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Commentary on Pinto

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Commentary on Robert C. Pinto: "On Understanding 'Probably' and Other Modal Qualifiers"

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Happiness is discovering that an explanation I didn't have time to give in my other session can be used in this session. My other session is about question begging

Originally, I think, the idea of question begging arose as follows. I want to give an argument, the intended argument, but that argument is invalid. So I express the argument ambiguously so it appears to be the same as a valid argument which, in turn, appears to be the intended argument. But the valid argument is actually different. Either one of the premises is different, and so question begging or the conclusion is different, an irrelevant conclusion.

However Aristotle presents the idea wrongly, so that the invalidity, the ambiguity, and the question begging or irrelevant conclusion, instead of being several faults within a single fallacy, all appear to be separate items.

So if question begging is separate, what makes a premise question begging if there is no intended argument to refer to? And the answer comes back that question begging occurs when you use as a premise a statement you're not entitled to use as a premise. And the next question is: what kind of statement *are* you entitled to use as a premise?

Different answers to this question may lead to different theories of question begging. However the most general answer is that it all depends on the purpose of giving the argument.

For example, if I want to decide some question I will argue from things I believe. If I already believe something but want to be surer, I will argue from things I am surer about. If I want to cause an audience to know something, I will argue from things they already know. If I want to sell an audience a snake oil conclusion by hook or by crook, I will argue from all of their beliefs, however foolish I think them. If I want to refute a theory by reductio, I argue from statements of that theory and to a contradiction. In conditional proof, I argue from the antecedent to the consequent. If I want to cite Aristotle as my ally, I will argue from statements of Aristotle to my view. If I want to say that your view puts you in a league with the terrible Hegel, I may derive your view from statements of Hegel. Or some teacher may just have assigned a class of statements that I am permitted to argue from.

So in any of these cases, I beg the question if I use as a premise a statement which isn't in the class I'm supposed to be arguing from and hasn't been previously derived from that class.

So here, motivated by questions about question begging, I've developed a theory about arguments being given for purposes and those purposes determining what statements are suitable as premises in those arguments.

When I turn to Pinto's paper, my first impression is that, for different motives, he has developed the same theory.

But before we consider that, let us note one further feature of my theory. In my theory, an argument is *to* a conclusion but it is not necessarily being given *for* that conclusion. When in reductio, I argue *to* a contradiction, I am not arguing *for* the contradiction, but for the falsity of the premise. In conditional proof, I argue *to* the consequent but *for* the conditional. In arguing from Hegel *to* your view, I'm not arguing *for* your view, I'm trying bring your view into ill repute.

The case of arguing from an audience's foolish opinions to my snake oil conclusion needs a little discussion. In a sense the argument is *for* its conclusion, for that is the very conclusion I'm trying to sell. But I myself do not take the argument as giving any reason—good reason—for its conclusion. I shall say the argument is *for no* conclusions but is for a *purpose*—that of selling its conclusion to an audience.

So in my view an argument is *to* a conclusion but may not be *for* it.

In turning to Pinto, my first impression is that his theory and mine are the same. He distinguishes between believing that p and accepting that p. Accepting that p, in a context, means accepting p as a suitable premise for use in that context. You can believe that p and yet not accept p. You can accept p even though you think it is false. Acceptance varies from context to context even when beliefs remain unchanged. It sure *sounds* as if Pinto's theory and mine are the same.

I first began to doubt this because of a footnote, although partly, I saw later, because I *misread* that footnote. The footnote really does say that some remarks Pinto made above help *explain* how we can sometimes believe p without accepting p. This puzzled me slightly, because in my theory that hardly needs explaining. If, for instance, I'm arguing from *your* opinions, what *I* believe cuts no ice, and would generally be question begging. But then the footnote seemed to say, but didn't say, something that would be crazy on my view. It seemed to say that if in a situation I can accept that p, then in that situation I'm entitled to *act* on p. Of course, that would be absurd. Just because I assume for reductio that people can jump out of windows and fly, doesn't mean I should go ahead and try this trick! But, for the record, what Pinto really said was that if I'm deciding what to *do* and will *act* upon the *conclusion* of the argument, *then* I'd better stick to the premises I'm entitled to act upon.

Anyway, I began to feel that I was depending too much on abstract formulations of Pinto's theory and needed more concrete examples. Turning to an appendix I found three examples of accepting that p. One involves arguing from things I believe; another, from things that are very strongly established and widely accepted, and, in the third, I argue from a premise that isn't *strictly* true but is true enough for my purposes.

