

Degrees of acceptance

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Abstract: While many authors distinguish belief from acceptance, it seems almost universally agreed that no similar distinction can be drawn between degrees of belief, or credences, and degrees of acceptance. I challenge this assumption in this paper. Acceptance comes in degrees and acknowledging this helps to resolve problems in at least two philosophical domains. Degrees of acceptance play vital roles when we simplify our reasoning, and they ground the common ground of a conversation if we assume context probabilism, i.e. that the common ground must be represented with probability spaces rather than possible worlds.

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1 Introduction

Many authors distinguish states of outright belief from states of acceptance, where belief is typically construed as a truth-directed, involuntary relation between a subject and a proposition, while acceptance is typically construed as a practical, voluntary relation between a subject, a proposition and something like a purpose for which we accept the target proposition (e.g. Stalnaker 1984; Cohen 1992; Frankish 2004; Engel 2000).

Meanwhile, it seems almost universally agreed that no similar distinction can be drawn between degrees of belief, or credences, and degrees of acceptance. The existence of credences is relatively uncontroversial. However, Cohen (1992: 114), for instance, states that ‘acceptance [...] is unlike belief in not being able to vary in degree’ (see also e.g. Engel 1998: 147, 1999: 219–20; Tuomela 2000: 124–5; Frankish 2004: 86, 2009: 85).¹

I challenge this assumption in this paper. Acceptance comes in degrees in at least one sense of the term and acknowledging this helps to resolve problems in at least two philosophical domains. First, degrees of acceptance play vital roles when we simplify our reasoning due to our cognitive limitations. In particular, they offer an alternative to *sensitivism* about credences as defended by e.g. Clarke (2013) and Greco (2015). Second, we need degrees of acceptance to ground the common ground of a conversation if, following e.g. Yalcin (2012) and Moss (2017), we assume *context probabilism*, i.e. that the common ground must be modelled with probability measures rather than possible worlds.

In section 2, I introduce degrees of acceptance, offering a definition and some characteristics. In section 3, I argue that degrees of acceptance as defined play an important role when we simplify our reasoning. In section 4, I argue that degrees of acceptance partly constitute the common ground of a conversation. In section 5, I conclude by showing how the two roles for degrees of acceptance hang together.

¹ Ross (2006: 743–4) is the only exception I know of, and I take him to be an ally in my cause. He briefly discusses degrees of acceptance as attitudes towards ethical theories. Engel (2000: 12–3) suggests that states of acceptance may differ in how ‘active’ or in how ‘conscious’ they are, but this just shows that activity and consciousness are gradable, not that states of acceptance themselves are.

2 Degrees of acceptance

The state of acceptance has been defined in many conflicting ways. Stalnaker prominently employs the notion of acceptance, and he already offers various competing definitions. On one occasion, he says that '[t]o accept a proposition is to act, in certain respects, as if one believed it' (Stalnaker 1984: 80). On another occasion, he claims that acceptance is 'a category of propositional attitudes and methodological stances toward a proposition, a category that includes belief, but also some attitudes (presumption, assumption, acceptance for the purposes of an argument or an inquiry) that contrast with belief, and with each other.' (Stalnaker 2002: 716) These definitions seem to conflict. On the latter definition, belief entails acceptance because belief is a species of acceptance. On the former definition, belief does not seem to entail acceptance because having a belief does not seem to entail acting as if one had this belief. For instance, you may believe that there is no gas station within a ten-mile radius while still acting as if you believed there is to alleviate my concerns about the empty fuel tank. Stalnaker (1984: 79) further suggests that when you accept a proposition you 'ignore, for the moment at least, the possibility that it is false.' Again, it is at least unclear how this claim fits with the previous definitions. On Stalnaker's second definition, for instance, belief entails acceptance, but it is doubtful that believing a proposition entails ignoring the *possibility* of falsehood (think e.g. of threshold views, where belief is just sufficiently high credence). Bratman (1992: 2), meanwhile, suggests that to accept a proposition is to 'take it for granted in [one's] deliberation' or to have it in the 'cognitive background of [one's] deliberation'. Bratman at least thinks that this definition competes with Stalnaker's first definition in terms of as-if belief. 'In accepting that p I do not simply behave as if I think that p: I also reason on the assumption that p.' (9) This difference may become blurry though if we see reasoning as a type of action. On this assumption, acting as if you believed p entails reasoning as if you believed p. Cohen (1992: 4) offers another influential definition

of acceptance. He says that ‘to accept that p is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that p —i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one’s premises for deciding what to do or think in a particular context’. One key aspect of this definition is that acceptance is a ‘policy’, where a policy can be understood roughly as an intention to generally act in certain ways. This seems to conflict with the previous definitions, where policies play no role. Harsanyi (1985: 15–16) similarly suggest that someone’s accepting p includes a ‘*decision* [t]o assign *persistent* practical certainty to [p] both in his reasoning and in his scientific activities’ (my emphasis), where assigning practical certainty means that one ‘treats this statement as if [one] assigned probability 1 to it’ (5). Apart from the policy aspect, a further key difference between this and e.g. Stalnaker’s first definition is that, for Harsanyi, acceptance is tied to acting as if one had credence 1 rather than to as-if belief.

