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The Subtle Lives of Descriptive Names

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Abstract and Keywords

This paper develops a radical alternative to standard accounts of descriptive names. A ‘descriptive name’ is a singular term introduced by a stipulation of form ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’. It is shown that—contrary to standard views—the reference-fixing mechanism for a descriptive name is not satisfactory. §1 argues for a background view of reference-fixing for ordinary language singular terms. §2 shows how this view generates a non-satisfactory account of reference-fixing for descriptive names. §3 explores the implications of the discussion in §§1–2 for the possibility of descriptively mediated singular thought. §4 argues for a new account of what speaker and hearer are committed to when the speaker makes and the hearer accepts a ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulation.

Keywords: descriptive names, reference, singular thought, reference-fixing mechanism, singular terms

Consider the following example:

Case 1: ‘Tremulous Hand’ ‘Tremulous Hand’ is used to refer to the otherwise unidentified author of around 50,000 thirteenth-century glosses in manuscripts. Palaeographical analysis provides strong evidence that these glosses are the work of a single person with distinctive (tremulous and left-leaning) handwriting. All that is known about Tremulous Hand is what can be deduced from the glosses themselves.

‘Tremulous Hand’ is a ‘descriptive name’: a name associated with a stipulation of form ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’.¹ The extant discussion² of such expressions is characterized by a standard claim and a controversy:

Standard claim (satisfactionality)—A descriptive name's referent, if it has one, is the satisfier of the associated description (if α refers, it refers to the satisfier of \ulcorner the Ψ \urcorner).

Central question of the controversy (singularity?)—Is the thought expressed by a sentence containing a descriptive name a singular thought about the name's bearer? (Part of what is at issue in this controversy is what counts as a genuinely 'singular' thought.)

(p.2) This paper argues that the standard claim is false, and suggests a new solution to the controversy.

Here are two more examples which will enable a gesture towards what I am going to propose:

Case 2: 'Geraint the Blue Bard' 'Geraint the Blue Bard' was used for over a hundred years as a name for the otherwise unidentified author of a series of songs in medieval Welsh, dealing with medieval themes, and employing medieval metres. Efforts to find out more about Geraint's life, taking off from cues in the texts, supposed that he flourished in the ninth century, and was either an apothecary, a minor aristocrat, or a priest. Rival factions collected large bodies of evidence to support each of these hypotheses. But in 1956 the 'Blue Bard' songs were shown to be the work of notorious nineteenth-century forger Edward Williams.

Case 3: 'Gizmo' X, the now aged head of a manufacturing company, likes to boast to his underlings about 'the gizmo that started it all', with strong suggestions that he was himself this thing's inventor. The underlings introduce a descriptive name 'Gizmo' with aboutness-fixing description \langle X's most remunerative early invention \rangle , and use X's utterances ('Ah, that was the year that the gizmo that started it all really took off' etc.) and the company's financial history to try to work out which of the firm's early patents Gizmo was. In fact, there was an early patent that enabled the firm to get on its feet—the first version of the firm's famous self-setting rat trap. But X was not its inventor. The firm's early patents were all bought for almost nothing from an unworldly individual who died an impoverished emeritus professor in a university town.

I take it that there are reasonably clear intuitive verdicts³ about these cases. In *Case 2*, intuition cries out that there was no Geraint—'Geraint the Blue Bard' as used by the unfortunate scholars did not refer. In *Case 3*, we can imagine filling in the details in such a way that the intuitive verdict is that 'Gizmo' *does* refer—to the rat trap: one underling says to another 'Well, here's Gizmo, but you realize that X didn't invent it after all...' If we take them at face value, these intuitive verdicts reverse what we should expect to find if the most flat-footed version of the *standard claim* is true. 'Geraint' and 'Gizmo' are descriptive names,

associated with stipulations ‘Let “Geraint” refer to the author of these songs’ and ‘Let “Gizmo” refer to X’s most remunerative early invention’. The description that figures in the ‘Geraint’ stipulation is satisfied (by Edward Williams). The one in the ‘Gizmo’ stipulation is not. If the *standard (p.3) claim* as I have stated it is true, ‘Geraint’ refers to Edward Williams, and ‘Gizmo’ is an empty name: diagnoses repugnant to intuition.

By the end of the paper, I shall have argued for a position that I think best explains these observations. The *standard claim* is false. And it is not false for the unexciting reason that the accompanying explicit stipulation might not capture the ‘real’ reference-fixing description associated with a name like ‘Tremulous Hand’, ‘Geraint’, or ‘Gizmo’. The *standard claim* is false because the mechanism of reference-fixing for these expressions is not satisfactory at all.

The paper is structured as follows. §1 develops a general framework for accounts of aboutness-fixing for our thoughts about ordinary things—a framework which will provide the basis for accounts of reference-fixing for the singular terms we standardly use to express these thoughts. §2 uses this framework to overturn the *standard claim* and motivate an alternative, non-satisfactory, account of how descriptively mediated aboutness-fixing and reference-fixing work. §3 develops the response to the *singularity* controversy that I want to propose. §4 considers the consequences of the §§1–3 discussion for a right account of what speaker and hearer commit themselves to when the speaker makes, and the hearer accepts a ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulation.

I should add that, fascinating as descriptive names are in their own right, I take much of the interest of the topic to derive from how it fits into the wider picture of our thought and speech about ordinary particular things. I have allowed editorial decisions about which details to develop and which to elide to be guided by this view.

1.1 Aboutness and justification

This section introduces a framework for accounts of aboutness-fixing for our thoughts about ordinary things—things like tables, dogs, trees, and people.⁴ To get the framework in place, I shall concentrate on what have traditionally been taken to be the central instances of such thoughts: the perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based cases, illustrated by *Cases 4* and *5* respectively—

(p.4)

Case 4 ‘That’ You are looking at a grapefruit on a table in front of you. The viewing conditions are good, and the situation devoid of causal and cognitive perversities: you are having an ordinary perceptual experience, caused by the grapefruit in an ordinary way. You form a body of beliefs you

would express by saying things like ‘That is round’, ‘That is rolling’, ‘That is orange’.

Case 5 ‘Aneurin Bevan’ You have not heard the name ‘Aneurin Bevan’ before. Somebody begins to explain who Bevan was: ‘Aneurin Bevan was a British Labour Party politician. He was a long-standing member of parliament, and a cabinet minister in the 1940s and 50s. He was instrumental in the foundation of Britain’s National Health Service.’ Nothing about the situation leads you to doubt your informant’s reliability. You take the utterances at face value, forming a body of beliefs you would express using ‘Aneurin Bevan’.

In each of these cases, I take it that it is obvious which individual your beliefs are about. In *Case 4* they are about the grapefruit you are looking at; in *Case 5* they are about the politician Aneurin Bevan. But to say that your beliefs are about these individuals is as yet to say nothing about *what makes it the case* that these are the individuals they are about. This section develops a new answer to this ‘What makes it the case?’ question.

The new answer is built around a principle derived from two further principles which I take to be basic, one connecting aboutness and truth, the other truth and justification:

Principle connecting aboutness and truth—If an $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ belief is about object o , it is true iff o is Φ .⁵ (If my belief that Jack has fleas is about my dog, it is true iff he has fleas.)

Principle connecting truth and justification—Justification is truth conducive; in general and allowing exceptions, if your belief is justified, you will be unlucky if it is not true and not merely lucky if it is.

Given these principles, it will be surprising and disappointing if we cannot cut the intermediate term and obtain a third principle connecting aboutness and justification—a principle capturing the significance for accounts of aboutness-fixing and, therefore, for the theory of reference of the fact that justification is truth-conducive. The rest of this section argues for such a principle as applicable to the perceptual demonstrative **(p.5)** and proper-name-based cases. The next section extends the discussion to the case of descriptive names.

