it is worthwhile to spell out the worry and where it goes wrong, because it reflects a natural and perhaps common misunderstanding which is not directly addressed in Dickie's (2017) reply to critics. Addressing this worry also brings into sharper focus the way in which Dickie's account is supposed to explain aboutness. It reveals that while the account is not circular in the sense of (in effect) saying that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about the perceived object in part because they are about the perceived object, its explanatory value is nonetheless unclear. In section 6, I will try to get clearer on what the approach really explains and how it advances our understanding of the aboutness of thought.

4. Circularity in the Explanation of Aboutness-Fixing?

Here is a reason why one might resist the move from Step 3 to Step 4 of the explanatory story, even if one is willing to accept the assumption that ordinary perceptual demonstrative beliefs formed by uptake from a perceptual link have proprietary, rationality-securing justification.

14 Ninan (2017, p. 736) expresses a worry along these lines about Dickie's reasoning, noting that the matching between beliefs and object ensured by the Empirical Claim can count as “getting that object's properties right” and thus make for the justificatory convergence that RAJ says is necessary and sufficient for the beliefs to be about the object “only if the beliefs in question are about that object”. And Hofweber (2017, pp. 729–730) gives voice to similar puzzlement as to how beliefs that are practically justified by the Need and reliably match a particular object could be treated as epistemically justified in the sense needed for RAJ unless these beliefs “are taken to have content and are about something”.

15 I will develop the worry in the way that it struck me. I take this to be a development of the same basic worry expressed by Ninan and Hofweber (see n. 14), but I do not claim that their specific worries are exactly the one I will present.

16 I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to see this.

To move from Step 3 to Step 4 by appeal to RAJ, it needs to be shown that this proprietary, rationality-securing justification eliminates – is incompatible with – every rationally relevant circumstance where the perceived object lacks the features predicated by the beliefs. Recall that the rationally relevant circumstances are the circumstances that have to be ruled out by the way the belief is formed in order for the belief to count as rational. And for a belief to be rational, Dickie says, it must be formed by a “careful enough justification-conferring route”: one which “at least eliminates some reasonably wide range of circumstances where the belief is not true” (Dickie, 2015, p. 42). So it needs to be shown that the beliefs’ being formed by uptake from a perceptual attentional link is (at least) incompatible with a reasonably wide range of circumstances where the beliefs are not true.

In the 1–5 explanatory story, it looks as though the Empirical Claim is supposed to establish this. But it does not. To be sure, the Empirical Claim implies that the perceptual formation route is incompatible with a range of circumstances in which the perceived object does not match the beliefs so formed. For the Empirical Claim says that beliefs formed in this way reliably match the perceived object. But are these circumstances in which the perceived object does not match the beliefs also circumstances in which the beliefs are not *true*? That depends on whether the beliefs are about the perceived object. If they are, then yes, the Empirical Claim implies that their formation route eliminates a reasonably wide range of circumstances where the beliefs are not true. But if the beliefs are *not* about the perceived object, then the Empirical Claim does not imply this.

Thus, it seems that the Empirical Claim does not do the work it is supposed to do in the explanatory story. It does not enable the move from Step 3 to Step 4 via RAJ, because it does not combine with the assumption that justification by the Need is theoretical so as to satisfy the right-hand side of RAJ. For it to do so, it seems that we would have to add to the story between Steps 3 and 4 the assumption that the beliefs in question are about the perceived object. Step 4 of the story would be more fully expressed as: “Given the aboutness and justification principle, and assuming that these beliefs are about the object, these beliefs are about the object”. This looks like a straightforwardly circular explanation of why the beliefs are about the object.

5. How to Understand the Move from Step 3 to Step 4¹⁷

Reading Dickie’s explanatory story in the way described in section 4 results in puzzlement about how the story explains what makes perceptually formed beliefs

17 I am indebted to the aforementioned reviewer for pointing me toward the reading of the explanatory story that I propose in this section.

be about particular objects. In short, it seems that we cannot conclude that every rationally relevant circumstance where the perceived object fails to match the beliefs is eliminated by the beliefs' formation route, unless we have already assumed that the beliefs are about the perceived object.

