

## The Distinguishing Feature of Beliefs

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**Abstract:** This article explores the question: what individuates the propositional attitude of belief and distinguishes it from other truth-oriented propositional attitudes. It is argued here that a conviction in the proposition, beyond a certain threshold, with an intended global application, is all that individuates belief. To argue for this position, the relationship of belief with credence is explored. The distinction between belief and acceptance is also clarified. The clarification is put to use in explaining how can one have mutually conflicting beliefs at the same time.

**Key words:** Belief, Acceptance, Credence, attitude, proposition

### 1. Introduction

Belief plays a central role in the analysis of knowledge by philosophers. Yet, there is little discussion<sup>1</sup> on clarifying the essential feature(s) of belief which distinguishes it from other similar propositional attitudes. Instead, epistemologists have occupied themselves with the analysis of the justification of beliefs the nature of knowledge and its conditions. However, this approach has not yielded very satisfactory results, as any textbook of contemporary epistemology can testify. Therefore, to advance our understanding in the other direction, this article explores the question: what individuates the propositional attitude of belief and distinguishes it from other truth-oriented propositional attitudes. With that objective in mind, section 2, titled 'Credence and Belief' discusses whether belief and credence can be reduced to each other or are they mutually independent. The discussion leads to the conclusion that when the credence in a proposition goes beyond a certain threshold of confidence, it manifests itself as belief. This idea is extended in the subsequent section 3 titled 'Commitment'. In this section, it is argued that the distinctive phenomenal character of conviction in the truth of the proposition not only distinguishes belief from credence but also other similar truth-oriented propositional attitudes like *guess*. A prominent objection to this view, due to Eric Schwitzgebel, is also described and critiqued in this section. Another objection to this view could be that the criterion of commitment in the proposition beyond a certain threshold is not enough to distinguish belief from *all* similar truth-oriented propositional attitudes. One such attitude is that of acceptance. Section 4 elaborates on the nature of acceptance. It is a propositional attitude of deliberately accepting a proposition as if it is true, within a certain domain which is determined, either by the agent or his cognitive community, on the basis of practical considerations even though adequate evidence is not available in its support. Section 5 distinguishes the attitude of belief and that of acceptance. They are truth-directed and they both involve a commitment to the truth of the proposition under consideration. However, acceptance has limited scope of application whereas

beliefs are constitutively unconstrained / global in scope of their application. This distinction has implications, two of which are discussed. The last section, conclusion, summarizes the findings, and in the process, clarifies the distinctive, distinguishing feature of beliefs.

## **2. Credence and belief**

We know that truth-oriented enquiry or deliberation settles in a judgment and sometimes, such a judgment leads to belief. However, not all judgments give rise to beliefs. To find out which judgments lead to beliefs, we need to identify the type of mental state that has a token corresponding to each judgment. We can locate this mental state in the *confidence level* an individual has in his own judgment. The extent to which one is confident (or convinced) of his judgments is not uniform. For example, I judge more confidently that the sun will rise in the east tomorrow than I do that it will rain tomorrow. Similarly, I judge that grass is green more strongly than I do that my colleague is honest.

Philosophers have identified *credence* as the mental state which denotes one's confidence level in a judged proposition. That is, credence is a fine-grained propositional attitude that represents one's subjective probability (or confidence level) of the truth of a proposition; subjective in the sense that they are the subject's response to her own evidence. They are often given a value on the  $[0,1]$  interval, where 1 represents maximal confidence that  $p$  is true, and 0 represents maximal confidence that  $p$  is false. Since beliefs are related to judgements and judgments are related to credence, a natural question arises- how are credence and belief related?

