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Commentary on Cheng

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In Response To: Martha Cheng's [Reasons for reason-giving in unplanned discourse](#)

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I would like thank Martha Cheng for an interesting and tightly constructed paper. Her topic of Unsolicited Reason-Giving introduces us to a curious phenomenon. I have only a few brief comments directed (1) to how Cheng characterizes the conversations she has analyzed, (2) to her discussion of why interviewees produce unsolicited comments and, (3) to why unsolicited comments by interviewees seem curious.

Recall the general context Cheng discusses. The phone rings; a young person on the line wants to ask some questions soliciting our views about this or that topic. We agree to answer, perhaps grudgingly. Cheng would construe our answers as *claims*, and she is inclined to regard elaborations related to our answers as reasons justifying those claims. This seems to me to be a doubtful interpretation of the answer respondents give to telephone interviews--an interpretation which straightjackets Cheng's subsequent interpretation of and explanation for the unsolicited comments interviewees provide.

On the face of the matter, the responses which interviewees provide in telephone interviews simply seem to be reports of the interviewee's psychological states and, in some cases, the interviewee's social/economic conditions. They are asked whether they believe certain things, how they feel about this or that, how they judge various matters, whether they are better or worse off than previously, etc. The answers to these questions seem simply to be statements which report matters about which the respondent presumably is knowledgeable, since in all cases the questions are about the respondent's beliefs, judgments, and circumstances.

Why should we consider the respondents's answers to be claims? In her paper Cheng offers no analysis of what a claim is, so I am unsure how she comes to regard her interviewees's answers as claims. I am not prepared here to offer a full dress analysis of the concept a *claim*. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that claims are utterances which have two essential features. First, they are put forward for belief, consideration, acceptance, etc. Second, they are put forward in the understanding that the utterer might be called upon, in some relevant context, to provide grounds or justification which warrant responding to the utterance as intended. Roughly, then, S claims that *p*, if S says that *p*, (i) intending that some party or parties, e. g., believe (accept, consider, etc.) that *p* and (ii) expecting that S may be called upon to provide reason and evidence which warrant, e.g., believing that *p*. It is not clear that the answers respondents give to telephone interview questions satisfying these conditions.

It is difficult to see any response on the order of belief, consideration,

acceptance which interviewees might anticipate as a result or consequence of the answers they provide in telephone interviews. In many respects their communicative situation resembles talking to a tape recorder. The interviewer, after all, has precisely the role of recording the answers given. Just as it would be odd to say to tape recorder, e. g., 'You do believe me, don't you?' or 'That is an acceptable view, isn't it?', so it would also be odd to amplify the answers given to a telephone interview with questions designed to ascertain whether one's conversational-other believed, accepted, or otherwise positively responded to one's answers. Accordingly, it is difficult to see how what one says in response to a telephone interview could qualify as a claim one was making on that party or any other potential recipient of one's answers.

Still, responding to a telephone interviewer is in at least one important respect different than simply speaking to a mechanical recorder. In a telephone interview one is doing something a bit like speaking for the record, at least in the very minimal sense that one's answer will be compiled with other answers into a representation of some corresponding body of opinion. If one provides answers which misrepresent one's views, one introduces distortion into the larger representation being assembled. To the degree that one's answers result in a misrepresentation of the relevant body of opinion, one's answers would foreseeably mislead persons who might rely on that larger representation. This unfortunate potential outcome might suffice to give many respondents reason to believe that they ought to truthfully respond to the interview questions by honestly reporting their beliefs. But this line of thought merely shows that the interviewee's answers qualify as statements; we do not here have a basis for regarding respondents's answers as claims.

Notice that if we are to construe respondents's answers as claims on the basis of their responsibility for the truthfulness of what they say, then their claims will be claims about the state of their beliefs, the conditions of their lives, etc. Where a respondent is asked, e. g., 'Would you agree or disagree with a law that would require a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchased?', an affirmative response says (when fully expressed) 'Yes, I agree with a law that would require a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchased'. A respondent who says that takes responsibility for this statement's being a truthful representation of the state of her commitments. She has not said that a law should be passed requiring a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchased. Accordingly the respondent has not claimed that. *At most* she has claimed that her commitments about gun legislation are as she represents them to be, and it would seem strange in an interview situation to treat that answer as a claim.