As a first step towards the *aboutness and justification* principle that I want to propose, note two features that *Cases 4* and *5* have in common. In each case, you are maintaining a body of beliefs which you treat as about a single thing. And in each the body of beliefs is associated with what I shall call a ‘proprietary’ means of justification: a means of justification which you treat as trumping other means. The fact that in each case you are treating the resulting body of beliefs as about a single thing shows itself in the ways you are prepared to allow it to

develop. For example, when you believe <That is round> and <That is rolling> in *Case 4*, you are automatically prepared to move to <That is round and rolling>, without looking for evidence that the round thing and the rolling thing are the same. And as you maintain your growing body of <Aneurin Bevan> beliefs, you automatically guard against overt contradictions, revising your beliefs or reinterpreting or rejecting incoming testimony to avoid <Bevan was Φ > and <Bevan was not Φ > combinations.⁶ In *Case 4*, the proprietary means of justification is uptake from your attentional perceptual link with the grapefruit. In *Case 5* it is careful uptake from the stream of ‘Aneurin Bevan’ testimony. A body of beliefs united by the *treated by the subject as about the same thing* relation may come to include beliefs not justified by the associated proprietary means. But the proprietary means is marked out by its ‘trumping’ status: ‘Actually it’s made of glass and will shatter if it falls’ I tell you, as we watch the grapefruit to which we are jointly attending roll along. You have no reason to doubt what I say, and form a <That is fragile> belief, justified by uptake from my testimony. But when you see the grapefruit fall from a height onto the hardwood floor and roll away, perception trumps testimony and the <That is fragile> belief is discarded.⁷

(p.6) The *aboutness and justification* principle that I am going to propose connects the aboutness of a body of beliefs treated by the subject as about a single thing with what I shall call ‘justificatory convergence’ for the associated proprietary means of justification:

Principle connecting aboutness and justification (initial approximate version)—A body of beliefs treated by the subject as about some single thing is about object *o* iff its proprietary means of justification converges on *o*, making *o* the unique object whose properties the subject will be unlucky to get wrong and not merely lucky to get right in justifying beliefs in this way.

Here is a parallel case to consolidate what the *aboutness and justification* principle says. Suppose that an astronomer, hereafter ‘A’, is compiling a report from the data delivered by a telescope focused on object *o* in the night sky. A has verified that the telescope is both focused and working as it should. The telescope delivers a stream of data: detection of motion; detection of fluctuating temperature; and so on. A compiles her report: ‘It’s moving. Its temperature is fluctuating between such-and-such values...’. The fact that the telescope is focused on *o* does not entail that the report will get *o*’s properties right. But it does entail that the report will get *o*’s properties right unless some unlucky spoiler—a dirty mirror; deviant behaviour on *o*’s part—intervenes. The *aboutness and justification* principle treats the aboutness of our ordinary beliefs about ordinary things as what I shall call ‘cognitive focus’: the fact that a body of justified beliefs is about an object does not entail that all or any of them will

match the object. It does entail that if a belief about an object is justified yet does not match what the object is like, some unlucky spoiler has got in the way.

To reach an official statement of the *aboutness and justification* principle, we must say something more precise about the notions of being ‘unlucky’ to get an object’s properties wrong, and ‘not merely lucky’ to get them right. This in turn requires taking a stand on how to precisify the underlying principle connecting truth and justification. I take it that some version of this principle is inescapable: it is part of the concept of theoretical justification—justification for belief—that forming justified beliefs is, in general and allowing exceptions, a way to form true beliefs: if Philosopher A shows that Philosopher B’s account of what it is for a belief to be justified entails that nothing has gone wrong in cases where a (p. 7) justified belief is not true, A wins and B must go back to the drawing board. But the (inescapable) claim that we must accept some version of the *truth and justification* principle leaves completely open exactly which version is to be preferred. It is obviously not possible to do justice to the intricacies in which this question is embrangled in a section of a paper on something else. So rather than attempting to argue for a specific version of the principle, I shall rest with stating the version that I am going to employ. (Perhaps there is no one version of this principle which is to be preferred for all explanatory purposes. In any case, though I am not confident as to whether there is a definitive precisification of the connection between truth and justification, I am confident that the argument I am about to develop could be reconstructed, with suitable adjustments, around the various alternatives. The resulting *aboutness and justification* principle might itself look a little different from the principle that I shall propose. These differences will not matter for the purposes of this paper.)

The version of the *truth and justification* principle that I shall suppose takes its rise from the observation that the cognitive capacities at our disposal for the purposes of forming justified beliefs are limited relative to the complexity of our environment, and that there are, therefore, many more ways a belief might fail to be true than we have the resources to rule out as we go about our belief-forming business.

For example, consider my current belief, formed by uptake from perception, that people are riding bicycles past the window. My path to this belief is inconsistent with many ways it might fail to be true. If we set aside possibilities in which I am being taken in by some devious or unusual feature of the situation, my path to the belief rules out the possibility that what is outside is a six-lane highway devoid of bicycle traffic; the possibility that I am in fact staring at a blank wall rather than a three-dimensional bicycle-containing street scene; and many more besides. But in gesturing towards the ‘belief not true’ scenarios that my path to the belief *does* rule out, we have already conceded that there are others upon which it is silent. These are ‘devious’ or ‘unusual’ scenarios of the kind that were set aside preliminary to the gesture: the possibility that the things passing a few

feet away are cars disguised to look like bicycles to avoid the city's congestion charge; the possibility that rather than looking through a window I am looking at the last in a series of disguised and perfectly aligned mirrors, and the people on bicycles from whom my perceptual experience derives are in fact behind me and **(p.8)** several blocks away. Though there is, on the face of things, nothing in my path to belief that rules out these devious or unusual scenarios, I would not, in ordinary life, be regarded as under a requirement to hold back from forming my <People are riding past on bikes> belief until I had gathered evidence to exclude them. In situations like the one described, it is bad doxastic practice to hold out for evidence that excludes arcane and unusual, as well as humdrum and commonplace belief-not-true circumstances. A subject with ordinary human information-processing capacities who insists on ruling out even the most arcane not-p possibilities before believing that p will be too sluggish a cognitive operator to flourish in our rapidly changing world.

The elements of the precise *truth and justification* principle that I shall suppose can be abstracted from the discussion of this example. I shall suppose that a belief is justified only if formed by a route that eliminates some reasonable range of circumstances in which the belief is not true, where 'elimination' is defined as follows:

Definition—a route to the formation of a belief 'eliminates' a circumstance iff the fact that the belief is formed by this route is incompatible with the circumstance (so that the fact that the belief is formed by this route entails that the circumstance is not actual).⁸

I shall annex the term 'rational' to describe beliefs like the one in the example, justified by a route that eliminates a sufficient range and proportion of the ways the belief might fail to be true that it would have been bad practice to hold out for further justification before forming the belief:

(p.9)

Definition—a belief is 'rational' iff it is formed by a careful enough justification-conferring route.

And I shall introduce a notion of 'rational relevance' defined as follows:

Definition—Consider belief B formed by subject S. A B-not-true circumstance is 'rationally irrelevant' to S's formation of B iff it need not be eliminated by S's justification for B in order for this justification to secure B's rationality. A B-true circumstance is 'rationally irrelevant' to S's formation of B iff it is one in which rationality-securing-justification for the belief would fail to secure the belief's status as not-merely-luckily true. A

circumstance is 'rationally relevant' to S's formation of B iff it is not rationally irrelevant.

(For example, the circumstance in which the things I am looking at are cars disguised as bicycles is a rationally irrelevant belief-not-true circumstance. A circumstance in which I am (though I do not realize it) looking at the reflections of distant cyclists, but there are *also* cyclists, unseen by me, going past behind the mirror just a few feet away is a rationally irrelevant circumstance where my belief happens to be true.)

Given these elements, the version of the *truth and justification* principle that I am going to suppose can be stated as follows (capitalization signals official status):

TRUTH AND JUSTIFICATION—Justification that secures the rationality of a belief eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where the belief is not true.

