Reference and Revision:  
In conversation with  
Imogen Dickie

Mathew Armstrong, Imogen Dickie, Joy Shim & Christopher Yuen

**Introduction:** Imogen Dickie began teaching at the University of Toronto in 2004. She is currently the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the St. George Philosophy Department. Her current research involves the theory of reference, singular thought, and associated topics in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and the philosophy of action. In addition to her teaching and administrative duties, she is an editor of *The Philosophers' Imprint*, and on the editorial board of *Ergo—an Open Access Journal of Philosophy*. Recently, she published a book, entitled *Fixing Reference*, developing an account of aboutness-fixing for thoughts about ordinary objects. We decided to interview her to hear some of her reflections on the publishing process and to gain some insight into her views on reference.

**Noēsis:** How did you first get into philosophy?

**Dickie:** I went to university to do physics and mathematics. Then in my first year, I had some extra space, and did a metaphysics course called "God, Mind, and Freedom". After that, I just drifted over to philosophy, partly because I was really terrible at making experiments work. That's actually very common; a lot of my colleagues started in the sciences.

Further back than that, I remember being shown Hooke's Law, which says how far a spring will stretch when you hang a weight from it, and thinking, ‘That's not a law of nature!’ This was about halfway through high school, so we were also doing Newtonian mechanics, and it seemed quite plausible that ‘Force = Mass × Acceleration’ was, somehow, a law. But the spring-stretching thing just looked like a statement of proportionality. In hindsight, the question of whether there really is a
difference in kind between laws of nature and mere statements of proportionality is very recognisable as a philosophical question. So perhaps that was an early sign that my future in physics was doomed.

**Noēsis:** What made you go into philosophy of language and mind instead of philosophy of science?

**Dickie:** I did my undergraduate degree in New Zealand, where I'm from. The university had a very, very small department, which did not offer a large range of courses. I did quite a lot of logic, and a lot of history of philosophy. When I applied to graduate school I said I wanted to do Early Modern—Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and their friends. But that was really just because that was what I’d done most of in my first degree.

Quite early on at graduate school, I came across the questions about reference that I’ve been interested in ever since. From the philosophy of language side, the central question is what makes it the case that a singular term—for example, ‘Bertrand Russell’ or ‘that’—stands for a particular object. From the philosophy of mind side, the central question concerns the aboutness of thoughts—how does understanding of a proper name or uptake from a perceptual link enable thought about an appropriately related thing? I became interested in these questions, read some very interesting work on them, enjoyed talking about them, and found that the people I wanted to work with were interested in them too. So having come in wanting to work on Descartes and Leibniz, I ended up writing a dissertation on direct reference.

**Noēsis:** It seems that there the influence on your work is coming from your teachers and the ones with whom you wanted to work. Do you find that the influence on your work sometimes goes the other way, that you have interactions with your students that influence what you're working on?

**Dickie:** Yes, very much so. My supervisor—John Campbell, who is now at UC Berkeley—used to say that if what you've written is not understandable by a pretty good second-year student, then you haven't made yourself clear enough. I think he was right about that. I think you should try to write for people who have done a bit of philosophy, but are not familiar with the topics you’re discussing. By the time people are specialists in a fourth-year seminar, they already know a lot of philosophy, and aiming for readability by those people is setting the bar too low – it's making it too easy for yourself by supposing too much expertise in your
audience. So when I'm writing, I'm always thinking about my pretty good second year students, and whether they would be able to follow what I've written. If I think they wouldn't, I know I have to try harder. That's one respect in which interaction with students impacts on my research. I think if you weren't teaching then you'd just lose sight of what the standard for clarity is in philosophical writing.