The problem here results from losing sight of the fact that RAJ is circular with respect to aboutness. As discussed in section 2, a fuller development of the right-hand side of RAJ would have to make reference to the beliefs' being about *o*. We might think about RAJ, then, in the following expanded way (the expansions are italicized):

A body of ordinary $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs is about *o*

iff

its proprietary means of justification converges on *o*, so that, for all $\langle\Phi\rangle$, if *S* has that *which would be* proprietary rationality-securing justification *if the body of beliefs were about o* for the belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$, this justification eliminates every circumstance *that would be* rationally relevant *if the body of beliefs were about o* where *o* is not Φ .

Thinking of RAJ in this way makes it easier to see how to move from Step 3 to Step 4 in the explanatory story. We have assumed that forming a body of \langle that \rangle beliefs by uptake from a perceptual link confers proprietary, rationality-securing justification on those beliefs, full stop. This implies that the formation route confers proprietary, rationality-securing justification on those beliefs if they are about the perceived object. And the Empirical Claim implies that the beliefs' being formed by this route at least eliminates a reasonably wide range of circumstances in which the beliefs are false, on the assumption that the beliefs are about the perceived object. Does this in turn imply that the formation route eliminates *every rationally relevant circumstance* where the perceived object does not match a given belief, on the assumption that the beliefs are about the perceived object? That is, does it imply that the formation route is incompatible with all such circumstances with which it has to be incompatible in order for the beliefs it produces to count as rational? Recall that for a formation route to ensure a belief's rationality, it must *at least* be incompatible with some reasonably wide range of circumstances where the belief is not true. The Empirical Claim implies that this necessary condition is satisfied. Whether or not incompatibility with a reasonably wide range of belief-not-true circumstances is also *sufficient* for a belief's formation route to ensure its rationality is not clear. I take it that Dickie is assuming that it is sufficient. In effect, this amounts to assuming that the reliability of a belief formation process in producing beliefs that match a particular object entails

that the beliefs thus formed are rational, if they are about that object. This seems like a reasonable enough assumption, so let us accept it.

Then it follows that forming a body of <that> beliefs by uptake from a perceptual link confers proprietary, rationality-securing justification that eliminates every circumstance that would be a rationally relevant circumstance to eliminate if the beliefs were about the perceived object. Then by RAJ, understood in the explicitly circular manner spelled out above, the body of <that> beliefs is about the perceived object. The argument from Step 1 to Step 4 does not implicitly presuppose the conclusion at Step 4.¹⁸

So the explanatory story of aboutness-fixing for perceptual demonstrative beliefs is an argument that goes roughly as follows:

- (1) Suppose that a body of <that> beliefs, call it B, is formed by uptake from an attentional perceptual link to an object, call it o.
- (2) The formation route of B confers proprietary, rationality-securing justification on the beliefs in B. (Assumption; supposedly warranted because of the weak practical justification conferred by the fact that the formation route is guided by the Need.)
- (3) The formation route of B eliminates a reasonably wide range of circumstances where the beliefs in B do not match o. (Follows from the Empirical Claim.)
- (4) If the beliefs in B were about o, then the range of circumstances mentioned in 3 would be all the circumstances where the beliefs in B do not match o that are rationally relevant to the formation of the beliefs in B. (From 3 and the definitions of “rational” and “rationally relevant”, plus

18 One might wonder whether treating RAJ in the explicitly circular way will allow the right-hand side of RAJ to be satisfied for $o = q$, where q is not the perceived object. Might it not be the case that the proprietary justification for the beliefs (i.e., their formation by the perceptual route) also eliminates a range of circumstances where q does not match the beliefs produced? And, on the assumption that the beliefs are about q , might not these be all the rationally relevant circumstances where q does not match the beliefs? Dickie's basic answer to this is: no, this could not be the case, because the formation route could only eliminate the required range of circumstances for q if q were an observational duplicate of the perceived object. If q were not an observational duplicate of the perceived object, then formation of a <That is Φ > belief via the perceptual formation route would be compatible with plenty of possible circumstances in which the perceived object is Φ , but q is not. However, if q were an observational duplicate of the perceived object, it would have to exist in another sector of the universe causally isolated from our own. And given that the belief formation process is a causal process in our sector, its taking place is compatible with plenty of total circumstances in which there are no other sectors (so q does not exist), or in which the other sectors are not observational duplicates (so q does not share the observational properties of the perceived object). The details are complicated, and it is not clear that Dickie's argument takes account of the potential difference in the range of circumstances that are rationally relevant if the beliefs are assumed to be about q rather than about the perceived object. But I will not pursue this further here.