I take the notions of 'rationality' and 'rational relevance' that I have introduced to be correlative to that of knowledge: a true belief formed by rationality-securing means counts as knowledge iff the circumstance in which it is formed is rationally relevant. I also take the notion of 'rational relevance' to be correlative to the 'virtue reliabilist' notion of a 'manifestation' of true-belief-forming competence. An exercise of true-belief-forming competence 'manifests' the competence iff it generates a true belief, and does so in virtue of being an exercise of the competence, rather than in some way that leaves the belief's truth a mere matter of luck.⁹ In these **(p.10)** terms, a rationally irrelevant circumstance is one where a belief formed by the *exercise* of a true-belief-forming competence nevertheless fails to *manifest* the competence (leaving it a matter of luck whether the belief is true).

Combining these elements, we get the precise version of the *aboutness and justification* principle for which I am about to argue:

ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION—A body of beliefs treated by subject S as about a single thing 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 $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$, this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where *o* is not Φ .¹⁰

ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION is a biconditional connecting aboutness and a precisified notion of justificatory convergence:

Aboutness	Justificatory convergence
\Leftrightarrow	
S's $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs are about o	For all $\langle\Phi\rangle$, if S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for believing $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$, this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ .

To prove the biconditional, we shall establish each direction (left-to-right; right-to-left) in turn.

Here is an argument for the left-to-right direction (from aboutness to justificatory convergence):

Suppose

1 S's belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ is about o .

Add the *aboutness and truth* principle:

2 If S's belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ is about an object, the belief is true iff that object is Φ .

(p.11) **1** and **2** entail

3 S's belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ is true iff o is Φ .

Add TRUTH AND JUSTIFICATION:

4 Justification that secures a belief's rationality eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where the belief is not true.

3 and **4** entail

5 Justification that secures the rationality of the belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ .

So we have the left-to-right direction of the ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION biconditional:

6 If S's $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ belief is about o , justification that secures the rationality of the belief eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ .

The argument for the other direction of the biconditional (where there is justificatory convergence there is aboutness) is a proof by *reductio*:

Suppose

1 It is not sufficient, for S's $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs to be about o , that their proprietary means of justification converge on o .

Given **1**, the following combination is coherent. S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for believing $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$. There is nothing devious interfering with the 'detection of Φ -instantiation' aspect of S's path to the belief: in forming the belief, S manifests competence at detection of the presence of some Φ -instantiating object. o is the object upon which the proprietary means of justification for S's $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs converges, so S's manifestation of Φ -detecting competence is picking up on whether o is Φ . But, because of the failure of some extra condition on aboutness—some condition above and beyond justificatory convergence—S's $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ belief is not about o .

2 In the scenario just described, S's circumstance is either rationally relevant to her formation of the $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ belief, or it is rationally irrelevant.

But the elements already in place generate an argument for **3**:

3 The circumstance is not rationally relevant to S's formation of the belief.

Suppose that **3** is false—the circumstance is rationally relevant. **1** specifies that o is the object upon which S's justification for the belief converges. So the left-to-right direction of the biconditional, just established, entails **(p.12)** that if S's beliefs are about *anything*, they are about o . **1** also specifies that S's $\langle\alpha\rangle$ beliefs are not about o . They are, therefore, about nothing, in which case they are not true. In addition, the definition of 'elimination' entails that a subject's justification for a belief never eliminates the actual circumstance—the circumstance in which the belief is formed. So if we suppose that the actual circumstance is rationally relevant, we are supposing that S has rationality-securing justification for the belief that $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ which leaves uneliminated a rationally relevant circumstance in which the belief is not true. But TRUTH AND JUSTIFICATION says that rationally-securing justification for a belief eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where the belief is not true. Contradiction.¹¹

And the elements already in place also generate an argument for **4**:

4 The circumstance is not rationally irrelevant to S's formation of the belief.

To see the argument for **4**, note first that the circumstance is not rationally irrelevant to S's formation of the corresponding belief that \langle Something is $\Phi\rangle$. For in the circumstance as described, there is nothing devious interfering with S's detection of Φ -instantiation: in forming a \langle Something is $\Phi\rangle$ belief on the basis of the means of Φ -detection that underpins proprietary justification for her $\langle\alpha$ is $\Phi\rangle$ belief, S would be manifesting true-belief-forming competence, and a circumstance in which formation of a belief by rationality-securing means

manifests true-belief-forming competence *just is* a circumstance rationally relevant to the belief's formation.

Given that the circumstance is rationally relevant to formation of the belief that <Something is Φ >, to deny **4** is to endorse the possibility of the following combination:

A circumstance rationally *irrelevant* to formation of the belief that < α is Φ > may be rationally *relevant* to formation of the belief that <Something is Φ >.

(p.13) And to endorse this possibility is to suppose that the conditions for the rationality of a <Something is Φ > belief might be more demanding than those for the rationality of the corresponding < α is Φ > belief. For example, it is to suppose that it might be rational to believe <That is square> by uptake from a perceptual link, but irrational to believe <Something is square> on the same justification (because the rationality of the <Something is square> belief requires the elimination of extra 'nothing square there' circumstances—circumstances that must be guarded against if it is to be rational to move to <Something is Φ > on the basis of perception, but may be ignored in moving to <That is Φ >). And this just gets things the wrong way around. Across the target range of cases—cases like *Cases 4* and *5* from the start of this section—a subject rationally entitled to believe < α is Φ > is automatically rationally entitled to believe <Something is Φ > too. (There are cases where some philosophers would deny the parallel claim. For example, some people deny that beliefs 'about' fictional characters are existentially committing, maintaining that <Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker St.> does not entail <Someone lives at 221b Baker St.>, and that a subject might be justified in believing the first but not the second. But these and other instances where the validity of the inference from < α is Φ > to <Something is Φ > is up for negotiation lie outside the target range.)

Having established **3** and **4**, we have eliminated both disjuncts of **2**. But the choice at **2** is generated by a situation whose coherence is entailed by **1**, so **1** must be rejected, giving us **5**:

5 If the proprietary means of justification for S's < α > beliefs converges on *o*, these beliefs are about *o*.

With REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION in place, we have a blueprint for answering the 'What makes it the case?' questions about *Cases 4* and *5*—the questions of what makes it the case that your beliefs are about the grapefruit and the politician respectively. In each case, the account of how aboutness-fixing works will be an account of how the resulting beliefs are justified, combined with an account of the conditions under which this means of justification—the

means of justification proprietary to the body of beliefs—converges on a particular thing.¹²

(p.14) There are many questions of detail about exactly how this blueprint is to be filled in. And a raft of further questions concern how the resulting accounts of aboutness-fixing for our perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based thoughts will dovetail with accounts of linguistic competence to deliver accounts of reference-fixing for demonstratives and proper names. But rather than pursue these questions here, I want now to turn to the main topic of this paper—descriptive names like ‘Tremulous Hand’, and the thoughts we use them to express.

1.2 Descriptive names in the aboutness and justification framework

The previous section used the cases of perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based thought to motivate a framework for accounts of aboutness-fixing for our thoughts about ordinary things. This section extends the discussion to cases involving descriptive names.

The first steps towards this extension can be read off the structural parallels between the perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based cases, illustrated by *Cases 4* and *5*, and cases like *Case 1 ‘Tremulous Hand’*. Like those in *Cases 4* and *5*, subjects in *Case 1* seem to be in the business of using a proprietary means of justification to develop bodies of belief that they treat as about a single particular thing. The proprietary means of justification in this case involves deployment of the description associated with the name. The core group¹³ of speakers use this description to harvest information from the vandalized manuscripts, looking for evidence for <The author of the glosses was Φ > beliefs, and, gathering the resulting <...is Φ > claims into a bodies of beliefs which they would affirm, if asked, to be ‘about’ Tremulous Hand.

Given these structural parallels, we can see how the ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION framework developed in the previous section *would* apply to the cases like *Case 1*. The suggestion would be that grasp of a description makes available a means of justification for a body of beliefs: use the description to harvest information which you then bundle together as about a particular thing. The resulting body of beliefs—standardly **(p.15)** expressed using a descriptive name—is about object *o* iff *o* is the object upon which this means of justification converges: the object whose properties the subject will be unlucky to get wrong and not merely lucky to get right in forming a body of beliefs justified in this way.

