

# Cognitive Hunger: Remarks on Imogen Dickie's *Fixing Reference*

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The central thesis of Imogen Dickie's *Fixing Reference* is what she calls 'Reference and Justification' (R&J). In approximate form, it reads as follows:

S's  $\langle a$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  beliefs are about an object iff their means of justification converges on the object, so that, given how the beliefs are justified, the subject will be unlucky if they do not match the object and not merely lucky if they do. (Dickie, 2015, p. 37)<sup>1</sup>

Although stated in somewhat different terms, R&J is, as Dickie (280) notes, not unlike other meta-semantic principles that have been discussed in the literature. Many causal theories of content attempt, in one way or another, to ground the relation between a representation and what it represents in the fact that the former reliably indicates the latter. What is striking about Dickie's account, from this point of view, is its unapologetic appeal to the normative notion of justification. In that respect, her view is closer to that of Christopher Peacocke (1992).

Another aspect of R&J that is worth noting initially is that it treats belief as essentially structured. Someone who is, as I am, happy to speak of mental representations might say that what R&J is really about is the representational content of a singular mental representation, which Dickie notates as:  $\langle a \rangle$ . But, as Frege (1980, p. x) famously taught, such representations operate only in the context of 'judgements', or beliefs, that is, together with other mental representations. Dickie restricts her attention to simple subject-predicate beliefs in which  $\langle a \rangle$  figures. This seems to be, in part, just a practical simplification: The extension

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<sup>1</sup> Further page references otherwise not specified will be to this book.

to the case of relations likely poses no problem of principle. But it is not unreasonable, either, it seems to me, to suppose that the content of such singular representations is fixed by their behavior in relatively simple contexts, e.g., not by their behavior in quantified conditionals in whose consequents they happen to appear. As Dickie (26–7) notes, this strategy does require us to take for granted, for present purposes, that we know what the contents of the associated property-representations  $\langle \Phi \rangle$  are. But this sort of subtle interplay between the contents of whole judgements and the contents of their constituent parts is already familiar from the work of Gareth Evans (1985c, §II) and others.

R&J undergoes a series of refinements over the course of the first two chapters, until it reaches its final version:

A body of ordinary  $\langle a \rangle$  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  $\langle a$  is  $\Phi \rangle$ , this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where  $o$  is not  $\Phi$ . (57)

As the notion of justification is used here, it is obviously doxastic: We are talking about how the agent actually justifies the belief in question. I would suggest, moreover, that, the notion of justification used in this version of R&J is not really normative: We might just as well talk of how the belief was formed and of what maintains it. Normativity enters through the notion of *rationality-securing* justification. It is obvious that not just any method of forming and maintaining a belief can be expected reliably to ensure its truth. The thought is thus that when the belief  $\langle a$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  is formed and maintained in a way that makes it rational, *then* the agent will be unlucky if  $o$  is not  $\Phi$  and not merely lucky if it is.

Another aspect of the final form of R&J that deserves comment is its mention of a ‘proprietary’ means of justification associated with  $\langle a \rangle$ . Dickie (50–2) introduces this notion with an example: In the case of perceptual demonstrative beliefs, the proprietary means of justification is uptake from a stream of perceptual information; Dickie proposes that we normally treat this method of justifying perceptual demonstrative beliefs as overriding any other. So, e.g., we might also have testimonial information about the object, but if testimony conflicts with perception, then perception wins. Of course, this is at best true *ceteris paribus*, and I am skeptical myself about how broadly applicable such a notion actually is. But the underlying idea, that there is a means of justification that is distinctively and constitutively associated with singular representations

of a particular type, strikes me as both less problematic and as potentially sufficient for Dickie's purposes.<sup>2</sup> But, for that very reason, I shall not pursue the issue here.