What should we make of these definitions? How should we define the notion of acceptance? Since the notion of acceptance is at least semi-technical, I think the main question here should be which definition(s) yields a theoretically fruitful concept. In this vein, I propose the following account.

S accepts that p iff S acts as if she had credence 1 in p .

This definition merges Harsanyi’s appeal to credence 1 with Stalnaker’s first definition in terms of as-if belief. The definition is therefore closely connected to many of the definitions above, and the resulting notion of acceptance promises to play at least some of the theoretical roles acceptance is intended to play. I will not go into this however. Instead, I will argue that my notion of acceptance allows us to define degrees of acceptance in a natural way and that this makes it theoretically very fruitful. Even if there are other fruitful notions of ac-

ceptance, the notion of acceptance as defined should be worth having. With the given definition of acceptance at hand, we can perfectly naturally define degrees of acceptance as follows.

S accepts that p to a degree x iff S acts as if she had credence x in p.

Acceptance is thus the limiting case of a degree of acceptance. It amounts to a degree of acceptance of 1.

To get clearer on the sense in which acceptance comes in degrees on the given definitions, consider the state of being flat. On a familiar semantics, a table, say, is strictly speaking flat iff it has the maximum degree of flatness (e.g. Kennedy 2007). Now this state cannot be instantiated to greater or lower degrees. A table is either maximally flat or it is not. Flatness still comes in degrees because being flat *is* a degree of flatness, namely, the maximum degree, and because there are other, lower degrees of flatness besides this maximum degree. Acceptance is just like that on my account. Consider the state of outright acceptance, i.e. the state of acting as if you had credence 1. You cannot instantiate this state to greater or lower degrees. However, the state itself *is* a degree of acceptance. It is the maximum degree of acceptance, which exists alongside other, lower degrees of acceptance. (Like most analogies, this analogy is imperfect. For instance, the maximum degree of flatness is presumably rarely instantiated whereas maximum degrees of acceptance might be common.)

Degrees of acceptance as defined are distinct from credences. You can treat a proposition as if your credence in it was x even if, in fact, it is not, just like you can treat me as if you were happy to see me even if, in fact, you are not. This is primarily because you can treat p as if your credence was x even though you do not treat p as if your credence was x *in every respect*. You just need to do so for a limited purpose, say, to make a specific decision. Analogously, when you treat me as if you were happy to see me, you may still roll your eyes when

you are alone in the kitchen. The following points should help to clarify the distinction between credences and degrees of acceptance further (similar points are typically made to distinguish outright belief from outright acceptance; see e.g. Engel 2000: 2–3).

First, degrees of acceptance, unlike credences, are under our direct voluntary control. I can decide to treat a proposition as if I had a certain credence in it, and this decision will normally be effective. For instance, I can decide to treat the proposition that it will rain tomorrow as if I had credence 1 in it, letting my actions be guided accordingly. This may be rational or not, but it is within my control. Contrastively, even if I can decide to change my credences, this decision is normally ineffective, and it will leave my credences unaltered. Even if we have some control over our credences, this control seems very different from the direct control we have over degrees of acceptance.²

Second, degrees of acceptance, unlike credences, are relative to purposes. The relation of S having a degree of acceptance of x in p is not a two-place relation between a subject and a proposition. It is a three-place relation between a subject, a proposition and a certain purpose (setting aside other potential argument places for e.g. a point in time). A more accurate definition would therefore look as follows.

² One may worry that, to the extent that acceptance is voluntary, it cannot come in degrees. However, there is no real tension here. My thesis is not that the *choice* to adopt a certain degree of acceptance comes in degrees. Only the chosen state does. I can likewise choose to indent a piece of dough to a certain degree (by producing larger or smaller indentations) even though this choice is an on-off affair.

S accepts that p to a degree x for purposes π iff S acts as if she had credence x in p for purposes π .