But why think that aboutness-fixing for the beliefs we express using descriptive names in fact *does* work in something like this way?

One reason is that the argument for ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION as applicable in the perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based cases applies, with a few wrinkles,¹⁴ to the case of descriptive names too. Another is that the resulting view generates improvements on both extant discussions of whether there can be, as I shall say ‘descriptively mediated singular thoughts’, and accounts of how ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulations work in conversational contexts. (I develop these points in §3 and §4 respectively.) A third reason is that the ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION-based account explains the intuitive verdicts surrounding the problem cases from the start of the paper—cases which seem to show that a descriptive name may refer to an object that does not satisfy the associated description, and fail to refer even though the associated description is satisfied. This is the line of thought I shall develop in this section. (I should stress that it is only in combination with the other two reasons that I think the story I am about to tell counts as the *best* explanation for the phenomena.)

Recall *Cases 2* and *3* from the start of the paper.

Case 2: ‘Geraint the Blue Bard’ ‘Geraint the Blue Bard’ was used for over a hundred years as a name for the otherwise unidentified author of a series of songs in medieval Welsh, dealing with medieval themes, and employing medieval metres...

Case 3: ‘Gizmo’ X, the now aged head of a manufacturing company, likes to boast to his underlings about ‘the gizmo that started it all’, with strong suggestions that he was himself this thing’s inventor. The underlings introduce ‘Gizmo’ with the stipulation ‘Let “Gizmo” refer to X’s most remunerative early invention’, and set about trying to find out which thing it was...

The intuitive verdict in *Case 2* was that the scholars’ <Geraint> beliefs were about nobody, even though the description associated with ‘Geraint’ is satisfied—in particular, the beliefs were not about Edward Williams, **(p.16)** even though he was the description’s satisfier. The verdict in *Case 3* was that Gizmo—the thing the underlings are trying to find out about—does not, after all, satisfy the ‘Gizmo’ description. I shall consider how the ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION framework predicts each of these results in turn.

Consider *Case 2* ‘Geraint’, and consider how scholars working before the discovery of the forgery justify their <Geraint> beliefs. We can imagine Scholar A arguing that Geraint had seen a manuscript of the *Life of St Cuthbert* like this: ‘There is strong evidence in the songs that Geraint has read the *Life of St Cuthbert*. In the ninth century, the only copies of the *Life of St Cuthbert* in existence were manuscript copies. So Geraint had seen a manuscript copy.’ Now, by the nineteenth century, there were many many more print copies of the *Life*

of *St Cuthbert* than manuscript copies. But suppose that Edward Williams, the satisfier of the 'Geraint' description, in fact did see one of the rare manuscript copies. Does anything in Scholar A's path to his <Geraint saw a manuscript copy> belief tend to rule out situations in which Edward Williams did not see a manuscript copy (making the match between Scholar A's belief and a property had by Edward Williams more than just a matter of luck)? The answer to this question is 'No': Scholar A's justification for this <Geraint was Φ > belief secures the belief's rationality, but leaves it a matter of luck whether Edward Williams was Φ . And, given the associated proprietary means of justification, this conclusion applies to the scholars' <Geraint> beliefs in general: it will be a matter of spectacular chance if a body of <Geraint> beliefs justified by the method the scholars are using matches what Edward Williams was like. So, given ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION, the suggestion that the scholars' beliefs are about Edward Williams is wrong.

Now consider *Case 3 'Gizmo'*. In the situation as envisaged, the story develops something like this. The name is introduced using the stipulation 'Let "Gizmo" refer to X's most remunerative early invention'. The underlings set about their investigation, combing the financial records from the firm's early days; studying X's old sketchbooks in the attempt to date various inventions; and so on. As the investigation unfolds, financial-record-combing proves a much more fruitful line of inquiry than X's-sketchbook-trawling, so that the sketchbook-trawling is left behind as a way of arriving at <Gizmo> beliefs. In this way, the underlings end up with bodies of belief whose means of justification converges **(p.17)** on an object—the rat trap upon which their investigations are homing in—which does not satisfy the initial aboutness-mediating description.

So the ABOUTNESS AND JUSTIFICATION framework explains the *Case 2* and *Case 3* intuitions, and does so in terms of a principle for which there is an independent, from-first-principles argument. But there is an obvious objection to moving from here to the conclusion that the mechanism for aboutness-fixing that underpins our uses of descriptive names is not satisfactory. The objector maintains that the reference-fixing mechanism at work in the cases I have considered *is* satisfactory—it is just that the respective 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulations do not capture the 'real' aboutness-fixing descriptions. For example, the suggestion might be that in the 'Geraint' case the 'real' aboutness-fixing description is 'the ninth-century author of these ballads'—a description that Edward Williams does not satisfy, and that in the 'Gizmo' case the 'real' description is one that the rat trap *does* satisfy—'the firm's most remunerative early patent'.

I shall give the reply to this objection which I take to be most helpful from the point of view of adding detail to the alternative, non-satisfactory, view of descriptively mediated aboutness-fixing that I want to propose.

Consider the following case:

Case 6 What will save the queen? (from a Hans Christian Andersen story)
The queen, beloved of her people, is sick and in danger of death. A sage advises that the queen will be saved if she is shown the loveliest rose in the world. The people embark on a collective search. At first they are looking for the rose bloom that is the most aesthetically pleasing. However, the results of the search for such a bloom lead them to realize that they need not the rose 'loveliest' in the narrow aesthetic sense, but the rose that shows forth the most love. So they consider roses that (in the world of the story) have grown spontaneously from the graves of lovers or soldiers who have given their lives for their countries. What they uncover in this phase of the search leads them to decide that what they are looking for is not a literal rose. At first they think it is a 'flowering' of human creativity, and look for the human creation which shows forth the most love on the part of its creator. But the search in that direction leads them back to more everyday possibilities: the rose 'seen on the blooming cheeks' of a young child, or the 'white rose of grief' in the face of somebody worried about somebody beloved. Finally their search leads them to what they have been looking for all along: Christ (in the world of the story, visible to the faithful, when in a suitable state of enlightenment, as an apparition springing rose-like from the pages of the *Bible*).

Case 6 illustrates a feature of our operations with descriptive names that is also present, in less extreme form, in *Case 3 'Gizmo'*: the description (**p.18**) around which the proprietary means of justification for a descriptive name is built is not a static parameter which must stay fixed throughout the course of development of an associated body of beliefs. Rather, it is what I shall call an 'outcome sensitive' parameter. The proprietary means of justification associated with the body of beliefs standardly expressible using a descriptive name is to use a description to harvest information, looking for evidence for <The Ψ is Φ > precursor beliefs, and bundling the resulting <...is Φ > information into a body of beliefs you treat as about a single thing. In structurally simple cases like *Case 1 'Tremulous Hand'* and *Case 2 'Geraint'*, the description playing the information-harvesting role remains stable through the period of the use of the name. But in more complex cases like *Case 3 'Gizmo'* and *Case 6 '...the queen'*, the descriptive condition used to harvest information shifts as the activity of maintaining the body of beliefs unfolds. An element of the descriptive condition that is front and centre at the beginning of the investigation fails to bear fruits in the form of resulting <...is Φ > beliefs, and is left behind: this is what happens to the <...was invented by X> element of the initial descriptive condition in *Case 3*. Subjects' understanding of key elements of the 'the Ψ ' description shifts so that, though there is continuity in their unfolding investigation, each stage making sense in the light of what has been uncovered at earlier ones, there is no single descriptive condition which can really be said to underpin the whole course of

the investigation. This is what happens in *Case 6*. And it is easy to imagine further dimensions of fluidity as subjects adjust their investigative tactics to maintain the productivity of the investigation and the coherence of the body of beliefs it generates. (For example, it might be that the ‘Tremulous Hand’ investigation ends up discarding some subset of the initial set of glosses as apocryphal; or that the investigation comes to take for granted the claim that Tremulous Hand was also the author of one of the major texts in which the marginalia appear; or...)

