Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Language
Contents

Preface vii
List of Contributors ix

1. The Subtle Lives of Descriptive Names
   Imogen Dickie 1

2. Sources of Context-Dependence: The Case of Knowledge
   Ascriptions
   Michael Glanzberg 35

3. Words by Convention
   Gail Leckie and J. R. G. Williams 73

4. Conditional Acceptance
   Ofra Magidor 99

5. Frege’s Begriffsschrift Theory of Identity Vindicated
   Ulrich Pardey and Kai F. Wehmeier 122

6. Truth
   Ian Rumfitt 148

7. Subordinating Speech and Speaking Up
   Gillian Russell 178

8. Context-Free Semantics
   Paolo Santorio 208

9. Semantic Explanations
   Zoltán Gendler Szabó 240

Index 277
Preface

With this inaugural issue, *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Language* joins the distinguished family of *Oxford Studies* series, as a regular showcase for leading research in its area. Philosophy of language has been a main focus of philosophical research since at least Frege’s seminal contributions at the turn of the twentieth century. Since that “linguistic turn,” important work in philosophy has often been related in some significant way to philosophy of language. This series hopes to offer a regular snapshot of state-of-the-art contributions in this important field. To be published biennially, and intended to be a forum for papers by some of the best scholars from around the world, both senior and junior, each issue will include an assortment of outstanding papers in philosophy of language, broadly construed.

This first issue of our series is a good instance of the form: it includes nine new papers by a distinguished range of philosophers. Together, the papers provide a perspective on the state of the sub-discipline. Two of the papers investigate basic notions in the area, truth and reference: Imogen Dickie’s “The Subtle Lives of Descriptive Names” and Ian Rumfitt’s “Truth.” Dickie’s treatment of reference derives from a reconsideration of descriptive names and a rejection of the idea that the referent of such a name is the satifier of the associated description. Rumfitt seeks to recapture a conception of truth due to P. F. Strawson on which the key insight is that “one who makes a statement or assertion makes a true statement if and only if things are as, in making the statement, he states them to be.”

“Words by Convention,” by Gail Leckie and Robbie Williams, and “Semantic Explanations,” by Zoltan Szabo, can both be seen as investigations in metasemantics. The former is concerned with the priority, relative to reductive projects in metasemantics, of our categorization of words into types; the latter with the question of whether semantic theories are merely “descriptive” or whether such theories can offer more substantive explanations.

Two other papers take up the phenomenon of context-sensitivity, considering the role of context in semantics generally and in the case
of knowledge-ascriptions in particular: Paolo Santorio’s “Context-Free Semantics,” and Michael Glanzberg’s “Sources of Context Dependence: The Case of Knowledge Ascriptions.” Santorio rejects any distinctive semantic role for context; Glanzberg defends a form of context-dependence for knowledge ascriptions and explores the varieties of context dependence found in natural language.

Ofra Magidor’s “Conditional Acceptance” finds that three prominent theories of conditionals cannot provide an adequate treatment of a case she devises. The paper by Gillian Russell, “Subordinating Speech and Speaking Up,” explores a broadly socio-political question in philosophy of language: how can “speaking up” work against the phenomenon of subordination? Frege’s Begriffsschrift is the focus of the paper by Ulrich Pardey and Kai Wehmeier: their “Frege’s Begriffsschrift Theory of Identity Vindicated” is concerned to rehabilitate Frege’s view in the face of two main objections leveled against it.

As you read the entries, you will see how in almost every case, the specific topics taken up are closely connected to other topics of deep and abiding interest in philosophy: collective action (like that involved in establishing conventions or practices), explanation, identity, individual action (like that involved in making a speech act), knowledge, reasoning, and subordination.

Together, this broad-ranging set of papers reveals the breadth and depth of work in philosophy of language today. We expect future issues to provide an equally diverse, rich, and valuable collection of contributions to our discipline.

Our thanks to Peter Momtchiloff for his support, and for the addition of this series to the Oxford Studies family.
List of Contributors

IMOGEN DICKIE Department of Philosophy, St. Andrews University

MICHAEL GLANZBERG Department of Philosophy, Northwestern University

GAIL LECKIE Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds

OFRA MAGIDOR Faculty of Philosophy, Oxford University

ULRICH PARDEY Institut für Philosophie, Ruhr Universität Bochum

IAN RUMFITT All Souls College, Oxford

GILLIAN RUSSELL Department of Philosophy, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

PAOLO SANTORIO Department of Philosophy, University of California, San Diego

ZOLTÁN GENDLER SZABÓ Department of Philosophy, Yale University

KAI F. WEHMEIER Department of Logic & Philosophy of Science, University of California, Irvine

J. R. G. WILLIAMS Department of Philosophy, University of Leeds
1

The Subtle Lives of Descriptive Names

Imogen Dickie

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 $\alpha$ refer to the $\Psi$.\(^1\) The extant discussion\(^2\) 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 $\alpha$ refers, it refers to the satisfier of "the $\Psi".

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.)