It is important to appreciate that, although R&J is a general principle concerning all singular representations, it is really programmatic: It describes the general form of an account of what makes beliefs featuring a certain sort of singular representation about whatever it is that they are about. Half of *Fixing Reference* is devoted to developing these more specific accounts for the cases of perceptual demonstratives, proper names, and what Evans (1985b, p. 180) called 'descriptive names'. And when we look closely at the structure of these accounts, we get, I think, a better sense for how R&J is supposed to be understood. In the case of perceptual demonstrative beliefs, implementing R&J amounts to doing three things (122): identifying the proprietary mode of justification associated with these beliefs; showing that the proprietary mode confers rationality-securing justification on the beliefs; and showing that beliefs so justified will reliably get the properties of a certain object right.

So we might re-state R&J as follows:

A body of ordinary  $\langle a \rangle$  beliefs is about  $o$  iff:

- (i) There is a 'proprietary' method by means of which such beliefs are formed and maintained.
- (ii) Beliefs so formed are justified, or rational.
- (iii) If a belief  $\langle a$  is  $\Phi \rangle$  is so formed, then  $o$  will in fact be  $\Phi$ , unless circumstances are unusual in some way against which the agent is not rationally required to guard.

I have stated this last condition using the sort of language Dickie herself tends to use in practice. But I suspect that there are many ways in which it might be stated. To see the point of the escape clause, consider the case of proper names. In the case of interest to Dickie, that of what she calls 'participating consumers',<sup>3</sup> the proprietary means of justification is

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of the argument for R&J given in Chapter 2, the assumption that there is a proprietary means of justification plays a role only in the argument for what Dickie calls the 'uniqueness lemma'. But it is not really needed there. If it is needed at all, then, it is in connection with the detailed accounts of how the contents of various types of singular representations are fixed, which we will discuss below.

<sup>3</sup> Much of my concern about how Dickie uses the notion of a 'proprietary' means of justification emerges here. In the case of 'producing' participants in a name-using practice, I suspect that there is no proprietary means of justification, in Dickie's sense.

supposed to be *careful* uptake from a stream of testimony (174): One has to be reasonably sensitive to whether one's informant is competent and sincere. If, in forming a certain belief, one was fooled by a very good liar, that does not deprive the belief of rationality, though it does undermine any expectation that the belief should be true.

In the case of perceptual demonstratives and proper names, it is possible to give an independent statement of what the contents of such representations are supposed to be: Perceptual demonstratives refer to the objects of attentional perceptual links; a proper name acquired through testimony inherits its referent from one's informant.<sup>4</sup> The problem is then to show that R&J actually does deliver these results.

As Dickie sees it, however, the case of descriptive names is very different. Evans's famous example was "Julius", which he introduced as a name of whoever invented the zipper. It has, so far as I am aware, been universally held that, if such expressions are to be regarded as names at all, then they refer to whatever satisfies the associated description. Perhaps *the* most original, and striking, claim that Dickie makes in *Fixing Reference* is that this is false. She motivates this radical thesis with a real-life example (3–4): "Geraint the Blue Bard" was introduced as a name for whoever wrote a certain series of songs in medieval Welsh; historians spent many years investigating Geraint using textual analysis and related techniques; but then it turned out that the songs were forged by one Edward Williams. Not only did historians not conclude that Geraint was Edward Williams, but there is strong linguistic evidence that "Geraint" was not functioning in such a way that it could have referred to the forger (34–6). So, if Dickie is right, we have, in general, *no* independent way of saying to what descriptive names refer, except that given by R&J: A given descriptive name will refer to the object that is the 'cognitive focus' of the practice of using it, period.

There is much that might be said about this, and I expect much will be said about it. But I will say only a few things here. First, my own initial reaction to this discussion was one of astonished disbelief. Later, I thought there were just too many obvious moves for a 'descriptivist' about descriptive names to make. But I now think Dickie is probably right. In some ways, this is a wonderful example of how the right theoretical framework, as developed in Chapters 6–7, can make a view that might

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<sup>4</sup> It is, in the current climate, worth emphasizing how Dickie's account *justifies* this claim, which is familiar from the work of Saul Kripke (1980, pp. 91ff), without basing it upon 'intuitions' about 'cases'. See Dickie's discussion of "the status of examples" (19–22).

first seem ‘unintuitive’ seem almost inevitable.