One option that might suggest itself to someone attracted by the ‘find the real aboutness-fixing description’ strategy is to claim that the ‘real’ description whose satisfaction by an object fixes the aboutness of the body of beliefs expressed using a descriptive name can change over time. But this will entail that many cases that we *want* to say involve thinking about the same thing all along in fact involve flipping between aboutness and aboutness failure, and from thought about o to thought about o^* , as the ‘real’ aboutness-fixing description changes.

(p.19) Another option that might suggest itself is to raise the level of cognitive sophistication of the supposed aboutness-fixing descriptive condition. For example, the suggestion might be that the aboutness-fixing descriptive condition in any given case is something like <the object upon which the means of justification introduced by this ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulation converges>. Given the proposal of the last two sections, the object the beliefs are about will be the satisfier of this description. But it is a familiar observation that to formulate a description that is satisfied in a case of aboutness is one thing, and to show that the description plays an aboutness-fixing role quite another.¹⁵ And in this case the suggestion that the proposed description is playing an aboutness-fixing role is open to an obvious response from redundancy. The suggestion that this description is playing an aboutness-fixing role owes whatever plausibility it has to the argument of §1. But given this argument, we *already* have an account of what makes an object the object the body of beliefs expressed using a descriptive name is about: it is about the object on which the associated means of justification converges. There is simply no aboutness-fixing work left for the meta-level description <the object upon which the associated means of justification converges> to do.

So I suggest that there is a good case for the conclusion that the mechanism of aboutness-fixing for the thoughts we standardly express using descriptive names is, though descriptively mediated, not satisfactorial. This proposal can be put as a distinction between truth-conditions for what I shall call ‘description based’ thoughts on the one hand, and ‘mere descriptive’ thoughts on the other:

Mere descriptive thought—A mere descriptive thought that <The Ψ is Φ > is true iff whatever satisfies <the Ψ > is Φ .

Description-based thought—A description-based thought that $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$, with aboutness fixing description $\langle \text{the } \Psi \rangle$, is true iff (i) there is some o upon which the associated description-centred route to justification converges, and (ii) this o is Φ .

(I shall return to the claim that the thoughts we ‘standardly’ express using descriptive names are description-based thoughts in §4.)

(p.20) 1.3 Descriptively mediated singular thoughts?

The previous two sections argued for a framework for accounts of the aboutness of our ordinary thoughts, and used this framework to overturn the *standard view* of aboutness-fixing for the thoughts we ordinarily express using descriptive names. This section considers the implications of this proposal for the controversy over whether the thoughts standardly expressed using these expressions are genuinely singular.

The contemporary discussion of singular thought traces its modern history to Russell’s distinction¹⁶ between thoughts which characterize particular things in the world (for example, the thought I express when I look at my dog and say ‘He is dirty’) and thoughts which characterize the world’s pattern of property instantiation (for example, the thought that there are dirty dogs, which is, in effect, the thought that the property of being a dog is co-instantiated with that of being dirty). Given this distinction, we can recognize two kinds of case where a thought’s truth depends on what some particular object is like. On the one hand, there are cases of ‘singular’ thought about the object—cases where the thought is true iff o is Φ , and the reason o has this special status is that the thought characterizes the object. On the other, there are ‘general’ cases, where the condition for the truth of the thought is really a condition on the pattern of property instantiation, but if we hold steady o ’s place relative to this pattern, the condition can be restated as a condition on o . For example, if we accept the Theory of Descriptions, and if ‘the Ψ ’ has a satisfier, the thought expressed by an utterance of form ‘The Ψ is Φ ’ is a general thought whose truth or falsity depends on what a particular object is like: it is the thought that the property of being Ψ is both uniquely instantiated and co-instantiated with the property of being Φ ; if o is the unique Ψ thing, the thought expressed by the utterance is true iff o is Φ .

Though it is easy enough to state this initial distinction, it has proven much harder to say exactly what having a thought which ‘characterizes an object’ requires and, therefore, to say anything definitive about which thoughts are singular. My own view is that the traditional notion of singular thought runs together what are in fact distinct criteria; that a thought which counts as ‘singular’ relative to one or more of these criteria may fail to do so relative to others; and that rather than **(p.21)** squabbling about whether thoughts that meet some criteria but not others get to count as genuinely singular, we should

be exploring the roles that thoughts meeting the various criteria play in our overall cognitive economies.

In what follows I shall make two moves towards delivery upon this wider agenda. First, I shall show how the proposal of the previous two sections entails that description-based thoughts about objects meet one of the central traditional criteria for singularity: description-based thoughts are object-dependent; having such a thought involves standing in a relation to an object, so that if there is no object your thought is about, there is a sense in which there is no thought to be had. Secondly, I shall introduce a distinction between kinds of cognitive focus which I shall suggest should serve as the starting point for an exploration into the roles played by different classes of object-dependent thoughts in our cognitive economies.

The easiest way to bring out how the proposal of §§1–2 entails that description-based thoughts are object-dependent is to see how it overturns what I take to be the standard argument for the claim that object-dependence and descriptively-mediated aboutness-fixing are incompatible:

1 The mechanism of descriptively mediated aboutness-fixing is satisfactoral. (That is, if you count as thinking about an object in virtue of (a) your relation to a descriptive condition, and (b) a relation between this descriptive condition and an object, the relation at (b) is satisfaction: you count as thinking about the object in virtue of the fact that it is the description's satisfier.)

2 No thought whose aboutness is fixed satisfactorally is object-dependent.

3 There are no object-dependent thoughts whose aboutness is descriptively mediated.

The argument is valid. But the proposal of §§1–2 entails that **1** is false. According to this proposal, an $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ thought is about o iff o is the object upon which the associated proprietary means of justification converges. In cases of description-based thought, the proprietary means of justification is to use the description to harvest information and combine the resulting $\langle \dots \text{is } \Phi \rangle$ beliefs into a body treated as about a single thing. In some cases, this means of justification converges on the **(p.22)** satisfier of the description. In others, it does not—the body of beliefs might fail to be about the description's satisfier, as in *Case 2* 'Geraint', or be about an object that does not satisfy the description, as in *Case 3* 'Gizmo'. But even where the body of beliefs is about the object that satisfies the description, the mechanism of aboutness-fixing, though descriptively mediated, is not satisfactoral. In such a case, the descriptively mediated means of justification converges on the description's satisfier. And it is justificatory convergence, not satisfaction, that is doing the aboutness-fixing work.

Now, to overturn the **1-3** argument is not yet to establish that description-based thoughts are object dependent. But the reader can perhaps already see how the case for this conclusion will go. The proposal I have made treats having a descriptively mediated thought about a thing as standing in a relation to an object—a relation the same in kind as the relation to an object in which you stand if you have a perceptual demonstrative or proper-name-based thought about it; a relation of cognitive focus. In this sense, all three kinds of thought involve having an object before the mind—focusing on an object, and thinking, with respect to the object you are focused on, that it is Φ . And, according to the proposal I have made, cases of descriptively mediated aboutness failure (illustrated in this paper by *Case 2 'Geraint'*) emerge as involving the same kind of dysfunction found in empty cases of perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based thought: in each kind of case, you are essaying a token of a type of thought which, if it characterizes the world, does so in virtue of characterizing a particular object in the world—the object upon which you have cognitive focus. So in each kind of case, if there is no such object you do not succeed in characterizing the world at all.¹⁷

I shall take this 'object dependence' result to be enough to warrant bestowing the traditional honorific 'singular' upon description-based thoughts. So I am suggesting that description-based thoughts are singular because having such a thought, unlike having a general thought, involves standing in a relation to the object the thought is about: no object; no relation; no thought there to be had.

