A NOTE ON ACCEPTANCE

Note: This is a revised version of what appeared as Appendix A in Pinto 2003b. I reproduce it here because Pinto 2003b appears only in conference proceedings that may not be readily available.

In the philosophical literature, and in the writings of argumentation theorists, the words 'accept' and 'acceptance' often play crucial roles in what authors have to say. Moreover, they are used in at least three quite distinct senses. My purpose in the note that follows is twofold:

a) to call attention to the threefold use of these terms in contexts where authors speak of accepting a *proposition* or *propositional content*.

b) to clarify the relationship between acceptance in the sense of belief with acceptance in Cohen's sense of that term (i.e., as being prepared to employ a proposition as a premiss in our reasoning).

Acceptance₁ and acceptance₂

In one of its many meanings, saying that somebody *accepts* the proposition that it rains in Spain mainly in the plane is pretty much equivalent to saying that the person in question *believes* that it does so. In this usage, referring to somebody's acceptance of something is referring to that person's psychological state. Let is call this acceptance₁.

A different sense of 'accept' begins to emerge when van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, p. 69) write

> It is not our intention simply to equate the acceptance or non-acceptance of an expressed opinion with 'being convinced' in the full psychological sense of the term. Acceptance, to us, is not a state of mind to be compared with a belief in it complexity and intensity. The acceptance or non-acceptance of an expressed opinion is a perlocutionary effect intended by the speaker, brought about by means of an illocutionary perlocution and based partly on rational consideration by the listener. …. It amounts to no more nor less than agreeing to the point of view defended in the argumentation. Thus our term accept has a lesser extension than the expression 'be convinced' may have in colloquial idiom, and it is free of any psychological (and philosophical) connotation.

They seem here to be getting at what they call "externalization of convincing" in which a person "mak[es] his acceptance or rejection known" and thereby "makes it plain that he regards himself as committed, positively or negatively, to that expressed opinion." They go on to say (p. 70) that

> [a]cceptance or rejection of an expressed opinion may be entirely by non-verbal means (e.g., by nodding or shaking the head), but it may also be by verbal means *by performing the illocutionary act of accepting or rejecting*. Where verbal externalization is to be consistent this last *must* happen, because only then is it unambiguously clear to what a person is committed.

Here it is quite clear that when they speak of acceptance or rejection van Eemeren and Grootendorst are talking about, not an "inner" mental state, but about an external act that can be explained without reference to any internal "psychological" state of believing. The force or meaning of accepting or rejecting comes down to acquiring and/or acknowledging, a certain committement – something that can, in the final analysis, be understood as obligation of a certain kind (which, of course, is how Brandom (1994) came to understand commitment and the speech acts such as assertions in which such commitments are undertaken and/or acknowledged: they are, in his terminology, deontological states).

Let us call acceptance in this sense – involving over undertaking or acknowledgement of commitment – acceptance$_2$. Accounts of relevant concepts of commitment can be found in Brandom (1994, ch. 3, esp. pp. 172ff.) and in Walton and Krabbe (1995, chapters 1 and 2, esp. pp. 22-25).

Acceptance$_3$

L.J.Cohen (1992) introduces still another sense that the verb 'accept' can carry – a sense in which accepting a proposition is being prepared to use it as a premiss in one's inferences. Let us call this acceptance$_3$. Acceptance$_3$ appears to be pretty much what Bratman(1999, ch. 2) called 'taking for granted.'[1]

To see what Cohen and Bratmen are getting at, let me begin by highlighting cases in which we are *not* prepared to use a proposition we *do* believe as a premiss in our inferences, and cases in which can reasonably use something which we *don't* believe as a premise from which we are prepared to draw conclusions that "have teeth".

If I *believe* a proposition at a time *t* and do not believe it at a later time t_1, either I have forgotten something or I have changed my mind. But I can *use* a proposition as a premiss at a time *t* and *refuse* to use it at a later time t_1 without forgetting anything and without changing my mind. It is possible to do this – and it is often reasonable to do this – because use of a proposition as a premiss can be appropriate on one occasion but not on another, even though neither the doxastic nor the "epistemic" status of that proposition has changed.