As far as the content is concerned, quite often towards the end of a graduate seminar I’ll have a couple of sessions about things I am working on myself, maybe even presenting my own stuff if I've got something that's far enough along for people to read. And to a lesser extent I’ll do the same in a fourth year class if the students are interested. So I’ll have students’ questions and comments on the material. And I always take people’s questions and comments very seriously. I keep minutes of feedback I get—if I go somewhere to give a talk, then before I get home I'll write out what happened in the discussion. I treat feedback from students the same way; it goes in the minutes, and I think about it as I’m trying to push my research forward.

Noēsis: Since we are talking about influences from others, students and teachers, on your work, you are also an editor on a couple of philosophy journals [The Philosophers' Imprint and Ergo]; we were wondering if that work, editing other people's papers, feeds back into your own work.

Dickie: Well, let me take the opportunity to say a little about these terrific journals, neither of which was set up by me.

Ergo is an open access journal that was set up by two of my colleagues, Jonathan Weisberg, who teaches at UTM, and Franz Huber, who is a St. George faculty member. It has a fantastic editorial model. Franz and Jonathan are the managing editors, so they're in charge, and are doing a lot of work. Then there is an army of section editors. I’m one of five section editors for the philosophy of mind. There is a similar little team for pretty much every area of philosophy you might think of.

When a paper comes to Ergo, if it's a paper in the philosophy of mind, then it'll to come to me or one of the other mind editors. Our initial job is to read the paper, decide whether to send it to referees, and if it is going to go to referees, find two people to do the refereeing. The ‘army of section editors’ model is a great thing about Ergo compared with many other journals. It means that every submission is read by someone in its field, whereas for most journals, you don't know if the person who's doing the first read and assigning referees is anywhere near your area. The ‘army’ model also means that each section editor has an agreement with
the journal to be responsible for around one paper a month. So if you are an author submitting to Ergo, you know your paper is not getting its first read from someone with twelve papers in front of them that they have to make a decision on that day.

If a paper does go out to referees, they’ll send in reports, and the section editor will make a recommendation about publication. The whole process is triple blind. The author doesn't know who the editor or referees are. The editor doesn't know who the author is. And the referees don't know who the author is. It’s as corruption-proof as I think it’s possible for a journal’s model to be.

Ergo is a new journal, though if you look at the papers it has published, you’ll see that it’s doing extremely well. The Imprint has been around a lot longer. It was founded fifteen years ago by David Velleman and Steven Darwall, who at the time were both at the University of Michigan. They were pioneers in bringing the ideals of open access publishing into philosophy—they just went ahead and set up from a standing start. Velleman designed the software and everything. I have a much larger role with the Imprint than with Ergo. At Ergo, there’s the army of section editors, while at the Imprint there are six of us doing all the editorial work: Darwall, who's now at Yale, Velleman who's at NYU, Nishi Shah who is at Amherst College, Thomas Hofweber who's at Chapel Hill, Ian Rumfitt who is at Oxford, and me. The Imprint also has an excellent editorial model. If you send something to the Imprint, two of us will read it, and if we both agree that it should go out, then it will go out; if we both agree that it shouldn't go out, then it won't go out; and if there's a disagreement, then someone else will read it to provide a tie break. Again, everything is blind. And the editors are all puritanical anti-corruption fetishists, so we hope we are running a clean operation.

As I’ve said, these are both open access journals—as the Imprint’s catchy jingle has it, ‘Edited by philosophers. Published by librarians. Free to readers of the web.’ One reason I agreed to be involved with them is that people I find it hard to say ‘No’ to asked me. But another is that open access journals are pushing back against the very questionable money-making model that many traditional journals are tangled up with. Philosophers who work in universities are all getting paid salaries, partly to produce the research that they submit to journals. And all the editorial and refereeing work that goes into a philosophy journal is being done by people from this same community of philosophers employed by universities. The journal publisher provides copy-editing and type-setting (which are often shockingly done, by the way), then sells the journal back to the universities for a profit, even though the universities have already,
by paying the salaries of the people who wrote the papers and volunteered their time as editors and referees, paid most of the real cost of its production! There’s something pretty wrong with that. Many people think there should be a better way. Some of them—first David and Steve with the *Imprint*, now Franz and Jonathan with *Ergo*—have actually bothered to do something about it.