To illustrate, if you constantly point out that the call centre of our bank might burn down over night, I might decide to treat this proposition as if my credence in it was high for the purposes of coordinating our joint decisions. For other purposes, which I may have at the same time, I may continue to treat it as if my credence was low, e.g. when I make solitary decisions about when to call the bank (see below for further discussion of such examples). On the face of it, credences are not like that. I do not have one credence for one purpose and another for another. At any given point in time, I just have one credence, full stop.

Third, degrees of acceptance, unlike credences, are subject to norms of practical rationality rather than norms of epistemic rationality. A Bayesian, for instance, will say that whether it is rational to have a certain degree of acceptance depends on whether this maximizes expected utility. In many cases, this will depend in part on one's evidence for the target proposition. Suppose you have very strong but less than perfect evidence for p. It may then be practically rational to treat p as if your credence was 1, for this can simplify your reasoning while affecting the outcome of your reasoning only marginally if at all (see section 3). Sometimes, though, one's pertinent evidence is irrelevant for the practical rationality of degrees of acceptance. For instance, if you take yourself to have very strong evidence for p then, to humour you, I might decide, for the moment, to treat this proposition in the same way even

if my own evidence for p is poor and I doubt yours (see section 4).³ As for credences, their rationality is standardly assumed to depend on one's evidence alone.⁴

Rational credences are often thought to be subject to coherence constraints such that e.g. your credence in p and your credence in not- p should add up to 1. Are rational degrees of acceptance subject to similar constraints? I will leave this question open, except to note that blatantly incoherent degrees of acceptance typically fail to maximize utility if they are adopted for the same purpose. For instance, if I follow you in treating p as if my credence in p was .9, while continuing to treat not- p as if my credence was .9, then we will still fail to coordinate our actions effectively. Meanwhile, rational degrees of acceptance are clearly not governed by laws of classical logic, which are sometimes assumed to govern rational belief or outright acceptance. If I have a rational degree of acceptance in a bunch of individual propositions, for instance, it does not follow that I rationally ought to adopt the same degree of acceptance in their conjunction. If I have a rational .5 degree of acceptance that it will rain tomorrow and a rational .5 degree of acceptance that it will not rain tomorrow, I am not rationally compelled to adopt a .5 degree of acceptance that it will both rain and not.

One final clarificatory remark before we move on to considering the theoretical importance of degrees of acceptance. My thesis that degrees of acceptance exist and are important is

³ There are other familiar cases of this kind. Cohen (1992: 20), for instance, discusses the case of a lawyer who accepts that their client is innocent despite having a contradicting belief.

⁴ Here my notion of a degree of acceptance diverges from Wedgwood's (2012) otherwise very similar notion of a 'practical credence'. Practical credences are not governed by utility maximization but by an alternative standard of rationality (325–328) because utility maximization may rationalize a 'practical credence of 1 in a proposition p such that the agent is *theoretically* almost *certain* that p is *false*.' (324) If so, Wedgwood reasons, a practical credence is 'surely not a state of belief at all' and 'seems rather to be the state that Michael Bratman (1992) has called "acceptance".' (324) Of course, I welcome this outcome for degrees of acceptance.

perfectly consistent with the idea that degrees of acceptance are reducible to states of outright acceptance as defined by others or myself. One can likewise hold that mental states exist and are important while staying neutral on whether they reduce to physical states. Indeed, I will not take a stand on reduction questions here. I still want to flag briefly how one might think degrees of acceptance as defined reduce to states of outright acceptance to show that such a reduction is far from trivial. One might hold that e.g. a degree of acceptance of .3 in rain reduces to a state of outright accepting that rain is .3 likely. Any such proposal faces the same type of worries one faces when one tries to reduce credences to outright beliefs. For instance, accepting that rain is .3 likely seems to require possession of a relevant concept of probability, or at least it requires acting as if you possessed such a concept. Meanwhile, a degree of acceptance of .3 in rain only entails that you act as if you had a .3 credence in rain. And just like actually having a .3 credence in rain, this does not seem to require possessing a relevant concept of probability or acting as if you did.⁵ More could be said here, but again, I can (and will) stay neutral on whether degrees of acceptance reduce to outright acceptance.

To be sure, if degrees of acceptance reduce to outright acceptance, it becomes less clear whether my views conflict with e.g. Cohen's claim that there are no degrees of acceptance. For one might hold that his claim just pertains to the fundamental level, where, on the given assumption, there are no degrees of acceptance indeed. Now there is a question of whether Cohen and others actually talk only about the fundamental level, but even granting that my views do not conflict with theirs, my paper still makes important contributions. It does not

⁵ See e.g. Jackson 2020: 3 for this type of worry for belief-first views and for a broader overview of the pertinent debate.

revise previous conceptions of acceptance, but it still shows that degrees of acceptance as defined help us solve various theoretical problems. I turn to this in the following sections.