How can the use of a proposition be appropriate on one occasion but not on another. Here are three examples.

    a) Suppose I'm quite convinced that cigarette smoking "causes" cancer – and suppose that it is reasonable for me to hold this belief. But suppose I've been asked to review the evidence supporting this belief, and to try to estimate how much confidence we (or I) should have in the claim that smoking "causes" cancer (or significantly increases the risk of cancer). In reviewing and assessing the evidence I'm going to have to reason from that evidence to a conclusion about the effect of smoking on cancer risk, and in that reasoning I'm going to have to draw on a variety of background of assumptions which it is reasonable for me to make. But I cannot, on pain of begging questions, draw on the proposition that smoking causes cancer – if I did, the claim being assessed would have a degree of credibility of 1, since it is *entailed* by the data plus one of the background assumptions. That is to say, I should not be prepared to use it as a premiss in this context, even though I am prepared to use it as a premiss in most contexts.

b) We are often called upon to make judgments based on evidence, where it is inappropriate to use evidence of certain kinds. Thus members of a jury are supposed to render their verdict based solely on the evidence presented in court: they are barred from tapping any information available to them from other sources. In making decisions about hiring or about accepting students into a university program, it is often inappropriate (and sometimes illegal) to use certain kinds of information – even information that consists of propositions which I know or have good reason to believe are true. For example, in hiring it may well be inappropriate to extrapolate predictions about likely success on the job which are based on race or gender. In university admissions, it may well be inappropriate to base a decision on information that is not in a candidate's official dossier (especially where a referee has extensive personal knowledge about one of the candidates but none of the others). Or again, if I'm reasoning as a physicist or a biologist, it is quite likely inappropriate to permit my religious convictions – no matter how reasonable – to influence the judgment I make qua physicist or qua biologist.[2]

c) There are contexts where it is appropriate to use as a premiss a simplifying assumption that I know to be false– e.g., Newton's inverse square law – for most calculations concerting gravitational force. But such simplifying assumptions won't be appropriate candidates for premiss in all contexts.

2. We need to distinguish (i) *actually using* a proposition as a premiss and (ii) *being prepared to use* it as a premiss. For example, someone could come to accept a lemma in a proof, but refuse to accept the proof as a whole because she refuses to make the inferences in which that lemma functions as a premiss. This example also makes it clear that one can come to accept something "as a conclusion," and that in communicative contexts reasons are often offered precisely for accepting something as an intermediate conclusion on which further conclusions may be based.

Hence we need to distinguish between *believing* a proposition at a certain time and *being prepared to use it as a premiss* at that time. We also need to distinguish between believing a proposition and accepting it as a conclusion. In short, we need to distinguish between belief and acceptance$_3$.

An important qualification. When I speak of using a proposition as a premiss, I intend to distinguish between premisses and *suppositions* - i.e., assumptions made in the course of suppositional reasoning, which are "discharged" at a later point in that reasoning. The suppositions that we encounter in inferences which employ either "indirect proof" or "conditional proof" are best expressed using statements in the subjunctive mood, thus: "Suppose it *were* the case that p. Then it *would be* the case that q. So since it *is not* the case that q, it *is not* the case that p." The way the such reasoning is represented in the propositional calculus (which makes no provision for the subjunctive mood) has a tendency to mask what is really going on in such reasoning.

Acceptance$_3$ and context

3. *Actually using a proposition* as a premiss or accepting it as a conclusion always occurs in a

context of reasoning - of inquiry or deliberation. This opens up the possibility that I may be *prepared to use a proposition* as a premiss in one sort of context but not in another – in other words, it opens up the possibility that acceptance, unlike belief, is context-relative.

And indeed, acceptance of a proposition is or at least can be context-relative, because it can be conditioned by and contingent upon the following sorts of factor

  (i)   the purposes for which we're reasoning in a context,

  (ii)   the practical implications of reaching a false conclusion in that context,

  (iii) the cost of failing to reach a conclusion in that context, and

  (iv)   the relative costs of various ways of reaching a conclusion in that context.

Moreover, whether it is *reasonable* for an individual to accept a proposition on a given occasion depends on contextual factors because it is sensitive these four sorts of factor. For examples, see Pinto 2003a ("Reasons").