(p.23) To fill out this proposal a little, let us put it to work in solving a widely discussed puzzle. Consider the following descriptions:

- (i) the longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh (fought in 1274 BC)
- (ii) the heaviest sea turtle currently alive in the wild
- (iii) the first person to be born in the twenty-second century
- (iv) the nearest pebble to my left big toe; the next nearest; the next nearest (repeat a thousand times)

Most philosophers defending the possibility of descriptively mediated singular thought have denied that it can be mediated by descriptions like these. The consensus has been that to allow that these descriptions *can* mediate singular thought is to treat descriptively mediated singular thought as too easily attained: easier than it in fact is (the suggestion is that there are intuitive barriers to introduction of descriptive names on the basis of (i)-(iv) type descriptions); and easier than we should expect it to be if there really is a difference in kind between a descriptively mediated $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ thought and its $\langle \text{The } \Psi \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ precursor. But if there are some cases where grasp of a description *does* enable singular thoughts about an appropriately related object and others where it *does not*, there should be an explanation of why the boundary lies where it does.¹⁸

The proposal of this paper generates a new such explanation. I have suggested that subjects are in the business of thinking description-based thoughts about *o*—descriptively mediated singular thoughts; the thoughts standardly expressed using descriptive names—when they are in the business of deploying a description to harvest information into a body of beliefs whose proprietary means of justification converges on *o*. Against this background, taking the step from grasp of a precursor description to description-based singular thought requires intending to engage in this kind of information-harvesting activity. But it is a standard element of philosophical accounts of intention that we cannot intend actions we do not believe that we will perform.¹⁹ So we cannot intend actions we believe to be impossible. Nor can we intend actions which we believe to be beyond the range of things we are going to get around to attempting.

(p.24) This explains why I cannot just move to description-based singular thoughts given my grasp of the descriptions at (iv). Even as I contemplate these descriptions, I *know* that I am not going to bother deploying them in singular-thought-sustaining information-harvesting activity.

A nearby line of thought explains why we cannot think description-based thoughts about objects on the basis of descriptions like (i)–(iii). Consider description (i), ‘the longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh’. From our current perspective, the informational environment is radically impoverished with respect to anything that might count for evidence as to the properties of individual rank-and-file participants in events this historically remote. So any attempt to justify <The longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh was Φ > beliefs will be thrown back very quickly on beliefs in the two classes represented by the columns in the following table:

The longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh survived the Battle of Kadesh.	The longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh was either an Egyptian or a Hittite.
The longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh lived longer than any other survivor of the Battle of Kadesh.	The longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh was born (and died) before 1100 BC.

Beliefs in the left-hand column are arrived at by unpacking the content of the description, rather than by using the description to harvest information to build up a body of beliefs treated as about a particular thing. And beliefs in the right-hand column, though arrived at by using the description to harvest information, are beliefs ascribing properties which will, unless some rationally irrelevant factor intervenes, be possessed by every survivor of the battle (in intuitive terms, the right-hand results are arrived at by using the informational environment to draw conclusions about survivors of the battle in general, not one survivor in particular). Given our current informational environment, using

the description <the longest-lived survivor of the Battle of Kadesh> to harvest information is not a means of justification which converges on some particular thing. So, again, a subject who grasps the description and knows which kinds of things we can find out about the ancient past cannot form the intention to use it to move to descriptively mediated singular thought.

(p.25) So far in this section I have argued that description-based thoughts (as opposed to merely descriptive thoughts) fill one of the criteria associated with the traditional notion of singular thought: description-based thoughts are relational and, therefore, object-dependent. In this respect, the proposal of this paper treats description-based thought as much closer to the perceptual demonstrative case than is generally supposed. But I now want to turn to a respect in which description-based thoughts are *unlike* perceptual demonstrative thoughts: the two kinds of thought involve different kinds of cognitive focus.

To see the difference between kinds of cognitive focus in intuitive terms, consider the contrast between an optical telescope and a radio telescope. In the optical case, focus is a relation to an object which contributes to shaping the information signal the telescope delivers: it is a relation that secures the result that this signal will match the object unless some unlucky spoiler intervenes. For a radio telescope, in contrast, focus is a relation to an object that is generated by post-signal processing. The radio telescope is angled to collect all the information coming from some portion of its potential receptive field. The resulting signal then serves as input to further processing which, if the astronomers do their job properly, and if no unlucky spoiler intervenes, matches what some object in the receptive field is like. So if the astronomers do their job properly, there is a relation of focus between the report and some object in the telescope's receptive field. But the signal is not itself shaped by an underlying focus relation: the focus relation is generated by post-signal processing.

I shall give the two kinds of cognitive focus the working appellations 'A-focus' and 'B-focus':

A-focus—A body of beliefs is A-focused on object *o* iff

- (a) beliefs formed by the means of justification proprietary to the body of beliefs will match *o* unless some rationally irrelevant factor intervenes, and
- (b) the condition at (a) holds in virtue of an underlying relation between the body of beliefs and *o* which shapes the information-processing that generates the proprietary path to belief formation.

B-focus—A body of beliefs is B-focused on object *o* iff

(a) justification of beliefs by the proprietary means generates beliefs that match what the object is like unless some rationally irrelevant factor intervenes, where

(p.26) (b) the condition at (a) does not hold in virtue of any underlying relation which shapes the information processing that generates the proprietary path to belief formation.

I suggest that the cognitive focus involved in perceptual demonstrative thought is A-focus and that involved in descriptively mediated thought is B-focus. In a case of perceptual demonstrative thought, the subject stands in a relation to an object—the object at the end of the attentional perceptual channel—which shapes the subsequent information-processing, yielding a specific version of the A-focus template: if the information processing routine shaped by the attentional link runs its course, the resulting beliefs will match what the attended object is like unless some rationally irrelevant factor intervenes. In contrast, in a case of descriptively mediated thought, the subject is dealing with a wealth of information (compare—the radio telescope picks up all the signal coming from some region of the night sky) and uses the description as the basis of post-signal processing to generate a body of beliefs. In cases of descriptively mediated aboutness, the subject's post-signal processing generates a B-focus relation: it is a means of justification for beliefs such that the subject will be unlucky if the beliefs justified in this way do not match what the object is like, and not merely lucky if they do.

To consolidate both the contrast between A-focus and B-focus, and the suggestion that perceptual demonstrative thought involves the one and descriptively mediated thought the other, I shall pause to note a difference between A-focus-involving perceptual demonstrative cases and B-focus-involving description-based cases with respect to the relation between having cognitive focus on an object, and actually engaging in the business of forming $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ beliefs. In A-focus cases, cognitive focus is causally upstream from belief formation: having the kind of cognitive lock on an object that enables beliefs about it does not require actually having any beliefs of the enabled kind. This diagnosis accords with what I take to be the intuitive verdicts about cases like these:

Case 7 You are looking at an object visible to you only as a speck on the horizon. You are attending to the object. But, because your attentional perceptual link is not delivering any information of the kind that ordinarily generates $\langle \text{that} \rangle$ beliefs, you have not formed any. $\langle \text{I wonder what that is} \rangle$ you think.

Case 8 You are attending to an object plainly visible just in front of you, and receiving rich perceptual information of the kind that ordinarily

generates our **(p.27)** <that> beliefs. But somebody whose word you have no reason to doubt has just told you (falsely, as it happens) that you had better be very careful, because a nefarious third party has given you a drug which will distort your perceptions of everything you encounter. <I wonder what it's really like>, you think, your attention fixed on the object.

In each of these cases, it seems that you are thinking about the attended object, even though you are not forming beliefs—let alone justified beliefs—as to what it is like. And the observation that the kind of cognitive focus involved in perceptual demonstrative thought is A-focus lets us explain how this can be. In each case, though you are not engaged in the activity of maintaining a body of beliefs whose proprietary means of justification converges on an object, you stand to an object in a relation which enables this activity: a relation which is such that, if you *were* to start forming beliefs justified by the route it makes available—if the object in *Case 7* moved closer so that your attentional link started delivering property information of the kind to which we respond by forming <that> beliefs; if you were disabused of the misapprehension in *Case 8*—these beliefs would tend to match what the attended object is like.