But all this has not yet answered Chris' question, which was about editing and how that feeds back into my own work. What we're looking for at both journals is an original contribution. Now, there's a lot of pressure on people to publish in philosophy. These days you probably need to publish to get a job (I was hired without being published, but this is increasingly less common); you need to publish to get tenure for sure; and then you just need to keep publishing because every year you've got to write a list of what you've done to hand in to the university, and if you've done nothing, you're conspicuous by the nothing that you've done. So people are under pressure to publish, and a result of the pressure to publish is that some not very good stuff ends up doing the rounds and eventually coming out. At the *Imprint*, David and Steve had the notion of what they called an "Intervention". An “intervention” is a paper which says “Philosopher A says X and Philosopher B says Y, and these are apparently inconsistent views, but look, if you slightly tweak A's position and you slightly tweak B's position, you find XY, a compromise”—something like that. Any paper which makes this kind of tiny move, we don't send out to referees. And I apply the same standard as a section editor at *Ergo*. So as an editor I’m looking for papers that make original contributions on genuinely philosophical questions. And, well, obviously that's the kind of paper I try to write myself, but, as one of my favourite colleagues likes to say, philosophy is hard....

**Noēsis:** So, on the topic of publications, you recently wrote a book; we just wanted to know what was the hardest part about writing the book, and how any of your views changed during the writing process.

**Dickie:** Do you want to see the book? [See figure 1.] The cover is by my friend who's a famous artist; she's a famous artist—she actually is a famous artist.

As for what’s inside the cover, different parts were hard in different ways.
The last phase was the production process, dealing with rounds of proofs, and that was really, extremely unpleasant, though I complained a lot to my more senior colleagues who said the production phase of a book is always horrible, and that made me feel a bit better. The book is published by Oxford University Press, but the production side—typesetting, and
putting the thing together—was all outsourced to a big international company. This company would send me a round of proofs. I’d go through it, find mistakes, and send back a corrected version. They’d send me a new round of proofs, in which the original mistakes may or may not have been corrected, but some innovator had introduced new mistakes. I’d go through the whole thing again, and send a new list of corrections. They’d send a new round of proofs, and so on. I had five rounds in all. So that was very frustrating.

Of course, before the production process there was the writing the book process, and that was hard in the characteristic way that philosophy is hard. There were some parts of the argument that took a long, long time to work out.

Something else that was hard was weighing up how much detail to go into against the need to avoid barriers to readability. It’s asking quite a lot of a reader to expect them to get through pages and pages of philosophical text, so it’s only fair to provide a narrative to give the reader a sense of moving along. I don’t mean that I was trying to write a Harry Potter book, but I did want to write something that doesn’t leave the reader feeling bogged down for pages at a time. But when you’re trying to do that, and you get to an intricate piece of argument, you’ve got a problem: You need to decide how much detail to go into. On the one hand, there’s no getting around the fact that the argument is intricate. On the other, you don’t want to hold people up for twenty pages at the end of which you deliver one little sub-conclusion. To deal with this, something I ended up doing in a few places was trying to give a slightly thinned-down version of the argument in the main body of the chapter, then putting the details in an appendix. That way, if anybody actually shares my obsession about how the argument looks at the level of the tiniest little cogs and levers, they can look in the appendices.

So, in terms of the philosophical work (as opposed to the war of attrition with the production company) there were two difficult things: actually thinking of how stuff should go, and trying to write it up in a way that balances detail and readability. Actually, the whole thing was very hard. But it was a lot of fun, too.

Noēsis: What was the best part about dealing with the publisher?