the extra assumption about the connection between reliability and rationality already discussed.)

- (5) A body of ordinary $\langle \alpha \rangle$ beliefs is about o iff its proprietary means of justification converges on o , so that, for all $\langle \Phi \rangle$, if S has that which would be proprietary rationality-securing justification if the body of beliefs were about o for the belief that $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$, this justification eliminates every circumstance that would be rationally relevant if the body of beliefs were about o where o is not Φ . (RAJ, expanded version.)
- (6) B is about o . (By 2, 4 and 5.)

6. What Does the Explanatory Story Explain?

The work of the last two sections has been to clarify Part 3 of Dickie's explanatory strategy. Part 3 is supposed to reveal why certain relations between beliefs and objects, such as the beliefs' being formed by uptake from a perceptual link to the object, are aboutness-fixing relations. It is supposed to reveal why the obtaining of these relations *makes* beliefs be about particular objects. But on its face, the explanatory story at Part 3 is simply an argument from a set of premises – RAJ, the Empirical Claim, and the claim that the perceptual formation route justifies beliefs in the way relevant for RAJ – to the conclusion, in Step 4, that perceptual demonstrative beliefs formed by uptake from an attentional perceptual link to an ordinary object are about that object. Suppose this argument is sound. Still, it does not show that these premises *explain* the fact that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about the perceived object.¹⁹ Or at any rate, it only shows that the premises “explain” this fact in the sense that they entail it. (In this sense, the existence of the singleton set of Socrates “explains” the fact that Socrates exists.)

I take it that Dickie intends her explanatory story to explain the aboutness of perceptual demonstrative beliefs in a different sense. Here is a proposal. Perhaps the right way to see the explanatory story of Part 3 is as a way of defending an explanatory claim that many theorists have (more or less) made. That claim is that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about a particular object in virtue of the beliefs having been formed by uptake from a perceptual link to that object. Dickie (2015, pp. 114–115) describes this as the “acquaintance-theoretic view”, according to which “a perceptual link enables thoughts that are about the perceived object ‘directly’, without descriptive mediation”.²⁰ According to the

19 This is in the same way that Dickie's arguments for the two directions of RAJ do not show which, if either, side explains the other, as Dickie (2015, p. 108) is careful to acknowledge.

20 As prominent proposals in this vein, Dickie (2015, p. 115) cites (and I have no quarrel with this list) Evans (1982, ch. 6), Campbell (2002, ch. 5), Bach (2010) and Recanati (2012, ch. 5).

opposing traditional view, which she labels “descriptivism”, “a perceptual link with *o* enables thought about it by supplying the subject with grasp of a descriptive condition that it satisfies”. Such views are often expressed using the “in virtue of” locution: perceptual demonstrative beliefs are claimed to be about a particular object *in virtue of* that object satisfying a descriptive condition grasped by the subject, or *in virtue of* perceptual uptake from that object having given rise to the beliefs. Of course, it is possible to read the “in virtue of” locution that features in these claims in the less interesting sense suggested above: in this sense, we could say that in virtue of Socrates’s singleton set existing, it is also the case that Socrates exists. But I take it that in the formulation of these views, “in virtue of” should be understood in a more metaphysically loaded sense. Acquaintance theory and descriptivism hold that the facts they each cite *explain* perceptual demonstrative beliefs’ being about a particular object – make them be about it – in a sense that requires those facts to enjoy some sort of metaphysical priority or fundamentality relative to the aboutness facts.