3 Simplified reasoning

It is common and natural to think that we often simplify both theoretical and practical reasoning by treating certain propositions as true even though we are less than fully certain that they are. We then distribute probabilities across the remaining options to make our choices. Harsanyi (1985: 5–6), for instance, suggests that a person may regard a proposition as ‘practically certain’ by treating it ‘as if he assigned probability 1 to it, even though in actual fact he assigns only a lower probability to it.’ When this is so, we can model the subject’s decisions not by assigning the unconditional probability $\text{Prob}(p)$ to any given proposition p but rather the conditional probability $\text{Prob}(p|p^*)$, where p^* corresponds to the practically certain propositions.

Staffel (2019: 940–1) illustrates this idea as follows. Consider a case where I try to figure out the probability of rain during an upcoming tennis match. The calculation is complicated because I am unsure where the match takes place, as represented by the following probability function.

$$\text{Prob}(\text{NY}) = 0.48$$

$$\text{Prob}(\text{Boston}) = 0.48$$

$$\text{Prob}(\text{LA}) = 0.04$$

Staffel suggests that we reduce complexity by just taking it for granted that the match will not take place in LA, working with something like the following, simplified probability function instead (I will have more to say about the role of conditionalization as a means to arrive at this probability function below).

$$\text{Prob}'(\text{NY}) = 0.5 [= \text{Prob}(\text{NY}|\neg\text{LA})]$$

$$\text{Prob}'(\text{Boston}) = 0.5 [= \text{Prob}(\text{Boston}|\neg\text{LA})]$$

$$\text{Prob}'(\text{LA}) = 0 [= \text{Prob}(\text{LA}|\neg\text{LA})]$$

We then calculate the probability of rain as follows.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Prob}'(\text{rain}) &= \text{Prob}'(\text{NY}) \times \text{Prob}'(\text{rain}|\text{NY}) + \text{Prob}'(\text{Boston}) \times \text{Prob}'(\text{rain}|\text{Boston}) \\ &= 0.5 \times (\text{Prob}'(\text{rain}|\text{NY}) + \text{Prob}'(\text{rain}|\text{Boston}))\end{aligned}$$

If we accept these ideas and thus that we can model decision-makers by assigning the conditional probability $\text{Prob}(p|p^*)$ to given propositions p , we need to get clear on what this assignment represents in cognitive reality. Which cognitive state corresponds to it?⁶

A number of authors seem to suggest that the indicated assignment represents our credences. Greco (2015), for instance, maintains that outright beliefs simplify our reasoning by letting us ignore otherwise possible states and that this constrains our credences as follows.

The picture I'm suggesting is that credences come into the picture only *after* beliefs have done their job. Beliefs let us focus on a small number of possibilities, and then credences let us make finer grained distinctions *among the unignored possibilities*. If we think of a credence function as a function from some event space to real numbers (probabilities), the claim is that the relevant event space is given by the possibilities compatible with the agent's beliefs. (184)

We treat certain propositions as a given, and our credences can be represented by a probability distribution across the remaining options, i.e. by a probability distribution that assigns

⁶ There is a familiar answer to the question of what the extreme conditional probabilities of 0 and 1 represent (e.g. the assignment of 0 to the LA-possibility in our tennis example above and the corresponding assignment of 1 to the $\neg\text{LA}$ -possibility). They represent states of outright acceptance (e.g. of the proposition that the match will not take place in LA). See e.g. Bratman 1992 for many helpful examples of outright acceptance in this sense. My main question here is what the non-extreme, intermediate conditional probabilities represent.

to p the probability $\text{Prob}(p|p^*)$, where p^* is what we take for granted.⁷ Following Clarke (2013), we can call this view *sensitivism*, because it says that credences are sensitive to what we treat as a given.⁸

Sensitivism may seem natural, especially if we think that credences are the only graded doxastic states at our disposal, but it leads to many problems. First, according to sensitivism, our credences vary systematically with our practical situation, in particular, with which decision we face and how it forces us to simplify. I might ignore the possibility of the match taking place in LA when trying to figure out the probability of rain. I will not ignore it, though, when asked to bet on the match taking place in LA. This shifts the respective conditional probabilities and thus my credences, according to sensitivism. It follows that we are either systematically irrational or that the rationality of credences depends not just on our evidence but on our practical situation as well. Both options seem problematic. The first option entails widespread irrationality, while the second option yields pragmatic encroachment on rational credences, a position that many authors seem loathe accepting.⁹ Second, we have direct voluntary control over how we simplify our reasoning. In the tennis case, for

⁷ See e.g. Dodd 2011, Clarke 2013; 2018, Norby 2015, Staffel 2019: 939, Gao 2019, Dorst 2019: 200 and Weisberg 2020: 10n23 for related views.