But suppose we were to construe the respondents's answers in telephone interviews as claims that they actually do believe, feel, etc. what they report themselves to believe, feel, etc. If we then interpret their unsolicited comments as reasons justifying those claims, we will have to read their unsolicited remarks as justifications for believing that they are truthfully reporting their beliefs, feelings, etc. So, where the respondent says that she believes a law

should be passed requiring a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchased, we would then interpret her unsolicited comments as reasons for supposing that the respondent actually does believe that such a law should be passed. Martha Cheng does not seem inclined to interpret respondents's unsolicited elaborations as providing reason for believing that the respondents are sincerely and accurately reporting their beliefs. Rather she wants to interpret the unsolicited comments our respondent might make as justification for supporting a policy that requires a one week waiting period before a hand gun could be purchase. So even were we (mistakenly) to construe interview responses as claims, these responses would not be the sort of claim that Cheng attributes to respondents.

The second condition necessary for an utterance to qualify as a claim, *viz.* that the utterance be put forward in the understanding that the utterer might be called upon to provide justification for, e. g., believing what the utterer says, poses an even larger obstacle to interpreting interviewee answers as claims. Certainly the telephone interviewer is in no position to demand justification of the respondent. The interviewer's role precludes that. It would be a joke for an interviewer to say something on the order of 'Why should a one week waiting period be required for a hand gun to be purchased? That view needs justification' or 'You people all say you support gun legislation, but then you vote the other way'. Humor of this sort would be lost on most interviewees; many, I suppose, would simply hang up if they met demands for justification from interviewers. Nor would the situation change were other parties brought into play. The interviewee will generally be in a position to rebuff questions and objections with a response on the order of 'If you aren't going to accept my answers why are you bothering me with these questions?' Were it to become generally the case that the answers given in telephone interviews seemed to be unreliable, I suspect the practice of polling by telephone would go into decline, and I doubt that anyone would then blame the interviewees for giving unreliable answers. The comment would be that the public had run out of patience with telephone interviews, so the practice had come to an end. It seems that there is little avenue for calling upon telephone interviewees to justify their answers. It hardly seems plausible, then, that those answer qualify as claims.

Consistent with Cheng's interpretation of interviewee responses as claims, she initially regards the supplementary comments respondents provide as "unsolicited reasons for their answers." Consider the following exchange.

Interviewer, "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off than a year ago?"

Respondent, "Since I'm retired and drawing a social security check, I guess I'm in the the uh-same."

Cheng interprets the respondent's answer, ". . . I'm in the the uh same

[condition as a year ago]" as a claim, and the respondent's unsolicited comment, "Since I'm retired and drawing a social security check," as a reason justifying his claim. In some cases, this may be a reasonably accurate interpretation of the respondent's unsolicited comment, but, I want to suggest that given the sample conversation Cheng provides, other interpretations seem warranted. The idea that respondents's unsolicited comments are justificatory reasons may be largely an artifact of Cheng's initial commitment to treat their answers as claims.

Interestingly, Cheng's data lead her to supplement her analysis in ways which, while insightful, are not entirely consonant with her inclination to treat the respondents's unsolicited comments as reasons justifying claims. The first supplement occurs in connection with Cheng's classification of unsolicited comments. Since she primarily interprets those comments as "unsolicited reasons for their [the respondents's] answers" She offers a classification of unsolicited comments based on the type of appeal she finds in the "reasons" offered by respondents: sentiment, personal fact, impersonal fact, value, authority, alternatives, and analogy. In addition to these categories, Cheng recognizes that in some cases the unsolicited comment "is not an appeal in order to justify an answer. Rather with the reasoning displayed in the instances the respondent mitigates a claim or reflects upon his or her own thinking process or knowledge state, or on the question itself." This latter category, on a scale unto itself, Cheng describes as "meta-thinking." The second supplement is presented in connection with her explanation of why respondents provide unsolicited comments. Her primary analysis is that such comments are offered in order to justify the claims respondents present in their answer, but in some cases, Cheng suggests, the respondents are externalizing an internal dialogue in which they critically assess the reasons they have to warrant a claim." While Cheng tries to interpret these two supplements in ways which fit her primary interpretation of unsolicited comments as reasons justifying claims, these important supplements point instead to the diversity of those unsolicited comments.

Cheng's category of meta-thinking collects a broad array of comments which cannot plausibly be construed as reasons justifying claims. It includes comments respondents make about the questions asked, about their answers, and about their ability/inability to answer the question asked. The examples of respondent "meta-thinking" provided by Cheng's paper suggest a rich variety in interviewee responses. Consider the answers reported from respondents to the following question asked a few days after George Bush's election to office, "How would you rate the job George Bush has done since the election-- excellent, good, only fair, or poor?" The answers including meta-comments: "It's only been a couple of days. Can't tell." "Well he hasn't been there very long. I don't know." "Can't comment on that. He's only been in office one day." "Well, he just got elected, so uh, I guess good." Chang, if I understand her, is inclined to construe comments which express "meta-thinking" as utterances which express the interviewee's reflection on the justification the respondent has for a (potential) claim to be made in answer to the question asked. But

these comments responding to a patently premature question about Bush's performance in office express thinking about the *question* being asked and seem manifestly designed either to reject it as unanswerable or to qualify the question so as to render it answerable. If we do not initially suppose that respondent answers are claims, greater variety emerges in their supplementary comments.

