Comments on *Belief and Contextual Acceptance*

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1 Overview

Eleonora's paper is concerned with the connection between beliefs and another representational mental state, what she calls "acceptances." I think that acceptance and belief are related as follows on Eleonora's view.

- A thinker X **accepts** that p in context i iff in i, she treats the proposition that p as true.
- A thinker X **believes** that p iff in **all** relevant contexts, she treats the proposition that p as true.
- A thinker X **merely accepts** that p in context i iff she accepts that p in i but she does not believe that p.

2 What Is A Relevant Context?

There clearly needs to be a restriction to all *relevant* contexts in the claim about how belief is related to acceptance. To see why, suppose that the restriction was absent. One situation I find myself in quite often is talking to people with very different beliefs from my own. Focus on one such belief, call it the belief that p: I believe that p, my interlocutor does not. Suppose I now want to convince my interlocutor that it really is the case that p. If I act in good faith, then I won't treat the proposition that p as true in this conversation, and hence not accept. Thus, if believing that p required treating the proposition as true in all contexts simpliciter, then I wouldn't count as believing that p after all.

It seems as if I can find myself in this kind of conversational situation for just about any proposition. Eleonora discusses something like this as the problem of skeptical and cautious contexts, and she says that

> it might be contended that acknowledging the legitimacy of a skeptical context, or of scattered 'cautious' contexts for every contingent potential assumption, suffices to reduce bona fide beliefs to beliefs about logical truths.

But a context in which I do not take a proposition for granted doesn't have to be skeptical or even cautious in any interesting sense. It could just be a conversation. More generally, what I take for granted in a situation is only distantly related to my epistemic standing with respect to various propositions. Moreover, if we allowed contexts in which I prove a logic theorem in my intro logic class as relevant, then I don't even believe logical propositions. So the bona fide beliefs would be reduced even further than the logical truths. And if a context counts in which I accept the negation of a proposition I believe in the course of a reductio, then I believe just about nothing at all.

That shows that the restriction to *relevant* contexts imposes a very substantive restriction, ruling out examples like the ones I've mentioned. But this brings me to my first question.

(1) What is the target of analysis: what attitude of acceptance is at issue such that the treating a proposition as true (or refraining from doing so) in the context of conversation or reductio does not count as a relevant context, and hence not as accepting, in the relevant sense?

Given the examples Eleonora discusses in the paper, as well as some of the remarks she makes, she might say something like this. Early on in the paper she says that she will be concerned "only with what we might call "*epistemic* assumptions." (Emphasis in the original) Moreover, one of the prime examples of acceptance is accepting an inference to the best explanation when doing so promises to advance a research program. Thus, I think that relevant contexts have some privileged position in the agent's epistemic life, rather than in her communicative or active life.

But I think it's hard to say exactly what that means, because I take conversations in which I talk to someone whose beliefs differ from mine to be a crucial aspect of my epistemic strategies—I enter them with a pretty firm belief, but it's at least an open possibility for me that my beliefs might change as a result of the conversation. So any

criterion that tries to rule out conversations from the relevant contexts will have to do so on grounds other than that these contexts somehow fail to be epistemically important.

3 Why Isn't Belief Voluntary?

As Eleonora says at the beginning, one of her concerns is to diagnose as confusions certain debates epistemologists have had: claims they thought competed are best interpreted as being about different subject matters. One such debate concerns the doctrine of doxastic involuntarism, the view that an agent cannot directly and voluntarily make herself form a belief. I say "directly" because I can voluntarily make myself believe that there is a person in front of me by moving into the relevant position and opening my eyes. I think that Eleonora wants to uphold doxastic involuntarism. But it certainly seems as if we sometimes voluntarily endorse certain conclusions, as for example in the case of an inference to the best explanation. If that was how things really were, it would refute doxastic involuntarism.

Eleonora's strategy is to say that IBE doesn't really refute doxastic involuntarism, since in IBE, we voluntarily *accept* the relevant hypothesis, but we do not come to believe it—or if we do, it's not direct in the relevant sense.

One might think that this division between the voluntariness of acceptance-changes and the involuntariness of belief-changes cannot be maintained. Here's the argument.

(i) If I can decide to accept a proposition in one context, I can decide to accept it in every context.

(ii) A proposition accepted in every context is believed.

$\therefore$(iii) I can decide to believe a proposition.