Dickie: Peter Momtchiloff, the philosophy editor at OUP in the UK, has always been very good to me, and dealing with him is always a joy and delight – by the way, he’s also a rock star (a real one with a band I mean); you can look him up on the internet. Peter knows the philosophical
profession very, very well—he knows who is interested in what, and so on. Anyway, he chose two anonymous readers to assess the manuscript I first sent to OUP, and they each wrote ten or twelve-page reports full of helpful comments and criticism. I don't know who these people are, except that they are Reader A and Reader B, but I feel like I love them. Their feedback was both incredibly encouraging and incredibly useful. This was actually the best experience with anonymous feedback I've ever had.

Noēsis: Was there specific feedback that you remember?

Dickie: It was just very interesting to see people's views on what worked and what didn't, and what was worth exploring more, and what they thought it would be good to stress in the final, polished version. A lot of the comments were pointed detail on specific parts of the argument. But they also had what I think was great advice on the strategic issue I was talking about before – the issue about balancing detail against readability.

Something that made the whole package of feedback really useful was that the readers seemed to be from very different backgrounds. The first reader was somebody who looked like they grew up in the same house I did—a probably-British-educated philosophy of mind/language person with interests not too remote from mine. The other reader seemed to be an American-educated, mind-metaphysics-y person. So their comments came from very different perspectives. And then the editor of the series the book is in, François Recanati, is a singular thought guy, which is very much the topic of the book, and he had a set of comments as well. So I had three sets of comments from different perspectives. I worked through every single comment, and made many changes, and I really can't thank these three people enough for their contributions to the finished product.

Noēsis: How long did the book take, from start to finish?

Dickie: A long time. I’ve been thinking about reference for years. My dissertation was on direct reference. There’s none of the dissertation left in the book, except, right in the tiny details of the argument for the hardest step, a claim that I was obsessed with when I was a graduate student. This is in Appendix B of Chapter 2 of the book—my formerly favourite claim is a premiss in the argument! I was very pleased to find that. So the ghost of my dissertation is still there.

Anyway, I’ve been thinking about reference for a long time. But this particular project really began while I was at NYU from 2008–2010. At that time, I’d been mucking around with a view of what makes a
thought or sentence ‘about’ a particular thing for which I didn’t have a first principles motivation. I had an example-driven motivation for the view. And I also thought it was the most plausible version of the view of reference in the Tractatus, by which I mean, what you get if you take the Tractatus picture and abstract away from the maniacal elements—if you do the abstraction you find a very powerful and intuitive proposal which didn’t have a fair go in the 20th century because it got thrown out with the bathwater like the rest of the Tractatus. I’d had two papers published where I started to develop this kind of view. But I hadn’t yet found the deepest formulation. In 2009, I was fiddling around thinking, “Where’s the real motivation? Where’s the real motivation?” —and then I found it! This book grew out of that. There’s continuity with stuff I’ve done before, but this is really the working out of the framework that you get if you start with the first principles motivation that I found in 2009. So for the project that’s six years, but it’s not as though I started on it from cold. Philosophy just takes a long time.

Noēsis: Obviously the argument of the book is going to be complex, but is there a central argument that you can elaborate on for our readers that might make some sort of sense?

Dickie: Let me give it a try.

Think about views of reference-fixing that you might have had in an undergrad course. If you’ve had a course on this stuff, you’ll have seen the contrast between descriptivist theories, where what makes it the case that the name refers to the object is that speakers associate the name with a description that the object satisfies, or maybe a cluster of descriptions, and causalist theories, where what makes it the case that the name refers to the object is that there’s a causal chain leading back to the object (that’s the picture in Kripke’s Naming and Necessity). The late 20th century debate involved to-and-fro between these kinds of view. By now there’s been a lot of work on this topic, but really no consensus. And I think that when you have a lot of ink spilled on a topic, over quite a long time, and no apparent progress towards a consensus, this a sign that people have been operating at the wrong level of explanatory depth.