⁸ I take it that, according to sensitivism, credences are sensitive, not relative to context. According to sensitivism, credences vary over time with contextual shifts, but at any given time, we have just one credence.

⁹ One might grant that our credences fail to be ideally rational and insist that they still reflect some form of 'bounded rationality'. See e.g. Norby 2015: 82n15, Gao 2019: 1610–5 and Weisberg 2020: 10n23. See also Staffel 2019: 956. More would have to be said though. We need a philosophically satisfying definition of bounded rationality. Then it needs to be shown that the assumed shifts in credences are boundedly rational in this sense. Neither of these tasks has been adequately addressed, as at least Norby (2015: 82n15) and Gao (2019: 1614n30) seem to agree.

instance, I can effectively decide to make things more complicated for me by considering the LA possibility.¹⁰ This shifts the respective conditional probabilities and, according to sensitivism, my credences. However, it seems implausible that I can decide to change my credences in this way, by just deciding to engage in a more complicated form of reasoning. Third, sensitivism entails that we have a credence of 1 in many propositions in which we intuitively do not have a credence of 1. Take the proposition that the match will not take place in LA. Conditional on the assumption that the match will not take place in LA, the probability of this proposition is 1 and hence, in a context where we simplify as suggested, this should be our credence according to sensitivism. Even in this context, however, I am intuitively more certain that $2+2=4$ than I am that the match does not take place in LA. How could this be if my credence in the latter proposition was already maximal?¹¹ Finally, I take for granted that the match will not take place in LA while trying to figure out the probability of rain. I stop doing so once I have figured this out. According to sensitivism, my credence in the proposition that the match will take place in LA rises as a result. This is counter-intuitive once more. I do not become more confident that the match will take place in LA just because I stop deliberating.¹²

¹⁰ Staffel (2019: 958n5) states, contrarily, that ‘we usually can’t employ deliberative control over which claims we take for granted in framing a reasoning problem, this is done automatically and without our conscious awareness.’ I agree that we often grant propositions ‘automatically and without our conscious awareness’. It does not follow, though, that we lack ‘deliberative control’. Analogously, we often blink automatically without our conscious awareness. Still, we can control our blinking if we bother to do so. See also Greco 2015: 191n35.

¹¹ I assume an understanding of credences in terms of our ordinary notions of confidence and certainty (following e.g. Eriksson & Hájek 2007: 209).

¹² The remarks from footnote 11 apply *mutatis mutandis*.

In light of these worries, it seems worthwhile to explore alternative accounts. I suggest that the indicated assignment of conditional probabilities represents our degrees of acceptance rather than our credences. The above problems disappear. First, degrees of acceptance rather than credences come out as sensitive to pragmatic factors. This is unproblematic because they are subject to norms of practical rationality and because practical rationality is sensitive to pragmatic factors. Second, degrees of acceptance rather than credences come out as being under our control. Again, this is unproblematic. We can decide to treat a proposition as if we had a certain credence in it, even if, in fact, we do not have this credence. Third, the suggested view entails that many propositions receive a degree of acceptance of 1, i.e. that we treat them as if our credence was 1. It no longer entails that we actually have a credence of 1. Finally, we only have to conclude that our degrees of acceptance, not our credences, shift as we stop deliberating. This is as desired because we frequently adopt degrees of acceptance only for the purpose of a specific choice we face.

Notice that the above account does not make credences superfluous. It says that we base our reasoning on degrees of acceptance rather than credences when we simplify, but we do not always simplify. Suppose, for instance, that you ask me how much I would bet on the proposition that the match takes place in LA. My decision here will normally be based on my actual credence regarding the proposition that the match will take place in LA because I do not need to simplify my reasoning in this regard. It is easy enough to reason with my actual credence (see e.g. Holton 2008: 39–40).