I think that Eleonora probably denies the first premise, at least once it's suitably spelled out. What's true is this: for any context i, if I am in i, then I can decide to accept that p in i. What's false is this: for at least some context i, if I am in i, then I can decide to accept that p in all contexts, including contexts other than i. And I take it that Eleonora denies that the first entails the second. But clearly, it's the second that is needed to show that belief is voluntary, given the other assumptions I've mentioned.

Here's how she puts the point.

> contexts are *not* assumed to be describable with the (sole) aid of L [the language we use to model the agent's epistemic state]. To put it differently,

> the correctness of a conditional such as "if I were to find myself reasoning under circumstances c, then $\neg p$ would be possible for me" cannot be evaluated in any context *within* the present framework—anymore than we can evaluate other modalities or counterfactuals: they are all *derivative* statements that would require an additional meta-theoretic apparatus in order to be formulated in the first place, and whose legitimacy (or lack thereof) would get exactly determined by the first order model, i.e., by the structure of Δ, and hence by the resulting M and K. Thus, the descriptions of the potential circumstances the agent finds relevant at a particular time are not possible arguments of the functions in Δ; if needed, we should attempt to reconstruct them *out of set* Δ—at a meta-theoretic level. (End of Section 4)

This is the formal implementation of the claim at the beginning of section 6 that "agents are trapped in contextual reasoning, so to speak; thus, coming to believe that something is the case is not voluntary." My question is why this should be. The problem is presumably not that I cannot make contingency plans, depending on how the world turns out to be once it's time for me to make a decision. I decide now to read an article in the newspaper if I finish these comments before 10:00pm; otherwise, I'll go straight to bed. So it must be the case that contingency planning for the special case of *accepting* isn't possible. This brings me to my second question.

(2) Why can I generally make plans about what to do if I find myself in a situation other than the one I'm currently in, but cannot do the same for accepting a proposition?

I think that this disanalogy between epistemic and non-epistemic actions is particularly pressing if one is working, as Eleonora is, in the setting of an epistemic decision theory, which presumably depends quite heavily on the analogy between epistemic and non-epistemic action in general.

4 In What Sense does the Space of Contexts Evolve?

Finally, one of the most interesting claims Eleonora makes in the course of the paper is the claim that the very space of contexts can change (see for example section 5, page 23). My final question is what this amounts to, exactly.

As Eleonora introduces the notion, the space of contexts for an agent shifts if at least one context has shifted from being relevant to being irrelevant (or vice versa). Put differently, the set of contexts (simpliciter) doesn't ever change: the set of contexts is simply the set of consistent theories that can be formulated in the language we use to represent the agent's epistemic state L. What changes is which of these contexts are, at a given time, relevant to a given agent X.

One kind of example of a shift in the space of contexts is one in which a proposition comes to be believed, perhaps on the basis of a perceptual experience. I turn around to see a goat in my office. Prior to my experience, contexts in which I accepted that my office was goat-free were relevant. After the experience, they no longer are.

But the kind that Eleonora is most interested in occurs when a subject faces an epistemic decision problem, for example, whether to accept one of two competing explanations H_1 or H_2 for some phenomenon she is sure has occurred, and taking for granted all of the information she treats as true and deems relevant in that situation. Call all of that the basic acceptance state B. In addition to accepting a certain set of claims—that's what makes this the state B—the subject is more or less certain about H_1 and H_2. However, she's not able to assign precise probabilities to these two hypotheses. Instead, she assigns intervals to them.

Here's the crucial bit: when the subject focuses on the top of the interval that H_1 occupies, then it looks like the best explanation; when she focuses on the bottom of the interval, it does not. According to Eleonora, she should conditionalize on H_1 in those probability distributions in which H_1 has a sufficiently high credence, and leave the rest alone. Moreover, this leads to making a new context relevant—the one determined by adding H_1 to the set of acceptances, conditionalizing, and forming the closure.

Two questions.

(3) a. Why is a partial update in IBE the right move?

b. Why does this process make any new contexts relevant?

About (3a). It seems just as rational to follow this rule: in a context i with associated probability distribution Δ_i, conditionalize *any* probability function in Δ_i on H_1 iff H_1 has the highest expected epistemic utility in *all* such probability functions.

About (3b): Prior to the exercise of determining which of H_1 or H_2 is the better explanation, the investigator must have countenanced the possibility of a context in which she accepts H_1 (and likewise for H_2). You might think that such self-conscious

entertaining of possibilities makes a context relevant. If that's true, then there's no change in the relevant contexts, and hence no change in the space of contexts.