Second, there is a way in which this conclusion should not be too surprising. Hilary Putnam made a similar point a very long time ago, though his topic was natural kinds. Putnam (1975) observed that the description that originally served to define a given kind is sometimes not just replaced but rejected as not even true of the kind. Putnam’s point was very much that the description might, given our present epistemic situation, help us achieve ‘cognitive focus’ on the kind without accurately describing it. It is crucial for Putnam’s larger purposes that there be a ‘conceptual unity’ to our thought about the kind, even through such transformations, but he does not do very much to explain what secures that unity. This is precisely the issue that Dickie discusses in §6.3, and I recommend her discussion very highly.

To this point, I have ignored the second of what Dickie advertises as the two main theses of *Fixing Reference*: that our achievement of ‘cognitive focus’ is motivated by the mind’s “basic need to represent things outside itself” (6). This thesis plays a crucial role in Dickie’s various arguments that the particular forms of ‘proprietary’ justification associated with given types of singular representations do secure their rationality. The problem is perhaps most obvious in the case of perceptual demonstratives. Why are beliefs about an object that are formed on the basis of uptake from an attentional perceptual link *rational*? One answer, familiar from the work of John McDowell (1996) is that forming a belief on the basis of perception is relevantly like forming a belief on the basis of inference from other beliefs. Another answer would be that the question does not arise: Since we have no choice but to form beliefs that way, they count as rational.

But Dickie thinks we should at least consider alternatives to the inferential view, and she argues directly against the quasi-Wittgensteinian view. We do not always form beliefs in response to perceptual input, even when we are visually attending to an object: It is possible just to watch it. So there is an “intervening variable” that determines when we form such beliefs and when we do not. This, Dickie suggests, is where the mind’s need to represent things outside itself enters:

If you have plenty to think about, [then] you are not hungry for food for thought, and are less likely to take up the opportunity to think about a thing that an attentional perceptual link provides. If you *are* hungry for food for thought, you will seize upon the opportunity provided by an attentional percep-

tual feed, sustaining the attentional link, and forming and maintaining a body of  $\langle a \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  beliefs even if the object you are attending to is an unexciting specimen with which you would not bother in a situation where that need was being fulfilled in other ways. (127, emphasis original)

The comparison with hunger is deliberate: Dickie thinks of the mind's "need" for contact with the external world as a "non-conceptual motivational state", much as hunger is (6). Indeed, cognitive hunger, like nutritional hunger, is supposed to be a *felt* need, differing only in that the associated feeling is non-specific, one of general unease, unlike nutritional hunger, which directs us to the means for its satisfaction (286).

Let me first explain the role that cognitive hunger plays in Dickie's account of the rationality of perceptual beliefs. In Chapter 3, Dickie sketches the following picture, of how motivational states can justify actions, drawing upon the work of G. E. M. Anscombe (1957). Suppose that you are motivated to do something, and suppose that you take certain steps toward that end, guided by that need. Then those steps are, says Dickie, 'weakly justified' by the need. If, in addition, the steps reliably lead to satisfaction of the need, then they are also *strongly* justified. But the mind has a need to represent things outside itself, that is, to develop stable, accurate bodies of belief about external objects. Collecting information delivered by an attentional perceptual feed into a coherent picture of an object's state is a way of fulfilling this need, so doing so is weakly justified. And, moreover, given the empirical facts about how perception works, doing so is also a reliable way of meeting the need, so it is strongly justified.

My main worry about this story is that cognitive hunger, as Dickie describes it, seems to be far too luxurious a need to be necessary for aboutness. I suspect that most people who have lived would have relished the sort of leisure that left them craving food for thought. One might also think it plausible that some animals—higher primates, at least—are capable of perceptual demonstrative thought. But it seems odd to describe their cognition as motivated by *cognitive* hunger.