The opposite point about B-focus adds a refinement to the account of the boundaries of description-based aboutness-fixing from a few pages ago. It is not enough, to count as having descriptively mediated singular thoughts, just to *intend* to deploy a description to secure cognitive focus on an object. A subject might have this intention, but, through indolence or mischance, never get around to engaging in the intended activity. If just forming the intention were enough, we would still have a version of the objection that allowing descriptively mediated singular thought is treating singular thought as too easily and cheaply attained. But since the kind of cognitive focus involved in descriptively mediated singular thought is B-focus, this objection falls away. Since descriptively mediated singular thought is B-focus, there is singular thought only when the activity of using the description to harvest information is up and running. In cases where there is merely an as yet unfulfilled intention to engage in the activity, there is no activity, so no singular thought. (This point generates subtleties concerning 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulations which I am about to consider.)

So I suggest that there are in fact two kinds of cognitive focus—A-focus, of which the perceptual demonstrative case is the paradigm; B-focus, which underpins our uses of descriptive names and which (though **(p.28)** I have not shown this) is also involved in many cases of aboutness-fixing intermediate in sophistication between these two extremes. From a distance, the difference between kinds of cognitive focus is a difference in structure between aboutness-fixing relations. It would be surprising if this kind of difference did not generate quite far-reaching consequences concerning the division of labour in the 'thought about material objects' part of our conceptual scheme. And in fact I think there are important

consequences of the A-focus/B-focus distinction: consequences which must be explored to bring out what remains of the case against descriptively mediated singular thought once the old assumption that the mechanism of descriptively mediated aboutness fixing is satisfactorial has been left behind. But I shall not try to explore these consequences here.

1.4 'Let α refer to the Ψ '

I shall close by considering the implications of the view developed over the previous three sections for the question of the commitments that are generated when a speaker makes, and a hearer accepts, a 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulation. I shall first sketch what I take to be the standard account of this matter, then explain the very different picture the proposal of this paper entails.

The central claim of the standard account is generated by the *standard claim*²⁰ about reference-fixing for descriptive names. According to the *standard claim*, expression α introduced into use by a 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulation refers to the satisfier of 'the Ψ '. In a situation where such a stipulation has been made and accepted, participants have adopted the convention of using ' α is Φ ' to express thoughts which are true iff the satisfier of 'the Ψ ' is Φ . One standard add-on to this claim is that a descriptive-name-introducing stipulation is to be understood as forcing a wide-scope reading of the description with respect to modal operators, so that ' α might have been Φ ' is true iff there is a possible world in which the individual who satisfies 'the Ψ ' in the actual world is Φ . Philosophers who are in agreement on the *standard claim*, and on these initial steps concerning 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulations, then disagree about what to say about cases where such a stipulation is (p.29) made but the description has no satisfier, with the debate at this point interacting with the standard (*standard-claim*-assuming) dispute as to whether descriptively mediated thoughts are genuinely singular.

Here is a final case which will help motivate the details of the alternative treatment of 'Let α refer to the Ψ ' stipulations that I want to propose:

Case 9 'Tal' X and Y are researching the Battle of Kadesh, and trying to build up a picture of how it impacted the lives of its rank-and-file survivors. In writing up their findings for a popular audience, they introduce the name 'Tal', and use it as follows: 'Let's pick one survivor of the battle—say, the longest-lived one. We don't know his name, but we'll call him "Tal". Tal lived a long time ago, but he might have descendants who are alive today...'

The proposal of this paper entails that the 'Tal was Φ ' utterances that occur in X and Y's narrative do not express descriptively mediated singular thoughts: there is descriptively mediated singular thought where a description is deployed to achieve and maintain cognitive focus; the impoverishment of our informational environment with respect to participants in the Battle of Kadesh precludes this

possibility. But it seems that X and Y *are* using ‘Tal’ to make claims whose truth or falsity depends on what some particular individual—the longest-lived survivor of the battle—is like. Whether Tal has descendants who are alive today depends on how things stand with respect to one particular individual. If X says ‘Tal was a Hittite’, when in fact—though this is undiscoverable from our current perspective—the longest-lived survivor was an Egyptian, X has said something false.

I suggest that this case points to a fact of the matter about our ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulations. Let us say that an expression filling the subject place in an ‘...is Φ ’ utterance ‘Frege-refers’ to object o iff, in the absence of special stage-setting, the utterance may be regarded as expressing a thought which is true iff o is Φ . Then, reaching back to the initial distinction between singular and general thought drawn in §3, there are two kinds of case of Frege-reference: singular cases, where the utterance expresses a singular thought about o ; general cases, where the utterance expresses the thought that \langle The Ψ is Φ \rangle , and (as it happens) o is the Ψ . I suggest that it is a fact of the matter about our ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulations that such a stipulation on its own commits a speaker who makes the utterance or a hearer who accepts it *only* to using the expression **(p.30)** in a way that Frege-refers. The commitment may be fulfilled either by using the expression to express descriptively mediated singular thoughts, or by using it to abbreviate a (rigidified) description. In some cases, features of the context entail that the speaker is from the start committing herself to one disjunct rather than the other. In others, a commitment to one disjunct rather than the other crystallizes as the situation unfolds.

To develop this suggestion and bring out its plausibility, it will be useful to work within a slightly more formal framework for accounts of what conversational transactions involve. In what follows I shall suppose a framework in which a speaker making an assertion is proposing to restrict the range of possibilities which are counted as ‘live’ by participants in the conversation, and a hearer accepting an assertion is undertaking to make this restriction.²¹ (For example, when I say, in a situation where each of us knows that the other understands all the terms involved, ‘There is a direct train from London to Marseilles’, I am proposing that my hearer join me in ruling out all possibilities where there is no such direct train, committing us both to the claim that the actual world—whatever else may be true of it—is a world in which trains run London-Marseilles direct.) I shall also suppose that a stipulation as to what an expression is to stand for or how it is to be used may be treated, without too much distortion, as a case of assertion: a speaker making such a stipulation is, in effect, proposing to rule out all possibilities where the expression is used in ways that do not accord with it.

Now let us model the proposal I have sketched about ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulations within this framework. Suppose that speaker S directs such a stipulation to hearer H. I have proposed that on its own S’s stipulation is a proposal to begin using α as a Frege-referring expression, where the mechanism for determining an object’s status as the object upon whose Φ -ness or not the truth of an ‘ α is Φ ’ utterance depends is mediated by description ‘the Ψ ’. If H accepts this proposal, S and H both set aside, for the purposes of the future development of the conversation, uses of α which fall outside this characterization. Now suppose that H does accept the stipulation, and consider a use of α occurring within the S/H conversation, and within the scope of the stipulation (**p.31**) (that is, an occurrence of α occurring at a time when S and H take the permissible uses of α to be governed by the stipulation). We can recognize three main cases (I suppress finer details in the interests of getting the basic proposal on the table):

(a) *The singular thought case*—By the time of the use of α we are considering, there is a practice of using either <the Ψ > or a successor descriptive condition to harvest information into a body of beliefs treated as expressible using α .

(b) *The ‘options still open’ case*—By the time of the use of α that we are considering, there is not yet a practice of the kind required to underpin description-based singular thought. Nor are there features of either the context in which the stipulation was made, the context of the subsequent conversation, or moves made within the conversation which rule out (as not live in the conversation) the future development of such a practice.

(c) *The general thought case*—By the time of the use of α we are considering, either features of the context in which the stipulation was made, the context of the subsequent conversation, or moves made within the conversation have ruled out (as not live in the conversation) the future development of a practice associated with α of the kind required to underpin description-based singular thought. In this case α is being used as what I shall call an ‘abbreviated rigidified description’.

For example, consider *Case 8 ‘Tal’*. Features of the context in which the ‘Let’s call the longest-lived survivor “Tal”’ stipulation is made rule out—and are known by the parties to the stipulation to rule out—the possibility of using the descriptive condition to achieve cognitive focus on a single individual. So the context in which the stipulation is made closes off the possibility of using ‘Tal’ as a genuine descriptive name, forcing an ‘abbreviated rigidified description’ account of what speaker and hearer are committing themselves to when they commit to using the name in a way governed by the stipulation.