Credences might play further roles as the basis on which we form states of outright acceptance or as the basis on which we form degrees of acceptance. I think they play the former role, but this goes beyond the scope of this paper (see, however, Dinges 2021). Meanwhile, I doubt that they play the latter role. More specifically, our degrees of acceptance often match conditionalized credences but I doubt that we form degrees of acceptance by

performing operations of conditionalization. Staffel (2019) rightly notes that conditionalization is cognitively very demanding. Forming degrees of acceptance by conditionalization therefore threatens to defeat their purpose, which is to simplify reasoning (see also Harsanyi 1985: 8, who seems to anticipate this worry).

How do we form degrees of acceptance if not by conditionalization? This psychological question arises equally for my opponents, who connect the indicated conditional probabilities to our credences (see e.g. Staffel 2019). Consequently, I have no specific burden to answer it here. Let me still make some suggestions in terms of support theory, an influential psychological account of how we form ‘judgements of probability’ (e.g. Tversky & Koehler 1994).¹³

According to support theory, we form judgements of probability by comparing the support for the target hypothesis with the support for respective counter-hypotheses.¹⁴ Specifically, the judged probability of hypothesis A relative to counter-hypotheses B is given by the following formula.

$$\frac{s(A)}{s(A) + s(B)}$$

Here s yields the support for a given hypothesis, where the support for a given hypothesis is defined as ‘a measure of the strength of evidence in favour of this hypothesis that is available to the judge’ (549). It may be based on ‘objective data (e.g. the frequency of homicide

¹³ See e.g. Weisberg 2020: 17–8 and Staffel 2019: 951–4 for similar but less general views on how we form credences.

¹⁴ Brenner *et al.* (2002: 492), for instance, endorse this realistic interpretation of support theory, concluding in a review of available studies that ‘subjective probability can indeed be decomposed into separate assessments of the focal and alternative hypothesis.’

in the relevant population) or on a subjective impression mediated by judgmental heuristics, such as representativeness, availability, or anchoring and adjustment' (549).

Against, this background, it is natural to see the process of forming degrees of acceptance as a matter of comparing the support for the target hypothesis with the support for a set of counter-hypotheses that is limited by what we accept outright. In the tennis case, for instance, we compare the support for the hypothesis that the match takes place in New York with the support for the hypothesis that it takes place in Boston to derive respective degrees of acceptance. We ignore the support for the hypothesis that it takes place in LA because we treat this proposition as false to simplify our reasoning. If Boston and LA receive equal support, for instance, we end up with degrees of acceptance of .5 in each hypothesis. More could be said, but I will leave this for another occasion. Again, the problem I address here arises equally for my opponents.

Note that the support theoretic account above is only intended as an account of how we form degrees of acceptance when we simplify our reasoning as suggested above. In principle, we can form degrees of acceptance in any way we like, entirely independently of our evidence and support. In the next section, I consider conversational contexts where it can be reasonable to adopt such evidence independent degrees of acceptance.

Before we move on to this, though, consider the following concern. My dispute with sensitivists is merely verbal. In particular, 'credence' is a semi-technical term that they simply decided to use for the kind of shifty state I label 'degree of acceptance'. Indeed, Weisberg (2020: 20), for instance, specifically talks about 'occurrent' credences, and Staffel (2019: 939) is quite explicit that she uses a stipulative notion of credences. To respond, I cannot rule out that sensitivist intend to use 'credence' in this way, and so I am prepared to grant

that our dispute is verbal. However, first, labels matter. On the one hand, it seems misleading to use ‘credence’ to refer to a state that does not share many of the key features normally associated with credences (see my objections to sensitivism). On the other, I think we should acknowledge both credences and degrees of acceptance as distinct psychological states (as argued above). If we use ‘credence’ to refer to what I call ‘degrees of acceptance’, we cannot use ‘credence’ anymore for the state that most naturally fits this label, namely, for credences. Second, I take myself to make worthwhile contributions even if my views do not conflict with sensitivism and even setting aside the verbal issues above. For if sensitivists are willing to trade their ‘credences’ for my ‘degrees of acceptance’, one can see my project as not in conflict with but as complimentary to the sensitivist project. My objections to sensitivism can be turned into challenges to say more about what sensitivist credences/degrees of acceptance are, and my definition of degrees of acceptance can be seen as answering these challenges.

To wrap up the present section, we now have a first role for degrees of acceptance to play. We reason on their basis when we simplify our reasoning.

4 Context probabilism

Following e.g. Stalnaker (2002), philosophers of language and linguists assume that conversations take place against the background of a ‘common ground’ of shared presuppositions. The common ground evolves as the discussion progresses. Most importantly for our purposes, assertions contribute to it. If I assert that it is raining, for instance, this proposition normally becomes common ground. A common idea is to represent the common ground in terms of its so-called ‘context set’, i.e. the set of possible worlds in which all propositions in the common ground are true. On this model, the typical effect of assertions is to eliminate all those possible worlds from the context set that are inconsistent with the asserted proposition. In the above example, my assertion eliminates all worlds where it is not raining.

