

# Comments on Eleonora Cresto: *Belief and Contextual Acceptance*

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# Starting Out

# Acceptance as Basic

- 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  $p$ .

# My Questions

- (1) What is a relevant context?
- (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?
- (3) Evolution of the Space of Contexts and Inference to the best explanation (IBE).
  1. Why is a partial update in IBE the right move?
  2. Why does this process make any new contexts relevant?

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# What Is A Relevant Context?

# A First Try at Acceptance

- I accept that  $p$  in a context iff I treat the proposition that  $p$  as true in that context.
- For very many propositions, I can have a conversation with someone who doesn't accept that  $p$ .
- If I act in good faith, I won't treat the proposition that  $p$  as true, either.
- So in that context, I don't accept that  $p$ .
- So I don't believe that  $p$ .
- This consideration goes through for very many values of  $p$ , including propositions that, practically speaking, I would have taken to be central beliefs of mine.



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# Eleonora's Solution

- Belief isn't tied to acceptance, *simpliciter*.
- Rather, belief requires acceptance in all and only the *relevant* contexts.

# Relevant = Neither Skeptical nor Cautious?

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"epistemic assumptions."*

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# Epistemic Assumptions?

- Thus, I think that relevant contexts have some privileged position in the agent's epistemic life, rather than in her communicative or active life.
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# 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 does not count as a relevant context, and hence not as accepting, in the relevant sense?

Starting Out

What Is A Relevant Context?

Why Isn't Belief Voluntary?

In What Sense does the Space of Contexts Evolve?

## Why Isn't Belief Voluntary?

# Voluntarism, Belief, and Acceptance

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# Involuntarism and IBE

- A potential counter-example: Inference to the best explanation.
  - Perhaps IBE isn't really a counterexample; perhaps IBE is a process by which we make ourselves aware of where the weight of the evidence lies.
  - I'll waive that concern, because I'm interested in the general strategy.
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- (ii) A proposition accepted in every context is believed.
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# Reply

- Eleonora denies the first premise, at least once it's suitably spelled out.
  - If I can decide to accept a proposition in one context, I can decide to accept it in every context.
- What's true is this: for any context  $i$ , if I am in  $i$ , then I can decide to accept that  $p$  in  $i$ .
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# Why Am I Trapped?

- The problem is 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.
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## 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 depends quite heavily on the analogy between epistemic and non-epistemic action in general.

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- The space of contexts for an agent shifts (evolves) 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. It 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  $X$ .

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# Evolution via Belief-Acquisition

- 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.
- Note: the shift in what's relevant is entailed by the fact that I've acquired a belief.

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## A More Interesting Example

- 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, modeled by a set of probability distributions  $\Delta_i$ .

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- 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 explanations conditionalizing, and forming the closure.

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# Final Questions

## (3) Evolution of the Space of Contexts and IBE.

1. Why is a partial update in IBE the right move?
2. Why does this process make any new contexts relevant?

- About (3.1). It seems just as rational to follow this rule: in a context  $i$  with associated probability distribution  $\Delta_i$ , conditionalize *any* probability function in  $\Delta_i$  on  $H_1$  iff  $H_1$  has the highest expected epistemic utility in *all* such probability functions.
- About (3.2): 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.

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