It is not that I do not think that intelligent organisms have a need to represent things outside themselves. On the contrary, I think they do, and I agree with Dickie that this fact should play a role in our account of what representational content is. But I suspect that the need to represent is, in effect, emergent from other, more basic needs, such as the needs for food and shelter. Suppose an organism has found shelter: a

safe place to sleep, to raise its young, and so forth. To find food for said young, the organism will have to venture forth; to feed its young, it will then have to return home; finding food next time will be easier if the organism can remember where it has found food before. All of this points to the importance, to the organism, of having (at least) a ‘cognitive map’ of its local environment, as we know many creatures do.

Now re-consider the question why we do or do not form beliefs in response to a given stream of perceptual input. I suggest that cognitive hunger is too generic to be the ‘intervening variable’ here. It could perhaps explain why I choose to collect some perceptual information into a stable body of belief, but it can hardly explain why I choose to focus on the particular object I do. And in most cases, I would suggest, the answer to this latter question will refer to more basic needs: hunger, a desire for companionship, or a desire to stop the annoying buzzing of a fly. Satisfying any of these needs depends upon one’s having available a reasonably accurate representation of one’s local environment. And the more complex our intellectual, emotional, and physical needs, the more substantial the demands on our representational capacities.

Dickie suggests in Chapter 8, however, that explaining the mind’s need to represent in such terms would prohibit content from playing an explanatory role we might prefer it played (298). Fred Dretske famously argued that representational content can play a role in what he called ‘structuring’ causes, but not in ‘triggering’ causes. Suppose we ask why a can of soda came out of a machine when we put a quarter into it (see e.g. Dretske, 2000). One answer would go something like this: There is a mechanism inside the machine that detects objects of a certain shape and weight, and it releases a soda when it sees one. This is an explanation in terms of triggering causes, of Humean ‘constant conjunction’. But there is a different sort of answer, too, one formulated in terms of economic exchange, the status of certain objects as currency, and so forth. This is an explanation in terms of structuring causes: It tells us why the triggering causes worked as they did, i.e., why the machine was in such a state that putting a quarter into it would cause it to emit a can of soda. Dretske’s view is that content plays only that sort of explanatory role: We appeal to the contents of mental states, in effect, to explain why the brain is wired the way it is. But, although this gives representational content *some* role to play in the causation of behavior, even Dretske (2004, pp. 170–1) acknowledges that this role is at best indirect. And I agree with Dickie that this is not satisfying.

Dickie argues in §8.3 that, if we regard cognitive hunger as a *felt*

need, and if we characterize what it is a need for in terms of what relieves the associated unease, then we can acknowledge a role for content as a triggering cause. The argument is complex, but the basic idea is that the need to represent can be a triggering cause of our formation of beliefs about a particular object only if it is subjectively experienced: Then we can see ourselves responding directly to that need when we form such beliefs. If not, however, then, even if we have such a need, it can only explain why we are so designed as to form such beliefs, and then the need is only a structuring cause (297–9).

I am puzzled. The question Dretske raises is whether we have to mention the contents of our mental states (as opposed to their neurology) in characterizing the triggering causes of our behavior. And, so far as I can see, this is independent of the question *what it is* for those mental states to have the content they do. More precisely, even if the need to represent is only a structuring cause of our being in the representational states we are, surely our being in those states could still be a triggering cause of our behavior.

I suspect that what is really bothering Dickie is different. The mind's need to represent played a crucial role in explaining why our forming beliefs the way we do is rational. And that story, in turn, presumed that our so-forming our beliefs is responsive to the need to represent, i.e., that cognitive hunger is among the triggering causes of our forming those beliefs. One might well wonder how that could be if cognitive hunger were not a felt need. But the suggestion made above, that cognitive hunger is a sort of emergent need, could usefully be deployed here, I think, both within Dickie's own program and as a way of answering her anti-Wittgensteinian argument.

Unfortunately, I cannot pursue that idea further here, as I am almost out of space. Let me close simply by applauding Dickie's willingness to raise this sort of issue, which is too little discussed nowadays, perhaps because it is so terribly hard.<sup>5</sup>

## References

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Imogen, and also to Rachel Goodman, for discussions that helped shape these comments.



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