On an increasing popular view, *context probabilism*, we have to revise this possible worlds-construal of the common ground. To represent the common ground, we must add a set of probability measures, i.e. roughly, a set of functions that assign probabilities to the propositions we can form from the possible worlds in the context set. This supposedly helps to accommodate probabilistic assertions like ‘It is probably going to rain tomorrow’. Such assertions supposedly do not eliminate possible worlds. Instead, they eliminate probability measures. The assertion at hand, for instance, eliminates all those probability measures that assign a relatively low probability to the proposition that it will rain tomorrow (e.g. Yalcin 2012; Greco 2015: 185; Moss 2017: 29–31; see also Rothschild 2012 for a related view).

By way of illustration, consider one potential advantage of this view. It explains straightforwardly why A and B disagree when A says ‘Rain is likely’ against the background of one body of evidence and B says ‘Rain is unlikely’ against the background of a different body of evidence. They disagree on the above view because A’s assertion leaves the common ground with only probability measures that assign a high probability to rain while B’s assertion leaves the common ground with only probability measures that assign a low probability to rain. The common ground would therefore crash, being narrowed down to the empty set, if we tried to accommodate both assertions at once. Meanwhile, familiar contextualist semantics for epistemic modals (e.g. Kratzer 1977) threaten to predict that A and B are just talking past each other, merely expressing propositions about their own respective bodies of evidence.

In what follows, I argue that if we accept context probabilism as described, then there is another important role for degrees of acceptance to play. In particular, I argue that the probability measures in the common ground are best construed as representing our shared degrees of acceptance rather than our shared credences.

For starters, consider the context set, i.e. the set of possible worlds characterizing the common ground of a given conversation. This abstract object represents some concrete feature of this conversation, most plausibly, a feature that is grounded in the cognitive states of the conversational participants (e.g. Yalcin 2012: 132). Which cognitive states? A natural thought is that the context set represents something like our shared beliefs. When I assert that it is raining, I express my belief that this is so, and if you trust me, you come to share this belief. Naturally, this end-result constitutes the fact that the context set no longer contains possible worlds where it is not raining.

Now consider the set of probability measures characterizing the common ground. Which cognitive state does this set represent? If we transpose the previous ideas, a natural proposal would be that it represents our shared credences. When I assert that it is probably going to rain, I express a high credence in this proposition. If you trust me, you come to share this credence. And this in turn naturally means that the common ground now comprises only probability measures that assign high probabilities to the proposition that it is going to rain.

Stalnaker (2002), however, familiarly construes the context set not in terms of shared beliefs, but in terms of shared states of acceptance. He motivates this idea in the following passage (see also e.g. Yalcin 2012: 130–1).

For example, Alice says to Bob, who is holding his baby daughter, 'how old is he?' [...] Bob recognizes that Alice is taking something to be common belief that he knows to be false. How should he respond? The most straightforward response would be for Bob to correct Alice. In the first example, he might simply say 'it's a girl', or he might say something that shows that he is presupposing that the baby is a girl ('*She* is ten months old.'), requiring Alice to accommodate. Either way, the common beliefs will be brought in line with what both are presupposing. But if the false presupposition is irrelevant to the purposes of the conversation [...], Bob might decide to ignore the matter, tacitly *accepting* what Alice is

manifestly presupposing for the purpose of facilitating communication without disrupting the conversation with a distracting correction. That is, Bob accommodates, not by coming to *believe* the false proposition that Alice is presupposing, but by accepting it as part of the common ground. (Stalnaker, 2002: 717–718)

According to Stalnaker, things can become common ground even if they are not mutually believed. Sometimes we just play long e.g. because we do not want to disrupt the flow of the conversation. In this case, we merely share states of acceptance, and these states of acceptance determine the context set.

With these familiar considerations in mind, let us return to the set of probability measures representing the common ground. On the above account, this set represents shared credences. But if we accept Stalnaker's case for replacing belief with acceptance regarding the context set, as I suggest we do, then we are hard-pressed to uphold this account. Suppose we discuss our plans for the weekend. At some point you say, 'The high probability of rain makes me want to stay home all day'. I know that you acquire your beliefs about the weather from dubious sources, and I think that the probability of rain is actually low. Since it is cold, however, spending time outside does not seem attractive anyway. I let it pass, and one would want to say that your probabilistic presupposition now goes into the common ground, just like e.g. Stalnaker's gender presupposition in 'how old is he?' does. After your assertion, the common ground no longer contains probability measures that assign low probabilities to the proposition that it will rain. By stipulation, though, we do not share a high credence in this proposition. Your credence is high, but mine is low. Therefore, the respective set of probability measures cannot represent our shared credences.