Sometimes an individual accepts a proposition at a given time and in a certain context because he has decided to do so in light of factors like (i)-(iv). But people can and usually probably don't accept propositions as a basis for reasoning as the result of any actual or explicit consideration of such factors – their acceptance is rooted in an unreflective reliance on belief. That is to say, what usually explains the fact that they are disposed to use a given proposition as a premiss is simply the fact that they believe it to be true - and their use of that proposition at that time is not mediated by any actual consideration of factors like (i)-(iv).

In Cohen's account, acceptance is voluntary, whereas belief is not. That idea is consistent with the idea that acceptance is often rooted in an unreflective reliance on belief. To see that this is so, consider the following. Someone like Cohen can maintain that, even when an individual unreflectively accepts what he happens to believe, the individual always "could have done otherwise" – always could have stopped and reflected on whether use of this proposition in his reasoning would be appropriate in the context at hand in light of factors like (i)-(iv).Therefore the individual could have decided *not* to use it as a premiss. In other words, Cohen can maintain that one is always *in a position to decide* what one uses (or is prepared to use) as a premiss, even though one is *not* (as Cohen maintains) in a position to *decide* what to believe. We can say, then, that even when a person unreflectively accepts what he happens to believe, there is an "implicit" decision to accept it.

Though there need be nothing wrong with accepting a proposition on the basis of an unreflective reliance on belief, a thorough appraisal of the *reasonableness* of accepting a proposition would have to attend to factors of types (i)-(iv). Here's a way of conceiving the situation: Appraising the reasonableness of an inference requires appraising the reasonableness of the explicit or implicit decision to accept the propositions which function as premisses in that inference (see Pinto 2003b, which approaches the matter in this way).

At the beginning of his account of acceptance, Cohen says (1992, 4)

  …to accept that *p* is to adopt a policy of deeming, positing or postulating that *p* – i.e., of including that proposition or rule among the premisses for deciding what to do or to think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it true that *p*.'

Clearly, then, Cohen recognizes the context relativity of acceptance – though at a later point (p. 16) he says

> …acceptance, unlike opinion, *may* be relative to context, although it is certainly possible to treat some premises as being acceptable in any context whatsoever [italics mine].

But to my mind Cohen fails to highlight or develop this most interesting and most import feature of acceptance as a basis for and as a target of our reasons and reasoning – the fact that it is context-relative in ways that belief is not. His focus is on other issues – for example, the voluntariness of acceptance versus the involuntariness of belief (about which I think he is right), and what he takes to be a difference in the way deductive closure applies to belief and to acceptance (about which I think he is wrong).

Belief

4. If we can accept a proposition in Cohen's sense without believing it, what is involved in believing a proposition over and above a disposition to use that proposition as a premiss in our inferences?

Cohen's account of belief throws no light on how to answer this question.. It is unilluminating to base one's account of belief, as Cohen does, on the idea that someone believes a proposition if and only if he or she is disposed to "feel" it is true. For to say "I feel that p is true" is just another way of saying "I believe that p is true." Moreover, I believe that Cohen is mistaken in supposing that "feeling that p is true" has something essentially to do with "feelings" in anything like the sense in which pleasure and pain are feelings. Admittedly, he distinguishes "credal feelings" from emotional feelings (1992, p. 9), but I don't think this helps very much; moreover, the concept of credal feelings (which he appears to apply to a range of feelings) is mentioned only in passing and is not well-developed in Cohen 1992.

5. Consider Harman's account of the relationship between acceptance$_3$ and belief. Harman (1986, p, 47) equates "belief in a proposition *P*" with "full acceptance of *P*" – something which he says has two features:

> one allows oneself to use *P* as part of one's starting point in further theoretical and practical thinking (in effect., one accepts$_3$ that *P*)

> [one] takes the issue to be closed in the sense that one is no longer investigating whether *P* is true.

He contrasts belief or "full acceptance" of *P* with tentatively accepting *P* "as a working hypothesis," which has the first of these features but not the second (p. 47).

