Comments on Lu's 'On the pragmatics of belief ascriptions'

Ben Holguín (JHU)

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The "best guess" theory

- According to the "best guess" theory, (weak) belief is *question-sensitive*.[1]
  - You don't believe that p *simpliciter*; instead you believe that p relative to certain questions, and fail to believe it relative to others.[2]
  - So there's belief$_{Q_1}$, belief$_{Q_2}$, belief$_{Q_3}$, etc.
  - By extension, 'think'/'believe' is context-sensitive.[3]
- What does it take to (rationally) believe a proposition p relative to a question Q (according to BG)?
- Say that p is **cogent** for S relative to Q ('cogent$_{S,Q}$') iff:

1. p is the union of one or more complete answers to Q.
2. Every complete answer to Q that is included in p is no less probable on S's evidence than every complete answer to Q that is excluded from p.

- A first-order approximation of BG:[4]

  Best Guess S is rationally permitted to believe$_Q$ that p iff: p is cogent$_{S,Q}$.

Fang's challenge for BG

- BG is incompatible with:[5]

  Multi-Question Closure If (i) S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_1}$ that p and S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_2}$ that q, and (ii) Q_1 and Q_2 are probabilistically independent, then: S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_1 \wedge Q_2}$ that $p \wedge q$.

- This is because p can be cogent$_{S,Q_1}$ and q can be cogent$_{S,Q_2}$ without $p \wedge q$ being cogent$_{S,Q_1 \wedge Q_2}$.
- Why is this a problem? Because without MQC, it's not clear how we're supposed to explain the naturalness of speeches like:[6]

  (1) I think A will win the first semifinal and that either D or E will win the second. So I think two participants in the final will be either (A and D) or (A and E). ✓

[1] Holguín (2022), Dorst & Mandelkern (2023), Skipper (2023).

[2] Compare: p isn't an "answer" *simpliciter*, it's an answer *to* a (certain) Q.

[3] We report (weak) beliefs in natural language without reference to questions: e.g., 'I think that Sinner will win Wimbledon'.

[4] Emphasis on 'approximation'—the view I've written here is broken (and, relatedly, not the one I defend in my paper). To mention just one issue: it implies that agents aren't rationally permitted to believe the obvious logical consequences of what they rationally believe. This is because the proposition that the favorite will win the race entails the proposition that either the favorite or the third-favorite will win the race, but the latter proposition isn't cogent (given reasonable background assumptions). To get around this problem, we'd want cogency to be a necessary and sufficient condition for a certain proposition's being the *strongest* thing one rationally believes relative to a certain question. But I'm just going to ignore this for simplicity's sake.

[5] Fang (n.d.).

[6] See Fang's multiple horse race case.

Lu's defense of BG

- Lu's core proposal: we can explain the felicity of speeches like (1) without recourse to MQC. This is because 'believe' is even more context-sensitive than BG suggests.[7]
- According to BG, whether 'S is rationally permitted to believe p' expresses a truth in context depends on two things:
  1. S's evidence.
  2. The contextually supplied question Q.
- Standard implementations of BG take it for granted that the relevant notion of 'evidence' is context-*in*sensitive.[8]
  - But nothing forces us to think this!
  - And assuming the relevant conception of evidence is penumbrally connected to such things as *knowledge* and/or *surety*, then reasons to think these latter notions are context-sensitive become reasons to think the BG theorist's notion of evidence is too.
  - And this would suggest that there's more context-sensitivity involved with 'believe' than what is required to handle the question-sensitivity of belief.
- Following some of the recent-ish literature on "restricted attitudes",[9] Lu claims that the interpretation of 'believe' is sensitive not only to a question Q, but also a restricting proposition †.
- So what we should really be saying is that p is **cogent** for S relative to Q and † iff:
  1. p is the union of one or more complete answers to Q.
  2. Every complete answer to Q that is included in p is no less probable on S's evidence$_\dagger$ than every complete answer to Q that is excluded from p.[10]
- What is S's evidence$_\dagger$? It's S's "unrestricted" evidence conditioned on †.[11]
- Before we said there isn't such a thing as belief *simpliciter*, since all belief is question-sensitive belief. Now we're going even further: there isn't really such a thing as question-sensitive belief *simpliciter*, since all question-sensitive belief is question-and-restriction-sensitive belief:

BG$_\dagger$ S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q,\dagger}$ that p iff: p is cogent$_{S,Q,\dagger}$

- OK, how does the move from BG to BG$_\dagger$ help with MQP?

[7] I should note that my presentation of Lu's proposal is pretty different from his. I don't *think* anything I'm saying is substantively different from what he wants to say, but I'd be interested to hear otherwise.

[8] (Speaking as one BG-theorist, I'll note that I don't actually think the relevant notion of evidence is context-insensitive.)

[9] Drucker (2017), Blumberg & Holguín (2018, 2019), Jerzak (2019), Blumberg & Lederman (2021), Holguín (2021), von Fintel & Pasternak (2025).

[10] Note the subscripted '†' in 'evidence$_\dagger$'.

[11] Assuming S's unrestricted evidence can be represented as a single proposition E, S's evidence$_\dagger$ is $E \cap \dagger$.