This same point emerges in consideration of the prospect that some of the unsolicited comments provided by respondents are simply a matter of the interviewees thinking aloud. There are two points that need to be raised here. First this category of comment seems to be broader than Cheng suggests, including comments which she interprets as justification provided for claims. Consider the example in which the interviewer asks, "We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days. Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off than a year ago?" This question calls for an inference; the interviewee is asked to report how she or he would judge a matter. A respondent might not have given this matter much prior thought, and the conclusion to the inference might not be immediately obvious to the respondent. So the respondent might have to stop and work out the inference. To fill the dead air space or assist concentration, the respondent might do his or her thinking aloud and, so, might produce the following answer, "Since I'm retired and drawing a social security check, I guess I'm in the the uh-same." Cheng analyzes this answer as an attempt by the respondent to justify his answer, but it is very plausible to suppose that the respondent is simply working out his conclusion aloud. If we do not assume a priori that interviewee answers are claims and if we recognize, with Cheng, that some supplementary comments are expressions of the interviewee's mental effort to work out an answer to the question asked, some (perhaps many) of the comments which Cheng interprets as justification for answers will seem more like attempts on the part of respondents to figure out what they think or believe so that they can provide the reports requested of them.

Second, Cheng interprets cases in which unsolicited comments are overt expressions of the interviewee's thinking process as instances of "critical thinking" on the part of interviewees, i. e., as expressions of mental efforts to arrive at justifiable answers. This interpretation is consistent with her interpretation of respondent answers as claims. If the answers given to interview questions are understood by respondents as claims, then it would be natural for them to treat the inferences necessary for them to figure out what those answers might be as efforts to find justification for the claims they are making. But this way of interpreting the interviewee's thinking aloud is arbitrarily generous. Generous because it makes interviewees out to be *critical* thinkers, when in fact their thinking might be no more critical than musings which bring to mind what feel like relevant beliefs and combine those beliefs to yield a judgment which can be reported as an answer to the question asked by the interviewer. Interpreting such musing-aloud as critical thinking seems arbitrary because the only reason we have for supposing that the respondents are being *critical* in their thinking is Cheng's initial and highly doubtful

supposition that answers to interview questions are claims.

When one contemplates Cheng's data unfettered by the supposition that respondent answers are claims, still further variety seems emerge among the unsolicited comments she reports. In some cases the respondents may be less interested in trying to figure out how they judge a matter so that they can provide a relevant report of their beliefs and more interested in showing off their reasoning powers. We all have associates who seem never able to answer a questions without (proudly) exhibiting the reasoning process which lead them to their answers. It would be odd if none of the unsolicited comments offered up in telephone interviews had this pedantic character. I suspect we have just begun to index the variety among solicited comments to telephone interviews.¹

I have been suggesting that Cheng's topic, unsolicited comments provided in response to telephone interviews, does not mark out a unified range of phenomena for which a single or fundamental explanation can be provided. In conclusion I would like to comment on the initial sense that unsolicited comments comprise a uniform or unified phenomenon. That intuition initially arises, I think, not from any recognizable similarity or affinity within this collection of utterances, but rather from the sense that there is something odd about them. That sense of oddity may come from something like this. We have in mind a particular use of linguistic utterances, e. g., to convey information or, perhaps, to make claims. Unsolicited comments from respondents in telephone interviews do not conform to that preferred use, so they come to be aggregated by reason of their deviation from some "normal" use and their consequent apparent oddity. The basic mistake here, eloquently identified by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, is to suppose that linguistic utterances have only one use or a narrow range of select uses. Whereas, in fact, verbal expressions have a great many uses. The topic of unsolicited answers to telephone interview questions is, I think, an interesting one because it exposes us to some of that variety.

Endnotes

¹A member of the audience for Cheng's paper was from Texas and reported that the Texas Survey (the source for Cheng's data) is well known in Texas and is the subject of considerable community pride. This fact suggests another interpretation for the unsolicited comments provided by respondents. Some such comments might be offered as indication of how serious and proud the respondents are about their opportunity to participate in this community event. This explanation would, of course, be compatible with many other explanations for those comments.