Note that such an explanation need not be reductive. Dickie (2017, p. 749) eschews the search for a reductive explanation of aboutness and takes Hofweber (2017) and Ninan (2017) (in the exchange mentioned earlier) as insisting on one. However, as I read Hofweber and Ninan, they are looking for a metaphysical explanation of how aboutness arises from something more fundamental, not necessarily a reduction of aboutness to something else. Moreover, I read Dickie as in fact offering a metaphysical explanation of this sort, albeit not a novel one. The basis of the explanatory story of Part 3, it seems to me, is that a belief’s formation by uptake from a perceptual link with an object metaphysically explains the belief’s being about that object. This does not reduce the belief’s aboutness to its perceptual formation.²¹

What I have said so far is perhaps not such a big step away from the letter of Dickie’s text. After all, she describes her account of perceptual demonstrative beliefs as “a new way to be an acquaintance theorist about perceptual demonstrative thought”. How, then, does the explanatory story of Part 3 provide a novel version of acquaintance theory? Dickie says that it “discharge[s] [an] obligation” for acquaintance theory: an obligation to explain what makes perceptual demonstrative beliefs be about particular objects *if it is not the fact that those objects satisfy descriptive conditions associated with the beliefs* (as descriptivism would have it). The suggestion is that descriptivism has an explanation to give whereas

21 There is, of course, a large contemporary literature on the nature of this kind of metaphysical explanation and whether and how it may be unified under a notion like “grounding”. I will not delve into these matters here.

acquaintance theory is at the outset merely “negative”, claiming that aboutness is not fixed by description satisfaction (Dickie, 2015, pp. 114–115).

However, by Dickie's own lights, the comparative dialectical standing of the acquaintance theorist and the descriptivist at the outset is that they are on equal footing. Each claims that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about particular objects in virtue of the obtaining of certain facts involving those objects. Neither, just by claiming that much, provides an account of *why* those facts' obtaining should make the beliefs be about those objects. To illustrate: descriptivism says that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about particular objects in virtue of those objects satisfying descriptive conditions subjects associate with those beliefs. This is not yet to say *why* an object's satisfying such a condition should make it be what the beliefs are about. Likewise, acquaintance theory says that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about particular objects in virtue of those objects being at the end of the perceptual links through which the beliefs are formed. This is not yet to say *why* an object's being at the end of such a link should make it be what the beliefs are about.

Given this, one might expect the explanatory story of Part 3 to fill in the second bit of the explanation for the acquaintance theoretic view. That is, one might expect it to show *why* an object's being at the end of a perceptual link should *make* beliefs formed from such a link be about that object. In one sense, the explanatory story does this. It shows that an object's being at the end of the perceptual link from which a body of beliefs are formed *makes* the beliefs be about the object in the sense that it *entails* that they are about the object. But it does not show that their standing in this relation *makes* the beliefs be about the object in the metaphysically explanatory sense of its being *in virtue of* standing in this relation that the beliefs are about the object.

Recall the point made in section 2, that RAJ is formulated as a necessary and sufficient condition on beliefs' being about an object, not as a necessary and sufficient condition on a relation being an aboutness-fixing relation. Because of this, one cannot argue from the satisfaction of RAJ's right-hand side to the claim that the perceptual formation relation between the beliefs and the object is an aboutness-fixing relation. What I have just said is in effect another way of making the same point. As a further illustration, notice that a descriptivist about perceptual demonstrative beliefs could accept Dickie's explanatory story – they could accept that a body of perceptual demonstrative beliefs' being formed by uptake from a perceptual link to an object entails that it is about that object – and yet maintain that the beliefs are not about that object *in virtue of* being formed by perceptual uptake from the object. Rather, what makes the beliefs be about the object is that the object satisfies a descriptive condition (which might be

something like “the object at the end of the perceptual link from which this thought arises”), grasp of which such perceptual uptake provides.