- In some (most?) contexts, † takes a trivial value (i.e., ⊤), and so has no effect. But in other contexts, † can take a non-trivial proposition as its value, which can have non-trivial effects on the interpretation of 'believe'.
- Lu's meta-semantic hypothesis: **sequences of belief-reports often involve non-uniform resolutions of the context-sensitivity of 'believe'. There's a dynamic-y effect whereby the later occurrences of 'believe' are interpreted as restricted by the propositions that are expressed by the prejacents of earlier occurrences of 'believe'.**[12]
- If Lu is right, then a not unnatural interpretation of

  'I think that p. And I think that q. So I think that p and q.'

  is given by:

  'I think$_{Q_1,\top}$ that p. And I think$_{Q_2,p}$ that q. So I think$_{Q_1 \wedge Q_2, p \wedge q}$ that p and q.'
- And if that's right, we can perhaps account for the appeal of MQC in terms of the following weaker surrogate principle:

  Restricted Multi-Question Closure If (i) S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_1,\dagger}$ that p and S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_2,\dagger\wedge p}$ that q, and (ii) Q_1 and Q_2 are probabilistically independent, then: S is rationally permitted to believe$_{Q_1 \wedge Q_2, \dagger \wedge p \wedge q}$ that $p \wedge q$.
- Accordingly, we can explain the natural, felicitous readings of (1) as involving restriction-based context-shifting.

[12] Impressionistically: after saying we weakly believe something, subsequent weak belief reports are often interpreted as if we were *certain* of the thing we earlier said we (merely) weakly believed.

Worries

1. BG is already quite unruly, thanks to the combination of its question-based context-sensitivity and the permisiveness of cogency. BG$_\dagger$ is even more unruly, since it massively increases the space of available interpretations of 'believe'. Lu's "Inadvisability Condition" perhaps reins things in to some degree, but it would be nice if we had something more systematic to work with.
2. Consider the following variant on an example of Pearson's (forthcoming):

   (2) [Scenario: A will win if the die lands 1-4 while B will win only if the die lands 5 or 6.]
   I think that A will win. So I think that if the die lands 4 or higher, A will win. ✗

- I have a very hard time hearing this speech felicitously.[13] But on Lu's view (as far as I can tell), this speech should have an easily accessible interpretation on which the reasoning it expresses is sound—viz., 'I think$_{Q_1,\top}$ that A will win. So I think$_{Q_2,A}$ that if the die lands 4 or higher, A will win'.
- Similar points go for the lottery puzzle. Suppose all 100 entrants to a fair 100-ticket lottery are lined up in a row. I say of the first entrant: 'I think they're not going to win'. Likewise for the second, third, and so on up until the final entrant. Is there an interpretation of 'think' on which, looking at the final entrant, I, a paragon of rationality, can truly say 'But I *do* think this person will win!'?[14]

3. Consider the following variant on Fang's example:

(3) I think A or B will win the first semifinal and that either D or E will win the second. With respect to the final itself, I think it's going to be A versus D. ✗

- The intuitive strangeness: if I'm hedging with respect to the semifinals, shouldn't I be hedging with respect to the final?
- BG has nothing to say about this, since given the setup of the case: (i) A ∨ B is a cogent guess to the question *Who will win the first semifinal?*, (ii) C ∨ D is a cogent guess to the question *Who will win the second semifinal?*, and (iii) A ∧ D is a cogent guess to the question *Who will be in the final?*.[15]
- But BG$_\dagger$ doesn't seem to have anything to say about it either!
  - This is because the meta-semantic principle we've been given is *order-dependent*: later belief reports can be interpreted as restricted by the propositions expressed by the prejacents of earlier belief reports, but not the other way around. Interpreting the 'think' in 'I think it's going to be A versus D in the final' as restricted by [A ∨ B wins the first semifinal and C ∨ D wins the second semifinal] does nothing to undermine the cogency of [A ∧ D in the finals].
  - We could perhaps relax the meta-semantic principle to allow restriction effects to be order-*independent*, so that the 'think' in both 'I think A or B will win the first semifinal' and 'I think D or E will win the second semifinal' is interpreted as restricted by [A ∧ D are in the final]—but then the predictive power of the view would really be put to the test.[16]
- My hunch is that whatever explains the felicity of (1) should explain the infelicity of (3), though currently I have little sense of what such an explanation might look like.

[13] As Pearson points out, it's far more natural to say 'I think Alice will win, but also that Bob will win if the die lands 4 or higher'. Note too that, given the setup of the case, the proposition expressed by second conjunct is materially equivalent to the proposition expressed by the presumptive sounding: 'So I think that if the die lands 4 or higher, it will land on 4'.

[14] Apropos my first comment: note that if the answer to this question is yes, then Lu seems to be committed to the view that: for every entrant to the lottery S, there is at least *an* interpretation of 'believe' on which 'I believe that S will win the lottery' expresses a truth!

[15] MQC also has nothing to say about this, since it doesn't follow from the fact that [(A ∨ B) ∧ (C ∨ D)] is a rationally permissible guess to *Who will be in the final?* that [A ∧ D] isn't.

[16] It would also play badly with Lu's inquiry-theoretic gloss on restriction, though I myself find it unclear whether there's any deep connection between the meta-semantics of restriction and the activity of inquiry. (Are there deep connections between the meta-semantic principles of quantifier domain restriction and the principles of inquiry?)

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