So what I do in the book is go back to first principles. Suppose you’ve got a sentence, let’s say ‘a is F’, and the question is what makes it the case that ‘a’ stands for a particular object. Causal theories and descriptive theories were attempts to answer this question. But I suggest that we step back (temporarily) from our obsession with what makes it the case that the name ‘a’ stands for object o, and reach for a principle at the
level of whole ‘a is F’ sentences or beliefs. The principle I reach for—are you ready? Here’s a principle coming—is that justification is truth conducive. That’s not to say that you can’t have a false belief. It’s to say that a factor that adds to the subject’s justification for a belief somehow makes it more likely that the belief is going to be true, and that if you’ve got a justified belief which is not true, something’s gone wrong. That’s a principle connecting justification and truth. Now here’s another principle, connecting truth and aboutness. If my belief that Jack has fleas is about my dog, then it’s true if and only if he has fleas. So now we’ve got a principle connecting justification and truth, and a principle connecting truth and aboutness. [See Figure 2.] Let me say that again: justification and truth; truth and aboutness. And it’s going to be just so disappointing if we can’t cut out the intermediate term, and find a principle connecting justification and aboutness. This will be a principle which brings out the significance for accounts of the aboutness-fixing for beliefs, or reference-fixing for singular terms, of the fact that justification is truth conducive. The book argues for a precise version of the principle connecting justification and aboutness, and uses it to build an account of how aboutness-fixing works.

Noēsis: Can you tell us a bit more?

Dickie: Well, let’s say a bit more about the principle that justification is truth conducive. One way to put this principle is as the claim that if you have a justified belief, you’ll be unlucky if it’s false, and not merely lucky if it's true. The principle connecting justification and aboutness that I propose can be put in terms close to this. Suppose you’ve got a body of beliefs which you’d express using a singular term like ‘Jack’ or ‘Bertrand Russell’ or ‘that’. My principle says that these beliefs are about an object if and only if their means of justification converges on the object, so that you’ll be unlucky if beliefs justified by this means do not match the object and not merely lucky if they do.

To get an intuitive handle on the view, think about what’s involved when a telescope is focussed on an object. The fact that a telescope is focussed on an object doesn’t guarantee that the data it delivers will match the object. But it does guarantee that if the data doesn’t match the object, something’s gone wrong – the situation is somehow unlucky. My framework treats aboutness as what I call “cognitive focus”: A relation to an object puts you in a position to think about it by providing a means of justification such that, if you form only beliefs justified in this particular way but these beliefs don’t match the object, something has
Figure 2. Professor Dickie's dog, Jack. We hope the sentence, *'Jack has fleas'* does not refer to him.
gone wrong—you’re going to be unlucky if the beliefs don’t match what the object is like and not merely lucky if they do. This isn’t a descriptivist view, and it’s not a causalist view. But it lets us explain when a description or causal relation is playing an aboutness-fixing role. A description or causal relation is playing an aboutness-fixing role if it’s playing a role in securing justificatory convergence.

Anyway, that’s just a start, but obviously this view of mine solves every extant problem about reference and aboutness!

**Noēsis:** How did your views change while you were writing the book?

**Dickie:** Well, I started out with an idea of how you would motivate a principle—this principle connecting aboutness and justification that we’ve been talking about. Then the hard graft in writing the book was in working out how you would actually argue for a precise version of the principle, and what its implications might be. I don’t think that’s really a case of changing your views. There are many, many things in the book which I could not have foretold were going to be there at the beginning of the project. But it was more a matter of bringing out what the view actually is, and what its consequences are for other philosophical issues.

In fact, a wise philosopher said to me once, when I told him I’d accidentally generated a solution to a problem that I wasn’t actually trying to solve, that this is how you know you’re onto something: If your view solves the problem that you set out to solve, well, don’t be too pleased with yourself; but if it starts churning up solutions to other problems, then you know you’ve got something interesting. So often, especially when you go deep into a big, long project like this, you’ll find surprises, things that you just didn’t expect.