There are presently three competing theories which attempt to answer the question- which of the two propositional attitudes—belief or credence—is more fundamental and whether one can be reduced to another? According to the *Belief-first* view, belief is the fundamental attitude and credence is a species of belief. Elizabeth Jackson explains: “The fine-grained/numerical features of credence are built into the content of what is believed...credences are beliefs with probabilistic content. A 0.99 credence it is raining is actually just the belief the probability it is raining is 0.99; a 0.5 credence the coin will land heads is a belief with the content the probability the coin will land heads is 0.5...What is central to the belief-first view...is that the numerical structure is part of the content rather than part of the attitude, and the relevant attitude is simply belief.” (2019: 2479)

Keith Frankish (2009) denies that credence can be explained in terms of flat-out beliefs: “We attribute degrees of confidence and preference to individuals who lack the conceptual sophistication required to form beliefs of this kind. We speak of children and animals having more or less confidence in something and preferring one thing to another, even though they do not possess the concepts of probability and desirability. Indeed, even if a person is capable of forming beliefs about probabilities and desirabilities, we do not suppose that they have actually formed appropriate beliefs of this kind every time their behaviour manifests some degree of confidence or preference – certainly not that they have done so consciously, and I do not think we are committed to the view that they have done so non-consciously either.” (2009:77)

That is, the actual behavior of children, animals and even adults do not support the belief-first view: the attitude of confidence and preference cannot always be expressed or reduced to outright belief about probabilities.

According to the opposing Credence-first view, credence is the fundamental attitude, and belief is a species of credence. There are two versions of this view. On one view, belief is credence one (maximal credence). This view is favored by Bayesian decision theorists for whom the rational way to make decisions is to assign credence to the various possible outcomes of candidate actions and then choose the one that offers the best trade-off of likely success. Outright beliefs, for them, are merely a derivative of credence. The problem with this view is that it disregards the intellectual humility that is desirable in every believer; However strong the evidence may be, no evidence for an empirical belief is conclusive. Thus, no empirical belief can be infallible and it should not appear

to be so to the believer. But if belief is credence 1, then it appears absolutely certain for the believer. Therefore, outright belief cannot correspond to credence one.

According to the other version of the credence-first view, belief is not credence 1 but instead credence above some threshold, usually between 0.5 and 1. Ganson remarks: The degree of confidence that is sufficient for outright belief is “vague and gauged, perhaps, by untold contextual and pragmatic factors, but once a degree clearly exceeds or falls below a certain threshold, someone counts as having or failing to have a particular belief.” (Ganson 2008)

Jane Friedman (2019) argued recently against the reduction of belief into credence by drawing a distinction between the role played by belief in inquiry as compared to that played by credence. Her argument rests on the idea that only the attitude of belief (but not credence) that *p*, settles or “gives a complete answer” to the doxastic agent on her inquiry about *p*<sup>ii</sup>. One can have a high credence and yet adopt a deliberative stance with respect to a proposition.

Is Friedman’s contention, correct? Even if I consider the question ‘whether *p*?’ settled and I believe that *p*, I think it is perfectly rational for me to be cautious and check for confirmation of a belief, in the light of additional evidence. There is no harm (not at least in the epistemic sense) in being extra cautious, even though such a practice may come at a cost. I will not shy away from seeking confirmation of my belief, particularly if it does not require expending too much resources. That is, contrary to Friedman’s claim, I think no settlement is final, even when the attitude is belief. This is because (1) the settlement is subjective and (2) basis of the alleged settlement is evidence and no evidence for any empirical proposition is conclusive. Someone who refuses to review his answer to a question just because he considers it settled is not being intellectually humble. Moreover, cases of pragmatic encroachment clearly demonstrate that even if I have sufficiently strong evidence to believe that *p*, I may go on to collect as much evidence as possible to reaffirm my belief if the stakes in the judgment are too high. So, contrary to Friedman, I don’t think that our approach to inquiry can be used to discredit the credence-first view.

Buchak (2014) too objects to the reduction of belief to credence on the ground that belief, but not high credence, is crucial to our practices of praise and blame. I don’t think this observation is entirely correct either. Contrary to Buchak, I think that even the subjective probability of *p*, which is associated with credence, can lead to praise or blame. For example, in a game of poker, a player bets based on his subjective probability of winning the hand. But he doesn’t believe that he will win that particular bet. He simply has more credence in his bet. And yet, we usually credit him for his wins and blame him for taking wrong bets. Thus, Buchak’s objection is not tenable.