In all these examples, the premise accepted is either believed or well established or believed at least roughly. I begin to *suspect* that, for Pinto, acceptance presupposes

belief, at least roughly. And note, in all these cases, the argument would be *for* the conclusion. What *does* Pinto include under *argument*?

On this suspicion, Pinto's statement that one can accept p sometimes even while believing that p is false would mean only that sometimes you can believe p is true *enough* even though you don't believe it's *exactly* true.

I return to the paper, with this suspicion, looking for more examples of acceptance.

Unqualified belief or acceptance that p presupposes that I believe that there is no serious possibility that p is false. So, I take it, unqualified acceptance that p presupposes unqualified belief that p.

But under qualified belief and acceptance, we find two examples of qualified acceptance, that don't presuppose even qualified belief.

Qualified belief means I believe p on the basis of its probability, which, though not enough for certainty, *is* enough for believing p.

One example of qualified *acceptance* is that of real possibility. I qualifiedly believe *not* p; so there is a real possibility that I am wrong and that p. I argue: p, therefore q. The argument *to* q argues *for* the real possibility of q. The premise p is accepted as premise but not believed. Note, however, in this example, p and q are *positively* characterized as real possibilities.

Another example is that of presuming that p. Suppose the following simple account explains the presumption of innocence. I'm in the jury box. I have heard no evidence. But I believe the prosecution has evidence that shows the defendant is *guilty*, and I believe I am about to hear that evidence. And I believe that the defendant is guilty. Of course, I also think these beliefs *could* be wrong. But if I hear that evidence and, to my surprise, it does *not* show the guilt, I will believe the defendant is innocent. And I believe *now*, at the beginning of the trial, that *if* the evidence does not show the defendant is guilty, the defendant is innocent. And *this* belief *is*, on this account, the presumption of innocence.

But now if I accept that he's innocent and infer he should be set free, my argument *to* the conclusion *he should be set free* is really *for* the conclusion that *if* the evidence doesn't show guilt, he should be set free. And the premise that he is innocent is accepted as a premise but is not believed.

So again my suspicion is *not* right. But, again, the example is one where something positive, that they should be presumed, is being said about both premise and conclusion.

So now I wonder, maybe something *like* my suspicion is true. Maybe some of the various purposes to be served by his very general theory makes Pinto reluctant to go too far from the narrower arguments *for* a conclusion all the way to arguments to a conclusion. Why aren't there really negative examples, where the arguer *detests* the premise and conclusion? Why not arguments from Hegel, for reductio, and from the foolish to the snake oil? Or purely neutral ones, as from antecedent to consequent?

I now turn briefly to a different point. There is some unclarity in Pinto's paper about what he calls *expecting* p. "Probably p" expresses that I expect p. But is expecting a species of qualified *acceptance* that presupposes qualified belief, or is it just qualified belief itself, not requiring acceptance? I think it is just qualified belief. For it is possible to believe p on its probability and yet find that probability not high enough for one's

argument. Then one would say, "Probably p but not probably enough for this argument," and one would not say, "I believe p but can't say probably p."

One final warning about Pinto's phrase "accepting that p." Sellars[1] used this to mean, essentially "believing." Pinto has shortened the ordinary phrase "accepting that p for the sake of the argument." This *can* lead to strange ways of speaking. I say to my opponent, "I accept the complete truth of your theory. Of course, only for purposes of reductio. Of course, I don't accept your theory without qualification, but only with a qualification. The comedian's qualification 'NOT!'"

Afterword (Not read at session, but sent to Pinto.)

After writing the above comment, I began to worry that I was being unfair to Pinto. Maybe his abstract formulations show clearly that his concept of arguments is the full "to" concept even though his examples haven't caught up. I was thinking particularly of a *very* general sounding account of reasoning.

But then I realized *that* account actually proves my suspicion is not all wrong.

Pinto defines, "In my view, *reasoning* is a matter of *grounding* or *anchoring* my propositional attitude toward some propositional content…in my attitudes toward certain other propositional content."

But note, on this account a premise is accepted because of *my* propositional attitude towards it. Where are Hegel's views, the audience's views, and the contents of a theory I'm trying to refute? Not to mention, statements assigned by my teacher.

link to response   link to paper

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[1] In the passage that Pinto cites from Sellars, W. (1964) Induction as Vindication. *Philosophy of Science*, 31, 197-231, p.198.