One big surprise was that the last chapter ended up being about the relationship between thought and consciousness. I had thought—and I thought this even until quite late in the game—that the last chapter of the book was going to be about something completely different. I thought it was going to be called “A Logical Atomist Revival Manifesto,” and was going to be about my obsession with reviving logical atomism. But then I realized it had to be about something else altogether. Surprises just spring up in front of you as you’re trying to bring out how your view actually works.

**Noēsis:** So rather than a process of changing your mind, it seems more like a process of discovering what’s going on.
Dickie: Well that’s right. You hope that it’s genuine discovery and not just an illusion of discovery. So you hope that you’re not just making stuff up! But what it feels like when you’re doing philosophical work is that you’ve got the view in front of you on the table (as it were), and you’re discovering how it works and what it entails.

Noēsis: Speaking of making stuff up, a lot of scientists might have a view against philosophy, I know a lot of scientists do turn into philosophers, but there does seem to be this perspective culminating in Stephen Hawking’s declaration, “Philosophy is dead”. What do you make of this sort of viewpoint?

Dickie: Well… now don’t you think it’s a bit premature, the declaration that philosophy is dead? I actually think people will always be interested in philosophical questions, and the real ones are questions that science probably can’t answer. Of course, there was a time when philosophers were doing foundational work in the sciences—Descartes and Leibniz were major scientists as well as major philosophers. And those days are probably gone. But there are still philosophical questions: questions about what consciousness is; how the mind represents the world; the nature of proof; the difference between a genuine law of nature and something which is just a generalization; the difference between right and wrong; the nature of explanation; the relationship between morality and the law. These are questions of the kind that get people interested in philosophy in the first place. They’re not going to be answered by the sciences. And as long as people are still interested in them, philosophy is not going to die. And actually I think there are respects in which for some areas of philosophy scientific progress has brought us to a golden age. The questions that I’m thinking about in my book are one example of this. The amount of empirical scientific knowledge about our perceptual systems and about cognition that there is now enormous compared to what there was even a few decades ago, and I think this new scientific knowledge enables progress on some very old philosophical questions.

Let’s take the case of ‘that’ beliefs formed on the basis of a perceptual link with the object. If you’re going to have an account of what makes it the case that these beliefs are about the object, then you’re going to need some kind of an account of how perception works. The early modern empiricists—Locke, Berkeley, Hume—all supposed some such account. But it was an account they were just making up! They said that your perceptual system sprays sense impressions or simple ideas at you, so that perception is giving you ‘blue’, ‘square’, ‘fuzzy’, then it’s the job
of cognition to tie together the blueness, squareness, and fuzziness as properties of a single object. And this view of what perception delivers persisted well into the 20th Century—it’s there in Russell and Quine, for example. But it’s just empirically false. Psychology and neuroscience have given us a lot of new knowledge about perception and the boundary between perception and cognition. And this is a new tool to use in addressing philosophical questions about how perception enables thought. I think there’s been a lot of recent progress on these questions made available by scientific advances.

Anyway, reports of philosophy’s demise are greatly exaggerated.

Noēsis: That was an awesome answer. So rather than a murder-victim relationship you see science and philosophy in a kind of mutually beneficial relationship?

Dickie: Well look, I just talked about one respect in which scientific progress has enabled philosophical progress. You’d have to ask a scientist about the relationship going back the other way. And here I don’t want to get above my pay grade by talking about the scientists’ point of view. But it is worth noting that we don’t have to go too far back to find major central figures in science who’ve had philosophical programs. Hilbert, a major mathematician, didn’t like transfinite arithmetic, because he thought numbers you can get to by starting from zero and adding one are respectable, but numbers bigger than that, well… they’re just spurious. So he wanted to try to find a way of using the tools that have been developed by people who use transfinite numbers, without being committed to the existence of such things.