The third view, Dualism, accepts the existence of both credence and belief as fundamental attitudes, neither being reducible to the other. However, there are objections to this view. One is that when I reflect on my own psychology, I fail to identify two distinctive truth-oriented attitudes towards the same proposition at any given time *t*. For example, If I already believe that *p* at time *t*, I don’t think I can *guess* that *p* simultaneously. Ditto is the case with other truth-oriented attitudes such as supposition or assumption<sup>iii</sup>. If credence and belief were really both fundamental and mutually irreducible, it should have been possible to cite at least one instance where we have both attitudes to the same proposition simultaneously. But there doesn’t seem to be any.

After reviewing the three theories briefly, I think that the threshold version of the credence-first view is simple and easily explains the fact that our extent of confidence or conviction in the believed proposition differs from belief to belief. When you accept that belief is just credence with a very high degree of commitment, beyond a certain threshold, you can easily explain why, for example, your conviction in ‘sun rises in the east’ is different from your conviction in ‘Ram is a good boy’ even though both are your beliefs. Moreover, this view neatly explains how a judgment leads to the attitude of guess when confidence is low and to the attitude of belief when it crosses a certain threshold.

### 3. Commitment

In the previous section, we observed that-whether the level of confidence goes beyond a certain threshold or not determines whether the mental state corresponding to the judgment that  $p$  is a belief or a mere credence. For example, the attitude of guessing that  $p$  is also truth-oriented like belief: a true guess is correct and a false guess is incorrect. However, a guess is not a belief because only in case of belief (not guess), the doxastic agent has a high level of conviction/commitment, beyond a certain threshold, in the truth of  $p$ .

So, it seems plausible that what individuates a propositional attitude as a belief and distinguishes it from other truth-oriented propositional attitudes is not its causal role or its subjection to certain norms but its distinctive phenomenal character of conviction in the truth of the proposition. With the advent of artificial intelligence, the causal or functional role played by beliefs can no longer be taken to be the distinguishing mark of belief. This is because many such roles are executed by artificial intelligence with ease. If we are not willing to grant that robots and Artificial Intelligence programs too have beliefs, we have to turn to the phenomenal character of beliefs to understand what is so distinctive about beliefs which distinguishes them from cognitive outputs produced by intelligent machines. Several philosophers too now advocate this approach. Declan Smithies (forthcoming) writes: "The feeling of conviction has its own distinctive phenomenal character, which distinguishes it not only from sensory feelings of pain or hunger, but also from cognitive feelings of uncertainty or doubt. Moreover, we know by introspection what it's like to experience this feeling of conviction. And we can use this knowledge to understand what it's like for someone else to feel the same way." Thus, according to Smithies, conviction is a belief-specific, cognitive phenomenal character.

This position has recently been endorsed by others like Keshav Singh (forthcoming) and Pamela Hieronymi. Hieronymi argues: "Whenever one has an attitude that can be formed or revised simply by settling for oneself a question or set of questions (regardless of how the attitude was in fact formed), one is committed to an answer to the relevant question(s). One is committed in the sense that, if one has the attitude, one is answerable to certain questions and criticisms—namely, those questions or criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on the relevant question(s). So, for example, if I believe  $p$ , then I am committed to  $p$  as true, that is, I am answerable to questions and criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on whether  $p$ ." (2005: 450)

According to Singh, there is phenomenal contrast between feeling initially doubtful that  $p$ , feeling increasingly confident that  $p$ , and eventually feeling convinced that  $p$ . Only the last feeling is unique to beliefs.

But what is so distinctive about feeling convinced that distinguishes it from feeling increasingly confident? A supporter of the threshold version of the credence-first view has a ready answer- when the credence (or confidence) in the proposition crosses a certain threshold, one feels convinced. That is, one's attitude towards the proposition becomes belief. A few pertinent questions arise here- where exactly does this threshold lie? Is this threshold a quantity or a quality of the confidence level? How to determine it? While these questions are important and interesting, it is beyond the scope of this article to engage fruitfully with these questions as we need to conduct experiments on human psychology in order to find credible answer to the above questions. However, the above idea seems intuitively plausible.