Of course, if Dickie’s argument is sound, then there are no cases in which a body of beliefs is formed by perceptual uptake from a particular object but is not about that object. But the absence of counterexamples of this kind does not establish that the beliefs are about the object *in virtue of* their perceptual formation relation to it.²² Neither, I am suggesting, is this established by a sound argument from the fact that the latter obtains to the fact that the former obtains.

Even if the argument at Part 3 does not show that – or why – formation by uptake from a perceptual link to an object is an aboutness-fixing relation, it does discharge an obligation for someone who defends this view. For if one claims that being formed by perceptual uptake from a particular object *makes* a perceptual demonstrative belief be about that object, then one should at least be able to show that if a perceptual demonstrative belief is formed in this way, then it will be about the object. And this is what Dickie’s explanatory story does. (In doing so, it gives the dialectical advantage to the acquaintance theorist over the descriptivist, who needs to show that if a perceptual demonstrative belief is associated in the relevant way with a descriptive condition picking out an object, then the belief will be about that object. Dickie’s development of the acquaintance-theoretic view does not show that this cannot be done, however.)

Thus, Dickie’s explanatory strategy provides a more general, principle-based approach to defending “in virtue of” claims about aboutness than we find in the traditional “games of counterexample and evasion” (Dickie, 2015, p. 154). This is certainly a dialectical advance. For the case of perceptual demonstrative beliefs, Dickie’s 1–5 argument, assuming it is sound,²³ constitutes a strong defence of acquaintance theory. But it is not at a different “level of explanatory depth” from traditional approaches. As others have done before, Dickie makes a claim about in virtue of what beliefs are about what they are about. She backs up her claim by providing an argument to the effect that there are no counterexamples in which the proposed basis of aboutness obtains, but the beliefs are not about the relevant object. The advance is in making this argument from general principles rather than by taking up (or coming up with) putative counterexamples and either accommodating or dismissing them, only to have to do it all over again when further putative counterexamples are produced. An argument like this is of no small value in defending specific accounts of aboutness for various types of belief. Still,

22 In her discussion of proper name-based thought, Dickie (2015, p. 170) herself appears to suggest this: “even if we were to find a counterexample-proof candidate relation [for fixing aboutness for proper name-based thought], we would *still* need to establish that this is the aboutness-fixing relation, rather than just a relation that happens to hold whenever there is proper-name-based aboutness”.

23 It has not been my aim to assess this, as I have simply granted Dickie’s premises.

while such an argument can establish that a given relation (the perceptual formation relation, for example) is a *candidate* for fixing aboutness – that it is not ruled out – it cannot establish that this relation is what does the aboutness-fixing work. In this respect, Dickie's explanatory story seems to be on a par with the traditional rounds of counterexample and evasion.

7. Conclusion

Fixing Reference proposes to make a fresh start on understanding the nature of aboutness. The fresh start is to be had by adding a step to our theorizing about the nature of aboutness relations, which Dickie thinks has thus far been missed out. This is the step of saying what it would be for a relation between a belief and an object to be an aboutness relation, before going on to say which particular kinds of relations fit the bill. Dickie's proposal is that what it is for a relation between a belief and an object to be an aboutness relation is for that relation to satisfy a principle connecting aboutness and justification, RAJ. RAJ is explanatory insofar as it structures the task of saying what it is about our ordinary means of forming beliefs that qualifies them as creating aboutness relations. In showing how these ordinary means of belief formation make the right-hand side of RAJ true (i.e., how they make available a means of justificatory convergence on the relevant objects), we explain in what the aboutness of our ordinary beliefs consists.

My examination of Dickie's flagship case of beliefs formed by uptake from a perceptual link to an object casts doubt on this picture of the explanatory power of the account. The problem is not, as it might first appear to be, that the argument in Part 3 of the account assumes its own conclusion. Rather, the problem is that it is not clear that this argument reveals either what makes perceptual demonstrative beliefs be about the objects at the ends of the perceptual links from which they are formed, or how the perceptual formation relation makes this be the case. Instead, the argument provides a principled way to defend the claim that perceptual demonstrative beliefs are about objects in virtue of standing in this relation to them, against the worry that the perceptual formation relation might hold in the absence of aboutness.

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