Contrastive Belief, Full and Partial

Roger Clarke

Queen’s University Belfast
www.rogerclarke.org

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Plan

**Thesis** Context-sensitive accounts of (rational) belief and doxastic contrastivism can help each other out.
Plan

- Context-sensitivity of (rational) belief:
  - Leitgeb (2013, 2014)
  - Clarke (2013)
  - Ganson (2008)
  - Sturgeon (2008)
  - Ross and Schroeder (2014)
  - ...

- Doxastic Contrastivism
  - Blaauw (2013a)
  - Swinburne (2001)
Contrastive Belief

- Some different things:

1. **(Explicitly) contrastive belief attributions**: “Sherlock believes Moriarty rather than Watson stole the painting.”

2. Contrastivism about belief attributions: the LF of “Sherlock believes Moriarty stole the painting” is contrastive.

3. **Contrastive belief**: a ternary relation between subject, target proposition, and contrast proposition(s).

4. Contrastivism about belief: all belief is ternary, or: the One True belief relation is ternary.

- I’m mainly interested in 1 and 3.

- The challenge I aim to meet is *simply making sense of* contrastive belief.
I’ll argue the following sort of picture is nice:

1. Belief is context-sensitive in one way or another.
2. Contrasts (or contrast clauses) let us specify contexts.
3. Therefore,
   1. contrastive belief attributions make sense (they let us talk about a context-sensitive thing precisely, by specifying a context), and
   2. there’s a sense in which all belief is contrastive (it’s context-specific, and a context implies a contrast).
Blaauw’s Contrastivism

- Blaauw offers this (2013a, p. 93):
  - “S believes that $p$ means [sic] that $S$ is more confident that $p$ than that $Q$”

- Is this about belief or “believes”?

- As an account of belief, it doesn’t seem great, assuming confidence = something like credence.

- Maybe we can say something about how the set $Q$ is chosen so that the condition comes out stronger than it seems.
  - Blaauw is hesitant to do so—but it is a very short paper.
What would be the truth conditions of a contrastive belief?
Option 1: the belief that $p$ rather than $q$ is true iff $p$ rather than $q$.
  - What does that even mean?
Option 2: the belief that $p$ rather than $q$ is true iff $p$.
  - Problems . . .
Problems!

1. **Idle contrasts.**
   - It looks like the belief that $p$ rather than $q$ and the belief that $p$ rather than $r$ must have the same truth conditions. “[Q]uite different beliefs should not be expected to share their truth conditions.”

2. **Consistency.**
   - It looks like one should be able to believe $p$ rather than $q$, and also $q$ rather than $r$.
     - Holmes believes Moriarty rather than Watson stole the jewels.
     - Holmes believes Watson stole the jewels rather than transmuted the jewels into lead.
   - But $p$ & $q$ should be incompatible, since $q$ is a contrast for $p$.
   - So the two contrastive beliefs have incompatible truth conditions, despite seeming perfectly consistent.
Context-Sensitive Belief: Leitgeb

- Context contributes
  
  (a) a Lockeauan threshold for full belief
  (b) a partition on possible worlds.
Context-Sensitive Belief: Clarke

- Context contributes a set of possibilities.
  - Analogy with assertion: think of common ground/presuppositions in a conversational context.
  - To believe $p$ is to rule out (doxastically) all not-$p$ possibilities.

- Same deal for credence.
  - To have $Cr(p) = x$ is to assign a weight $x$ to all the $p$ possibilities, collectively.

- Full and partial belief:
  - To rule out a possibility is to assign it weight 0.
Context-Sensitive Belief: Clarke

- What work does it do?
  - Lets us account for *sincere assertion* (Clarke MS).
    - Principle: An assertion that $p$ is sincere iff the assertor believes $p$.
  - Eliminates the usual problems for belief $=$ credence 1 (Clarke 2013).
  - Accounts for the kind of cases epistemic contextualists & company like to talk about.
Contrasts and Thresholds

Compare:

- Holmes believes Moriarty rather than Lestrade stole the painting.
- Holmes believes Lestrade rather than Watson stole the painting.

We have a chain: $p \succ q \succ r$.

Proposal:

- “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” here means that there is a threshold where $\text{Bel}(p)$ and $\neg \text{Bel}(q)$. Equivalent to Blaauw.
- “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” here means that there is a threshold where $\text{Bel}(p)$ and $\text{Bel}(\neg q)$. Stronger.
Contrasts and Partitions

- Compare:
  - Holmes believes that Moriarty stole the painting rather than the jewels.
  - Holmes does not believe that Moriarty rather than Lady Victoria stole the painting.

- Different questions. Different partitions.

- Proposal:
  - Generate new partition by coarsening along the right direction.
  - “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” here means that on the resulting partition, $S$ believes $p$’s projected image.
If we add conditional belief to our resources, life gets even easier.

Compare:

- Holmes believes that Moriarty stole the painting rather than the jewels.
- Holmes does not believe that Moriarty rather than Lady Victoria stole the painting.

Different questions. Different partitions.

- Questions can carry presuppositions. “Have you stopped accepting bribes?”

Proposal:

- “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” means $S$ believes $p$ conditional on $p \text{ XOR } q$. 

Contrasts and Sets of Possibilities

- “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” seems to mean something like this:
  - Under the assumption that exactly one of $p$ and $q$ is true, $S$ believes $p$.
  - When the question is “Which of the following is true: $p$ or $q$?”, $S$ takes the answer to be $p$.

- Proposal: “$S$ believes $p$ rather than $q$” means $S$ believes $p$ in a context where $\{p, q\}$ induces a partition.
  - Contrastive credence? “$S$ has credence $x$ that $p$ rather than $q$.”
Problem for DC: Belief that $p$ rather than $q$ and belief that $p$ rather than $r$ have identical truth conditions. So what’s the difference?

Contextual DC: Difference in contrast clause indicates difference in context.
Problem for DC: Can believe $p$ rather than $q$ and $q$ rather than $r$, but would want these to have incompatible truth conditions.

Contextual DC gives us the means to make sense of this.

It makes sense to require consistency *within* each context, but not necessarily *across* contexts.