Actually, maybe talking about Hilbert is going quite far back. But there are many people whose employers would classify them as scientists who are thinking about philosophical questions and who talk to philosophers all the time. The philosophical end of psychology is one obvious place where there are people like this—I’m thinking of Alison Gopnik and people like that (she’s Canadian, by the way, and worked at the U of T early in her career). Constructivist mathematics is another example. What about physics, though? Well, there are quite a few people with backgrounds in both physics and philosophy thinking about things like the nature of space-time and the interpretation of the standard model of quantum mechanics. I went to graduate school with a number of people working on this kind of thing, and they’re now employed in philosophy departments. Does Stephen Hawking think those research programs are dead? Or does he just say those people aren’t philosophers because they
know some physics and are working on space-time and the interpretation of quantum mechanics?

Noēsis: Well we’re almost out of time but before we finish, we just would like to know what new projects you’re working on?

Dickie: At the moment I’m still on the clean-up operation from the book. I’ve got a bunch of papers I’m supposed to be writing which bring out connections between aspects of the book and other things. Aside from that, my new project is to find a new project. I worked towards the book for a long, long time, and I’ve really only just finished. And I can see little glimmerings sometimes on the horizon of what I might do next, but at the moment I’m still writing up unexpected solutions that my view’s spat up.

Noēsis: No six months to pat yourself on the back and go, “Whew, six years? Okay, I’m going to be on a beach somewhere sipping martinis for a while”?

Dickie: Beaches and martinis is not my way of relaxing.

Noēsis: I suppose it'd be climbing, instead.

Noēsis: Do you find with this book, a lot of objections springing up that you will be responding to in papers or in other ways?

Dickie: The book only came out in North America a month ago, and in the UK just before Christmas, so it’s still very early days. I hope that people will have things to say, and I’ll respond when that happens.

Noēsis: Speaking of responses, in what form would you be responding to them? Do they just drop you an email saying this part doesn’t really work and you reply to that, or is there going to be a second edition to the book at some point where you go, a year or two later, okay, these people have raised these issues and these are the revisions that have been made.

Dickie: We’ll see, but there are a few things planned. There’s going to be a symposium in the journal, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*; three people will read the book and write their reactions, which will be published with a response from me. There’s going to be an author-meets-critics session at the American Philosophical Association in January. Again, three people will read the book and make comments, and I’ll
respond, but this time it’ll be a spoken thing. And sometime in the early summer I’ll be the guest blogger on The Brains Blog—that means (apparently—this professor has never blogged before) that there will be a week where I do a series of posts about my book, and people comment on the posts or the book or whatever. As for dropping me emails—at the moment people are just writing to me and saying, “Hey I love the cover” [laughter] which is the one part of the book that I did not do. But people will write and have questions or links and connections with things that they’ve thought of, or there will be parts of it that they hate, and they’ll tell me that, which I won’t mind. The only bad outcome is if nobody reads it. That would make me sad.

Noësis: Do you find a lot of the time when you get objections it’s just from a misunderstanding of your view?

Dickie: If I get an objection from a misunderstanding, then my first instinct is to blame myself and try to explain myself more clearly. So hopefully this won’t happen too much with the book, since so much work has gone into it. I’ve gone around giving papers on the material, and as I’ve said, I would write up minutes—I’d be there on the plane home, recording the facts that so-and-so said x and I said y and that didn’t seem to work, so I said z and that seemed to work better, or so-and-so said something which has also been said a few months ago by so-and-so else. Then I’d try to improve my material in response to people’s reactions and comments and criticisms and questions.

The point about misunderstanding is tied up with the thing I said before about writing strategy. One part of what you’re trying to think about strategically while you write is the removal of barriers to readability. Another part is the minimization of the risk of misunderstanding. I mean it’s a bit childish just to stamp your feet and say, “Oh everybody’s misunderstanding me!” You’ve got to try very hard to make yourself clear. Of course, if you think about some historical philosophers there doesn’t seem to be all that much effort in this direction. But you can’t get away with that these days.