Thinking and being sure

Belief and its Limits (BaiL); Seminar 2   ANU
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I. Opening Task

Ping Pong. You want to play ping pong on Friday. You ask Tom when it's played. He responds...

(Response 1) We play at 4pm, but I'm not sure.

(Response 2) I think we play at 4pm, but I'm not sure.

Does either response sound weird to you? And does it sound weird or less weird than the other? If so, why?

Assuming Response 2 doesn't sound weird to you, this points at a potential important distinction between *thinking p* and *being sure that p*—the former somehow being "weaker" than the latter.

Goodman and Holguín (2022) (henceforth 'G&H') explore the ways these attitudes differ, in particular with respect to the roles they play in ordinary life. One of their contentions seems to be that philosophers will do better if they stop using "believes" and instead use "thinks" and "is sure"/"unsure"...

More directly, G&H suspect, in English, "believes" is synonymous with "thinks", but that the roles and properties philosophers have assigned to "belief" (say, that it satisfies Preservation, discussed last week) are more plausible possessed by "is sure".

Note to self: *Announcements about proposed structure of the course!*

II. Being Sure

Why is Response 1 weird? G&H propose that, when someone asserts *p*, they represent themselves as being sure that *p*. So in asserting '*p and I'm not sure that p*' you both represent yourself as being sure that *p* while also denying that you are sure that *p*. So you either falsely represent yourself (you're not sure that *p*, despite asserting *p*) or you say something false (you are sure that *p*, despite asserting otherwise).

More generally, they propose:

Surety Norm on Assertion Assert *p* only if you are sure that *p*.

This is in contrast to a more famous idea, from Williamson (2000):

Knowledge Norm on Assertion Assert *p* only if you know that *p*.

The "K-norm" is meant to explain the oddity of "*p* and I don't know that *p*" (the famous "Moore sentence") in a parallel manner.

G&H suggest explaining the oddity Moore sentences via a knowledge norm on being sure: be sure only of what you know. The K-normers can likewise explain the oddity of Response 1 by appealing to that fact that you can only know what you're sure of. Seems like a bit of a stalemate? We'll come back to this in a moment.

G&H aren't exactly clear what these norms amount to. I take it that there are two views, Constitutivism and non-Constitutivism.

On Constitutivism, to assert something is, in part, *just to* to represent yourself as (if the S-norm is right) being sure of it. So to assert something you're unsure is in some sense against the very nature of assertion. (This is the view in Williamson (2000).)

Non-Constitutivism is any opposing view. On one approach, these norms are just observations about our actual practices. For whatever reason, we expect people to be sure of what they assert and criticise people when they assert what they aren't sure of. But there could have been be different norms on assertion.

G&H also suggest an S-norm on *inquiry*. Consider:

> **Morse 1.** Morse is woken up by his telephone ringing in the early hours of the morning – a doctor in Oxford has been shot through her window while having dinner last night. Morse pulls himself together and heads to the scene of the crime. He searches the scene, talks to potential witnesses, and so on.

> **Morse 2.** The phone rings in the early hours of the morning, but it doesn't wake Morse up since he's been up all night. He's been up washing the blood out of his car, scrubbing his flat and disposing of any evidence he can, since last night he shot the doctor through her window while she was having dinner. Not wanting to be discovered, Morse must carry on as normal. He heads to the scene of the crime. He searches the scene, talks to potential witnesses, and so on

This is a famous pair of cases from Friedman (2019).

Friedman's observation is that Morse's investigation in the second case feels like a *sham*. Goodman and Holguin thus propose:

S-Norm on Inquiry Inquire into whether p only if you're unsure whether p.[1]

We might again propose instead:

K-Norm on Inquiry Inquire into whether p only if you don't know whether p.

Why prefer the S-norm over the K-norm? It can feel like a stalemate.[2] G&H argue the S-norm wins in both cases because it's possible to know p while being unsure whether p, and in these cases it's impermissible to assert p/permissible to inquire into whether p. So the K-norms are just false. Consider:

> **Hastings.** Suppose Jones reads, and thereby comes to know, that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. At that moment, he is also sure that the battle was fought then. Years later, he has long since forgotten reading the book. Someone asks him if he knows when Battle of Hastings was fought. He replies 'I'm not sure, but I think it was in 1066'. Although Jones is no longer sure that the battle was fought in 1066, he still thinks that it was, and his thinking this is the result of a memory trace preserved from the time he originally learned it. That is, Jones hasn't forgotten that the battle was fought then, so he still remembers that it was fought then, so he knows that it.

