

# EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE THEORY OF REFERENCE

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## 1 REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION

**Starting point** – Some of our thoughts are about mind-independent objects. This aboutness is secured by a relation between the subject and the object the belief is about. Various relations play this aboutness-fixing role: an attentional perceptual link with an object; understanding a proper name that refers to it; grasp of a descriptive condition to which it is appropriately related.

**Question** – HOW DO THESE RELATIONS DO THEIR ABOUTNESS-FIXING WORK?

**Traditional answers** – descriptivist views; causalist views; hybrid views....

### **Suggestion**

a) Take a basic principle connecting truth, and justification: *justification is truth conducive, so that (in general) if you have a justified belief you will be unlucky if it is not true.*

b) Note that there is a connection between aboutness and truth: *if the belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  is about  $o$ , the belief is true iff  $o$  is  $\Phi$ .*

c) *aboutness and truth + truth and justification  $\Rightarrow$  aboutness and justification*

REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION (*approximate version*) – a body of beliefs is about  $o$  iff its means of justification converges on  $o$  (so that  $o$  is the unique object whose properties the subject will be unlucky to get wrong in justifying the beliefs the way she does).

**An analogy** A telescope is focussed on  $o$  iff, given that it is working as telescopes usually do, it will deliver a body of data that matches what  $o$  is like unless some spoiler intervenes. Focus does not guarantee that the data stream will match  $o$ . It does guarantee that if the data stream does not match  $o$ , something has gone wrong.

## 2 PUTTING THE PRINCIPLE TO WORK

### **Blueprint for accounts of aboutness-fixing for our ordinary thoughts**

Each class of *ordinary* thought is associated with a ‘proprietary’ means of justification such that having a thought of the kind entails treating this means of justification as ‘trumping’ others:

- for perceptual demonstrative thoughts, uptake from an attentional perceptual channel.
- for proper-name-based thoughts, uptake from testimony.
- for description-based thoughts, description-centred cognition

In each case, an account of aboutness-fixing will explain how the relevant kind of justification works, and show why this justification converges on the object the beliefs are intuitively about.

### **Some examples**

**‘Geoffrey Chaucer’** Chaucer lived from about 1343 to 1400. He was well known in his lifetime. But in the centuries after his death, for reasons to do with the invention of the printing press and Henry VIII’s desire to create an English national literature, the pool of claims made using Chaucer’s name became flooded with invented attributions of literary works to him, and fabrications about his life, ancestry, place of birth, and so on. As a result of this flood of invention, there was a period of several hundred years (ending with the ‘purging of the apocrypha’ in the nineteenth century) during which even Chaucer experts had bodies of  $\langle$ Chaucer $\rangle$  belief most of the information in which derived from fabrications made long after Chaucer’s death.

*'Nicolas Bourbaki'* – 'Nicolas Bourbaki' is a name for a collective of mainly French mathematicians, its membership shifting over time, devoted to the development of set-theoretically respectable proofs, and still famous for a number of these proofs, as well as for the 'Bourbaki Dangerous Bend Symbol' ('z') used to mark a passage of argument containing hazardous discussion of intricate details.

[*'Bourbaki'* and the single-minded mathematician; *'Bourbaki'* and the biographer...]

### 3 ARGUMENT

#### *Argument for the left-to-right direction (if aboutness then justificatory convergence)*

1 S's belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  is about  $o$ . [Supposition]

2 If S's belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  is about an object, the belief is true iff that object is  $\Phi$ . [*Aboutness and truth* principle]

3 S's belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$  is true iff  $o$  is  $\Phi$ . [From 1 and 2]

4 If S has a justified belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ , she will be unlucky if it is not true. [*Truth and justification* principle.]

5 If S has a justified belief that  $\langle \alpha \text{ is } \Phi \rangle$ , she will be unlucky if  $o$  is not  $\Phi$ . [From 3 and 4]

#### *Argument for the right-to-left direction (if justificatory convergence, then aboutness)*

The uniqueness lemma – If the proprietary means of justification for an *ordinary* body of beliefs converges on  $o$ , there is no  $o^* \neq o$  for which this is also the case.

Argument for the uniqueness lemma (' $o$ ', ' $o^*$ ' range over ordinary material things)

- If a proprietary means of justification converges on both  $o$  and  $o^* \neq o$ ,  $o$  and  $o^*$  are qualitative duplicates.
- Our world contains no 'same sector' qualitative duplication.
- A proprietary means of justification can converge only on an object in the subject's own sector.

1 S is maintaining a body of ordinary beliefs whose proprietary means of justification converges on  $o$ .

2 There are three cases. The beliefs are about (a) some  $o^* \neq o$ ; (b) nothing; (c)  $o$ .

3 The beliefs are not about some  $o^* \neq o$

Given the *uniqueness lemma*, proprietary justification can converge on only one object. And **1** says that proprietary justification for S's beliefs converges on  $o$ . So **1**, the *uniqueness lemma*, and the supposition that **3** is false entail that the beliefs are about an object ( $o^*$ ) upon which their proprietary means of justification does not converge. And that contradicts the left-to-right direction of REFERENCE AND JUSTIFICATION, already established.

4 The beliefs are not about nothing.

We already have the conclusion that justificatory convergence is necessary for aboutness. So if there are cases where justification converges but the beliefs are about nothing, this is because there is some *extra condition* on aboutness – in a case where justification converges but this condition fails, aboutness fails too. But the proposed extra condition must play an explanatory role. And there is no such role for it to play. [z]

5 The beliefs are about  $o$ . [From 2, 3, 4]

**Applications** – to every extant problem in the theory of reference. But also to central questions in epistemology.