This same effect—forcing the ‘rigidified description’ account of how to conform to the stipulation—might be generated in other ways. For example, it might be that, in the context in which the stipulation is made, it is clear to both speaker and hearer that nobody is going to **(p.32)** bother engaging in cognitive-focus-generating information-harvesting activity, even though this kind of activity in fact is possible in the informational environment. Or it might be that someone closes off the singular thought possibility explicitly (‘Let’s treat α as a representative of all objects in this class; we won’t bother finding out what α was like’).

However, though it would be an exaggeration to say that situations where participants in a conversation conform to a ‘Let α refer to the Ψ ’ stipulation by using α as an abbreviated rigidified description are rarities, it is a matter of fact that by far the more usual cases are those I have spent most of this paper discussing: α is annexed to a stream of singular-thought-sustaining activity. In this kind of case, the participants in the conversation conform to the stipulation by using α to express beliefs generated by (or other attitudes associated with) this activity. And once α has been annexed to such an activity, it is the ‘abbreviated description’ way of conforming to the stipulation that falls away. ‘Well, here’s the author of the ballads, but there was no Geraint’, says scholar X to scholar Y, breaking the news of the discovery that Edward Williams wrote the ballads. ‘You realize that X didn’t invent Gizmo after all’, says one underling to another, as their investigation uncovers what really went on.

Let me close by stepping back from the array of cases introduced in this paper, and returning to Evans’s famous hypothetical stipulation ‘Let “Julius” refer to the inventor of the zip’.²² To keep the case simple, suppose that the stipulation is made, as it were, from cold: there is no established ‘What was the inventor of the zip like?’ investigation to which the stipulation is annexing the name. Here are what I take to be two observations about this case:

- (A) The answer to the question ‘Might Julius turn out not to have invented zips (but to have *found* them, occurring as a natural phenomenon)?’, asked immediately after the stipulation, is ‘No’.²³
- (B) The answer to this question, asked once an investigation into what Julius is like is up and running, is ‘Yes’.

(p.33) Evans and other proponents of the standard view of descriptive names have an explanation for (A) but not (B). According to the standard view, once the initial stipulation has been made and accepted in a conversation, the referent of ‘Julius’ within the conversation is the satisfier of the description: the only way for it to turn out that Julius did not invent zips is for it to turn out that there was no Julius. In contrast, the proposal I have made predicts the (A)/(B) pattern. Once the investigation is up and running within the conversational context, uses

of 'Julius' are annexed to the singular-thought-sustaining information-harvesting activity. 'Julius' refers—if it refers—to the individual upon whom this means of justification converges, an individual who may or may not satisfy the description that is being used to do the information-harvesting work. But the perspective from which it makes sense to say that Julius might turn out to have *found* zips growing as naturally occurring crystalline entities, or to have been *given them* by a beneficent alien has to be earned: it is made available by engagement in (or awareness of) the information-harvesting activity required to use the description to achieve cognitive focus on an object of singular thought.²⁴

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ 'α' and 'Ψ' are schematic letters ranging over object-language singular terms and predicates respectively.

⁽²⁾ See, for example, Evans 1982; Campbell 1999, 2002; Jeshion 2004, 2010; Reimer 2004; Recanati 2012; Goodman 2016.

⁽³⁾ I clarify the extent to which I think 'intuitive' verdicts like this carry evidential weight at pp. 19–22 of Dickie 2015.

⁽⁴⁾ This section presents an alternative version of the argument of Dickie 2015: ch. 2. I leave open the extent to which the same picture applies to thoughts about non-ordinary things, for example, bosons, numbers, or systems of government.

⁽⁵⁾ 'An <α is Φ> belief' should be read as an abbreviation for 'A belief standardly expressed by a sentence of form 'α is Φ''. 'Φ'/'<Φ>' and 'Φ' are braced together: Φ expresses conceptual representation <Φ> of property Φ.

⁽⁶⁾ A body of beliefs treated by the subject as about a single thing is what some philosophers call a 'mental file'—see Recanati 2012 for a recent and thorough discussion. I explain my own abstinence from use of this term in the appendix to Dickie (forthcoming).

(⁷) I provide a more detailed discussion of the notion of proprietary justification at Dickie 2015: 50–2. There are various options to explore in deciding how to extend the treatment of this notion to allow for ‘mixed’ cases where a single body of beliefs is associated with different proprietary means of justification at different times, or with two means of justification that carry equal weight. On the question of what counts as a ‘means’ or ‘method’ of justification, see note 9.

(⁸) The definition presupposes some way of individuating routes to belief formation. Philosophers with reductionist agendas who wish to explain traditional epistemic notions (like ‘justification’ and ‘knowledge’) in terms of notions like ‘route to belief formation’ and ‘reliability’ taken as prior face notorious difficulties in saying how routes to belief formation are to be individuated without using the epistemic notions that are the target of the reductionist explanation. This is the ‘problem of individuation of methods’ for reductive reliabilism (sometimes called the ‘generality problem’). For in-depth discussion and a pessimistic survey of solutions available to a reductive reliabilist see Conee and Feldman 1998. This author has no reductionist agenda, and takes the notion of the ‘route’ by which a belief is formed to be explicable partly in terms of the aspects of the causal story behind the belief’s formation that contribute to its having the kind of justification it does. A reader who *does* have a reductionist reliabilist agenda is invited to plug his or her own preferred solution to the problem of the individuation of methods into the definition.

(⁹) The notion of ‘manifestation’ is a primitive of Sosa’s virtue reliabilist framework. (See Sosa 2015: ch. 2 for a recent and careful development.) The suggestion is that a performance manifests a competence iff it is causally derived from the competence in a way that involves no deviant causal chains, where the right-hand side of this biconditional is not to be regarded as explanatorily prior to the left: causal derivation of performance from competence without a deviant causal chain is just what there is in cases of manifestation.

(¹⁰) The quantifier over property representations (‘for all $\langle \Phi \rangle$ ’) ranges over the $\langle \Phi \rangle$ such that the proprietary means of justification might deliver an ‘ $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ ’ or ‘ $\langle \alpha \text{ is not } \Phi \rangle$ ’ verdict. I explain this in more detail at Dickie 2015: 59 and 199–211.

(¹¹) There is in fact a loophole in this argument. The envisaged incoherent case is a case where there is a unique object upon which justification converges, and yet aboutness fails. So the argument is silent about cases where justification converges on *more than one* object. I close this loophole at Dickie 2015: 52–3 (down and dirty version) and 65–72 (full version, including connection to Strawson’s (1959) puzzle about ‘massive reduplication’).

(¹²) I develop the blueprint for the cases of perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based thought in Dickie 2015, chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

(¹³) Obviously there might also be ‘deferential’ users, who are ignorant of the association between the name and the description.

(¹⁴) The wrinkles concern the uniqueness claim discussed in note 12.

(¹⁵) Compare Kripke 1980: 88.

(¹⁶) Compare Russell 1956a: 234 and 247–8; 1956b: 51.

(¹⁷) I develop this point in more detail at Dickie 2015: 254–63.

(¹⁸) For recent discussions see Jeshion 2010; Recanati 2012.

(¹⁹) For philosophers of action making this general point see, for example, Velleman 2000: 202–4; Searle 1983: 408–9; Bratman 1987: 4, 15–18.

(²⁰) See p. 1 above.

(²¹) This is the central claim of Stalnaker’s account of assertion in, for example, Stalnaker 1984. I am departing radically from Stalnaker’s view of what might count as an aboutness-fixing relation.

(²²) Evans 1982: 31. Evans’s formulation is actually ‘Let us call whoever invented the zip “Julius”’.

(²³) Note that the precise form of the sentence is important. Things will be different for ‘Might Julius *not* have invented the zip?’.

(²⁴) This paper advances the discussion of the topic from Dickie 2015 in response to extremely helpful comments from Karen Lewis, Calvin Normore, and James Shaw. Thanks to them, to participants in the author meets critics session on the book at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division Meetings in 2017, and to participants at the *Meaning and Representation* Workshop at the University of Turin a few months later. I apologize for the vulgar profusion of references to my own book, rendered unavoidable by the paper’s status as the next stage in the development of one of its central proposals.

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