He says (p. 46) that to accept something as a working hypothesis is

> to "try it out," to see where one gets by accepting it, to see what further things such acceptance leads to. Accepting a particular working hypothesis is fruitful if it allows one to make sense of various phenomena; if it leads to solutions to problems, particularly where there are independent checks on these solutions; and if it leads naturally to other similarly fruitful hypotheses.

This account does not recognize or make provision for two points I consider of utmost importance:

a) that even when one "takes the issue [of the truth of *P*] to be closed," whether or not one is prepared to use *P* as a "starting point" in further theoretical and practical inquiries often is, and always should be, contingent on the particulars of the context of the inquiry or deliberation in which *P* might be used

b) that accepting something as a working hypothesis in order to "try it out" is just one of *many* kinds of context in which people can and do "reason from" propositions which they do not "fully believe". And as indicated at the end section 2 above, I do not take using a proposition as a *supposition* to be using it as a *premiss*.

Point (a) is illustrated by the three examples cited in section 1 of this appendix.

With regard to point (b), tentative acceptance of a working hypothesis is, in one respect, among the least interesting kinds of reasoning from propositions we do not "fully believe." For in this kind or case – which I treat as akin to suppositional reasoning – I do not "embrace" the conclusions derived from tentative (or suppositional) starting points. My "conclusions" will have the tentative or suppositional status of the "starting points" from which they've been derived - at least until either (i) they are independently confirmed or (ii) I "discharge" the supposition and draw a conclusion in light of something like the rule of conditional proof or the rule of indirect proof. But when I reason from a *simplifying assumption* or from *something that I consider probable but don't actually believe,* the status my "conclusion" has a "bite" that a conclusion drawn from a mere supposition does not have. When I reason from the inverse square law (which I don't believe) to a conclusion about the gravitational force exerted by the earth on the moon at a certain time (for instance, that it is *n*), I may well come to *believe* that the force at that time is, for all practical purposes, *n*. And even if I don't quite *believe* it, I will make design decisions based on it – something a wise person will not do with a conclusion deduced from a mere supposition. When a judge reasons from the assumption that plaintiff was injured by respondent – not because she's *sure* he was, but because that proposition is supported by the "balance of probabilities" – to the further conclusion that the plaintiff is entitled to damages in a certain amount, she will issue a judgment to that effect, and force the respondent to comply with it. (And, interestingly enough, the judge will probably *believe* that plaintiff is entitled to damages in that amount.)

For these reasons, I don't think Harman's account of "full belief" can shed much light on what, in the final analysis, the crucial differences between belief and acceptance$_3$ are.

On the relationship between belief and acceptance$_3$

6. Despite what I consider to be the inadequacies of Harman's account, something that he says about tentative acceptance applies, I think, to most kinds of "acceptance without belief." What he says may help to throw light on the difference between belief and acceptance$_3$.

Harman writes (p. 47)

> Tentative acceptance is not easy. It takes a certain amount of sophistication and practice to be able to investigate an issue by tentatively accepting various hypotheses. Ordinary people, and

even most scientists, are quick to convert tentative acceptance into full acceptance in a way that seems overly hasty to critical reflection....

I am inclined to think that, like tentative acceptance, the sorts of "acceptance without belief" I've described also require "a certain amount of sophistication and practice."

Harman explains why "tentative acceptance" is difficult in the following terms (p. 49)

> The same practical limits that keep one from operating in accordance with the foundations theory [i.e., revising one's beliefs whenever the evidence on which they were originally based is undercut] also keep one from never ending inquiry and always tentatively accepting one's conclusions as mere working hypotheses.

> In the midst of inquiry one must keep track of which tentative things depend on others, so that ongoing revision can be neatly accommodated. One needs to remember what reasons there are for and against various possible outcomes of inquiry, where this can involve also the reasons for various possible intermediate conclusions.

And most interestingly of all he adds (p. 50)

> If one had unlimited powers of record keeping and an unlimited ability to survey reasons and arguments, replies, rebuttals, and so on, it would be rational always to accept things tentatively as working hypotheses, never ending inquiry. But since one does not have such unlimited powers of record keeping and has a quite limited ability to survey reasons and arguments, one is forced to limit the amount of inquiry in which one is engaged and one must fully accept most of the conclusions one accepts, thereby ending inquiry. *Tentative acceptance must remain a special case of acceptance. It cannot be the general rule*. [Italics mine.]