\(^1\) ‘$\alpha$’ and ‘$\Psi$’ 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.
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 <X’s most remunerative early invention>, 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

³ I clarify the extent to which I think ‘intuitive’ verdicts like this carry evidential weight at pp. 19–22 of Dickie 2015.
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 satisfactional 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-satisfactional, 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 $\text{⌜Let } \alpha \text{ refer to the } \Psi \text{⌝}$ 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—

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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.
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 <α is Φ> 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

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.
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

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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.
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
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 embroiled 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 serious of disguised and perfectly aligned mirrors, and the people on bicycles from whom my perceptual experience derives are in fact behind me and
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:

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.
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

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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
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 <Φ>, if S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for the belief that <α is Φ>, 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aboutness</th>
<th>Justificatory convergence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S’s &lt;α&gt; beliefs are about o</td>
<td>For all &lt;Φ&gt;, if S has proprietary rationality-securing justification for believing &lt;α is Φ&gt;, this justification eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where o is not Φ.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 <α is Φ> is about o.

Add the aboutness and truth principle:

2 If S’s belief that <α is Φ> is about an object, the belief is true iff that object is Φ.

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 <Φ>’) ranges over the <Φ> such that the proprietary means of justification might deliver an ‘<α is Φ>’ or ‘<α is not Φ>’ verdict. I explain this in more detail at Dickie 2015: 59 and 199–211.
1 and 2 entail
3 S’s belief that \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) is true iff \(o \text{ is } \Phi\).

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 \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where \(o \text{ is not } \Phi\).

So we have the left-to-right direction of the **aboutness and justification biconditional:**
6 If S’s \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) belief is about \(o\), justification that secures the rationality of the belief eliminates every rationally relevant circumstance where \(o \text{ is not } \Phi\).

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 \(<\alpha>\) 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 \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\). There is nothing devious interfering with the ‘detection of \(\Phi\)-instantiation’ aspect of S’s path to the belief: in forming the belief, S manifests competence at detection of the presence of some \(\Phi\)-instantiating object. \(o\) is the object upon which the proprietary means of justification for S’s \(<\alpha>\) beliefs converges, so S’s manifestation of \(\Phi\)-detecting competence is picking up on whether \(o \text{ is } \Phi\). But, because of the failure of some extra condition on aboutness—some condition above and beyond justificatory convergence—S’s \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) belief is not about \(o\).

2 In the scenario just described, S’s circumstance is either rationally relevant to her formation of the \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) 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
that if S’s beliefs are about anything, they are about o. 1 also specifies that S’s <a> 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 <a is Φ> 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 <Something is Φ>. For in the circumstance as described, there is nothing devious interfering with S’s detection of Φ-instantiation: in forming a <Something is Φ> belief on the basis of the means of Φ-detection that underpins proprietary justification for her <a is Φ> 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 <a is Φ> may be rationally relevant to formation of the belief that <Something is Φ>.

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’).
And to endorse this possibility is to suppose that the conditions for the rationality of a \(<\text{Something is } \Phi>\) belief might be more demanding than those for the rationality of the corresponding \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) belief. For example, it is to suppose that it might be rational to believe \(<\text{That is square}>\) by uptake from a perceptual link, but irrational to believe \(<\text{Something is square}>\) on the same justification (because the rationality of the \(<\text{Something is square}>\) 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 \(<\text{Something is } \Phi>\) on the basis of perception, but may be ignored in moving to \(<\text{That is } \Phi}>\). And this just gets things the wrong way around. Across the target range of cases—cases like \textit{Cases 4} and 5 from the start of this section—a subject rationally entitled to believe \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) is automatically rationally entitled to believe \(<\text{Something is } \Phi>\) 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 \(<\text{Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker St.}>\) does not entail \(<\text{Someone lives at 221b Baker St.}>\), 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 \(<\alpha \text{ is } \Phi>\) to \(<\text{Something is } \Phi>\) 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 \(<\alpha>\) 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 \textit{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

¹² I develop the blueprint for the cases of perceptual demonstrative and proper-name-based thought in Dickie 2015, chapters 4 and 5 respectively.
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 group 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 <$\ldots$ 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

\[\text{Obviously there might also be ‘deferential’ users, who are ignorant of the association between the name and the description.}\]
expressed using a descriptive name—is about object \( o \) if \( o \) 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,\(^4\) 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 \( \text{Let } \alpha \text{ refer to the } \Psi \) 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,

\(^{14}\) The wrinkles concern the uniqueness claim discussed in note 12.
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 Ø> belief secures the belief’s rationality, but leaves it a matter of luck whether Edward Williams was Ø. 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
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 satisfactional. The objector maintains that the reference-fixing mechanism at work in the cases I have considered is satisfactional—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-satisfactional, 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
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.
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 "Let \( \alpha \) refer to the \( \Psi \) 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 satisfactional. 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 \(<\text{The } \Psi \text{ is } \Phi>\) is true iff whatever satisfies \(<\text{the } \Psi>)\ is \(\Phi\).

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

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