What does it represent? I suggest that it represents shared degrees of acceptance. When you say, 'The high probability of rain makes me want to stay home all day', you express a high

credence in the proposition that it will rain. You also make clear that you treat this proposition in line with your credence, that is, that you have a corresponding degree of acceptance. When I decide to go along with your assertion, I do the same. I do not have a high credence in the proposition that it will rain. However, I decide to treat this proposition as if I had a high credence, because this facilitates our discussion. In this way, I come to adopt a corresponding degree of acceptance, which is now shared. This makes it the case that the common ground contains only probability measures that assign high probabilities to rain.

Here is one potential concern. We can follow Stalnaker in treating the context set in terms of shared states of acceptance. Contrary to my arguments, however, it does not follow that we need degrees of acceptance to ground the set of probability measures. To accommodate the weekend case above, the objection goes, we just need states of outright acceptance about probabilities. In particular, we accept outright that it is probably going to rain in this case.

To assess this proposal, we need to clarify the state of accepting outright that it is probably going to rain. I argue for the following theses. There are two construals of this state. On one construal, the indicated proposal just reduces to mine. On the other, the proposal is untenable if we grant familiar arguments for context probabilism.

Following e.g. Moss (2017), one could construe the state of outright accepting that it will probably rain as a relation between a subject and a so-called probabilistic content, i.e. roughly a set of probability measures. Specifically, one could construe this state as a relation between a subject and a probabilistic content where all probability measures assign a high probability to the proposition that it will rain. On this construal, the above proposal just reduces to mine. We need to make sense of the idea of outright accepting a probabilistic content, and I submit that the best way to do so is in terms of degrees of acceptance. Moss

herself makes sense of outright *beliefs* with probabilistic contents by tying them to credences. For instance, on her view, outright believing a probabilistic content where each probability measure assigns probability x to proposition p constitutes a credence of x in p (3–4). I submit that, in the same way, accepting a probabilistic content where each probability function assigns x to p constitutes a degree of acceptance of x in p (recall also the general remarks on reducing degrees of acceptance to outright acceptance above).

Alternatively, one could construe accepting that it will probably rain as a relation between a subject and a regular, possible worlds-proposition. Now one faces all the worries that lead to context probabilism. For instance, we want to explain why A and B disagree (in one respect) when A says, ‘The high probability of rain makes me want to stay home all day’, and B says, ‘The low probability of rain makes me want to stay home all day’. If their respective presuppositions merely led to the acceptance of possible worlds-propositions, the question would arise which possible worlds-propositions are involved. On a Kratzer-style contextualist semantics, these will be propositions about A’s and B’s respective bodies of evidence, and this in turn makes it difficult to explain why A and B disagree. Thus, if one accepts familiar arguments for context probabilism, then one cannot accept the indicated response strategy construed in terms of outright acceptance of possible worlds-propositions.

Here then we have another role for degrees of acceptance to play. Assuming context probabilism, we need degrees of acceptance to ground the common ground.

To be sure, context probabilism is controversial, and I cannot offer a full defence of it here. My conclusion therefore remains conditional. Still, I would like to point out that my considerations lend some support to context probabilism by answering a challenge that this view confronts. Context probabilists face the challenge to explain which cognitive states ground the common ground as they construe it. I have shown that this challenge can be met in terms

of degrees of acceptance. There is thus a relation of mutual support between context probabilism and my thesis that degrees of acceptance are important.

5 Conclusion

I have defined a notion of degrees of acceptance, and I have argued that degrees of acceptance as defined play important roles in two philosophical domains, in reasoning and in conversation. Acknowledging this helps to avoid various problems that arise if, instead, we assign the indicated roles to credences. Interestingly, the two roles I have assigned to degrees of acceptance nicely complement each other. The first role concerns the basis for individual reasoning. In many cases, we reason not on the basis of beliefs and credences but on the basis of states of acceptance and degrees of acceptance instead. This makes otherwise overcomplicated reasoning tractable. As for the second role, states of acceptance and degrees of acceptance constitute the common ground. Now if we think of the common ground as the foundation not for individual but for joint reasoning, we can conclude that joint reasoning is often based on these states too. Graded states of acceptance therefore form a unified basis for both individual and collective reasoning.

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