I am inclined to generalize this and say that for somewhat similar reasons *acceptance without belief must remain a special case of acceptance; it cannot be the general rule*. But the emergence of such sophisticated forms of acceptance drives a wedge between the concepts of belief and acceptance.[3] In Bratman's phrase (1999, p. 29), my beliefs make up the "default cognitive background" in terms of which I do my reasoning, but the disposition to accept the propositional contents of any one of my beliefs can be overridden in a particular context if there is a special reason not to rely on its propositional content in that context.

If I may put this somewhat differently, to reason on the basis of propositions we don't fully believe – or on the basis of propositions that we know to be false – requires us at least temporarily to adopt a sophisticated mindset, a mindset which may sometimes be difficult to maintain for very long. Though such a mindset makes our cognitive lives more complicated and more demanding in some respects, it promises considerable payoffs when we are forced – as we always are – to operate under conditions of uncertainty with limited cognitive resources and limited time.

It is essential to our concept of belief that it is a factor in what Dennett has called the intentional explanation of action, and it is also essential to that concept that in its role as mediating action it can be the starting point and the end-point of reasoning (or the input and output of "information processing").[4] But the criteria for identifying the content of *belief* – criteria which anchor that concept within the network of our practices – are intimately tied to the idea of assertive utterances which are "sincere," serious and successful,[5] criteria that are pretty much *independent*

of the role of belief in intentional explanations of action and of the role of belief as a starting point and end-point of our reasonings.

As I see it, the emergence of those sophisticated mindsets that I call "acceptance without belief" means that what is picked out by the criteria for belief (the content of sincere, serious and successful assertive utterance) no longer coincides with the input and output of the reasoning that mediates action. Hence the need to disentangle the concept of belief from the concept of acceptance, even though – in most contexts most of the time – *what* we believe coincides with *what* we accept.

7. A number of points that flow from what I just said need to be sketched here:

a) In communicative contexts, reasons offered in support of a "conclusion" are readily conceived of as reasons for *accepting* that conclusion as a basis for action or further reasoning *in the context at hand*.

b) If such reasons for acceptance become effective as reasons for belief, it is because acceptance in the context at hand "spills over" into a person's belief system. The mechanisms that account for such "spilling over" – that account for a person's becoming prepared to use a proposition in other, somewhat different contexts and, more importantly, to allow it to become the content of sincere, serious and successful assertive utterance – are not in my opinion well understood. Empirical research on persuasion effects may already shed some light on this phenomenon, and may in the future shed more light.

c) It is easier to evaluate reasons when we approach them as reasons for accepting a proposition in the context at hand, because contextual factors of the four types described earlier usually render quite determinate the standards that are appropriate for such evaluation. Where the context of discussion or reasoning is indeterminate, standards for appraisal will often be very hard to pin down.

Notes

[1] Bratman (1999, p. 30, note 20) recognizes a similarity between his concept of context-relative acceptance and Cohen's concept of acceptance. However, in the note he criticizes aspects of Cohen's treatment of the distinction between belief and acceptance along lines quite similar to those that I (quite independently of Bratman) do.

[2] See Harman on "acceptance as a member of a group" (1984, 50-62).

[3] On the other hand, if we should come to agree with Cohen (1992, section 16: pp. 86-100) that the proper attitude toward scientific theories is usually one of acceptance without belief, the "special case" will not be all that uncommon!

[4] As Fodor, and other like-minded functionalists would have it.

[5] That is to say, our best evidence for what a person believes is usually what that person assertively utters – indeed, a fine-grained account of the content of people's beliefs is all but impossible except on the basis of an examination of their assertive utterances. But to use utterance as a clue to belief, we must learn to identify and discount cases of prevarication (or insincere speech), cases of "unserious" or playful speech (joking, irony) and cases in which someone fails to say what he or she intends (unsuccessful speech). The use of our concept of belief is anchored in the network of practices that enable us to identify insincerity, playfulness and misspeaking, and is

impossible in abstraction from those practices. I developed these ideas in a paper entitled "Believing" that was delivered at the annual meeting of the Canadian Philosophical Association in 1982, but which has never been published.

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