[1] Friedman expresses this norm in terms of "belief"—G&H are going to think this muddies the waters, as when "belief" is interpreted closer to "thinks", such a belief norm on inquiry is not particularly plausible.

[2] G&H surprisingly don't consider Friedman's third case—in which Morse is sure he committed the murder, but in fact hallucinated the whole experience—which is another argument for the S-norm

They also give a case using knowledge gained from perception.

Are we convinced?

III. Thinking

Thinking that p is "weaker" than being sure that p—that's why Response (2) from Tom can sound reasonable. Consider also:

> **Exam.** You've just completed a multiple choice exam and the instructor is reviewing some particular question, for which your answer was (c). The instructor then asks:

> (Question 1) What made you think the answer was (c)?

(Question 2)   What made you sure the answer was (c)?

Question (2) sounds weird. You can in most cases reasonably deny the presupposition: *nothing* made you sure it was (c).

Question (1) on the other hand is very natural. It's reasonable for the instructor to assume you thought the answer was (c); after all, why else would you write it?

Ok, so it's easier to think p than it is to be sure that p. But how much easier? Here's another famous case:

> **Horse Race 1.** There's a four-way horse race between horses *A*, *B*, *C* and *D*. *A* is 40% likely to win, *B* through to *D* are each 20% likely to win. *Who do you think is going to win the race?*

Consider: *I think horse A will win*. This sounds perfectly reasonable: horse *A* is twice as likely to win as any other horse. But then thinking p doesn't even require being 50% confident that p!

Note further that answers like *I think C will win*, or *I think A or C will win*, or *I only think A won't win* all sound off.

Thinking is also appears to be "question-sensitive". Consider:

> **Horse Race 2.** Horse *A* is taking part in a horse race tomorrow, and it's 40% likely *A* will win. *Do you think A is going to win the race?*

Here, *I think horse A will lose* sounds reasonable.

G&H propose the following account of thinking, where your "best guess to Q" be the answer to Q that you think is as likely as any other:

Best Guess Account (i) Think that p is the true answer to Q only if p is your best guess to Q. (ii) If it's okay that p be your best guess to Q, then it's okay to think that p is the true answer to Q.

G&H take the above to be the only normative requirements on thinking. But they also argue that, *typically*, we act on the basis of what we think all the time. In particular, they suggest:

Deciding People typically make decisions by becoming opinionated about what they should do, and then intending to do what they think they should do.

I'm surprised they only offer this as a descriptive claim, and not a normative claim, say something like: it's okay to ϕ if it's okay for ϕ-ing to be your best guess about what you should do. Any thoughts?

IV. Some Puzzles about Belief

I thought it would be fun to look at some of the puzzles about belief we considered last week (+ one new puzzle), and see if they can be solved by disambiguating "believes" into "thinks" and "in sure".

Of course, this presupposition can be denied as well—perhaps you chose randomly. But asking this question (1) does not feel anywhere near as presumptuous as asking question (2).

Originally from Jeremy Goodman I believe, mentioned first in Hawthorne et al. (2016).

There are lots of fun puzzles about weak belief: e.g. Teague (2024) Pearson (fc) and Helena Fang's "Guessing and its Limits" (manuscript).

See Holguín (2022) for a more fleshed out view.

"Okay" is a weaker, permissibility kind of requirement, in contrast with the "only ifs" used in the other norms on this handout.

Terminology: one "becomes opinionated" about Q when they comes to think that some answer p is the true answer to Q.

Puzzle 1. How does belief relate to credence?

- What do your rational credences (i.e. confidence %) concerning p need to be for it be rational to think p?
- What do your rational credences (i.e. confidence %) concerning p need to be for it be rational to be sure that p?

Puzzle 2. Are beliefs "closed under conjunction"?

- If you rationally think p, and you rationally think q, is it rational to think $p\&q$?
- If you're rationally sure that p, and you're rationally sure that q, is it rational to be sure that $p\&q$?

Puzzle 3. Are beliefs preserved when learning information you left open?

- If you rationally think p, and it's not rational for you to think not-q, is it always still rational to think p after learning q?
- If you're rationally sure that p, and it's not rational for you to be sure that not$-q$, is it always still rational to be sure of p after learning q?

References

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