Despite its plausibility, it may be objected that conviction (or commitment) is not sufficient for belief. For example, Eric Schwitzgebel (2010) argues that there can be cases where there is a divergence between conviction and their dispositions. He offers several purported examples of such divergence. One is that of Juliet, a Caucasian academic who has thoroughly examined racial differences of intelligence among races. As an academic, she is convinced that the arguments in favor of the equality of intelligence of all races are watertight. She is even prepared to argue for this position herself in formal, academic exchanges. However, her spontaneous and unguarded reactions

on this issue in specific instances is clearly racist in nature. Another hypothetical case Schwitzgebel offers is that of Kaipeng, who having been convinced by Stoics, endorses the thesis that death is not bad. He finds the arguments in its favour compelling and fully accepts them. And yet he does not behave differently from someone who thinks death is bad.

Schwitzgebel insists that in cases like the ones above, the doxastic agent has the requisite conviction but we should refrain from either ascribing or denying the concerned belief to the agent because his psychological and behavioral dispositions do not match the stereotyped disposition a believer should manifest. It is more appropriate, according to Schwitzgebel, to regard the corresponding attitude as of an in-between belief; Thus, he claims, conviction cannot be sufficient for belief.

The objection makes sense only if you treat a belief to be equivalent to having a set of dispositions. Schwitzgebel is a dispositionalist and so, he finds it difficult to accept that one's dispositions corresponding to a particular belief can be different in different contexts. Since, in the above purported counterexamples, the manifest dispositions corresponding to the belief are different from what one would normally expect to correspond to that belief, Schwitzgebel concludes that the doxastic agent doesn't have the belief in question. So, the objection appears plausible if you are a dispositionalist. But dispositionalism has a rival, known as representationalism. According to it, a set of dispositions are not sufficient to either identify an attitude as belief or distinguish belief from other propositional attitudes. This is because a given set of dispositions could be the effect of not only the beliefs one holds but also of one's emotions (fear, anxiety etc.) and his practical interests. For a representationalist, Schwitzgebel's objection doesn't make sense since she is comfortable with the idea that a belief can have different dispositions in different contexts. Therefore, I think that Schwitzgebel's objection is not well grounded.

One can also object to the proposed view on another ground. It may be argued that conviction fails to distinguish belief from a similar attitude, acceptance. Like belief, the attitude of 'acceptance' is also truth-oriented and additionally, it involves a commitment to the believed proposition. Thus, it is natural to conflate the attitude of "belief" and "acceptance". That is why, the attitude of acceptance is discussed separately in the next section.

#### 4. Acceptance

According to L. Jonathan Cohen (1992), to *accept* a proposition or rule of inference that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, posting, or postulating that *p*, that is, of including that proposition or rule among one's premisses for deciding what to do or think in a particular context. In his attempt to distinguish acceptance from belief, Cohen characterizes acceptance as a mental state that is active rather than passive and not a matter of degree. Further, unlike belief, it is voluntarily held: "Beliefs are said to come over you, arise in you, or grow on you, like anger or affection does...Acceptance, in contrast with belief, occurs at will, whether by an immediate decision or through a gradually formed intention. This is because at bottom it executes a choice—the acceptor's choice of which propositions to take as his premisses". (Cohen, 1992: 21)

Taking cue from the above, we may define "acceptance" as a mental state of deliberately or voluntarily regarding or accepting a certain proposition as true, provided the following conditions hold: (1) there is evidence or epistemic reasons in support of the accepted proposition; Without fulfilling this condition, one's attitude is not acceptance, but assumption. The second condition is: (2) the evidence is insufficient; if the evidence were sufficient, the propositional attitude automatically becomes belief, not acceptance. The third condition is: (3) the tolerable margin of error, for accepting the proposition on the basis of the insufficient evidence, is contextually determined by the believer or his community.

The third condition needs explanation. When one accepts a certain proposition on the basis of insufficient evidence, one takes some calculated risk, of being in error about the truth of that proposition. That is, one is willing to tolerate, to a certain extent, the deviation of the value of the

proposition from its actual value. The extent to which he is willing to tolerate error determines the outer limit of the insufficiency of evidence. How much is he willing to tolerate depends on how much cost he is willing to pay for being wrong about the proposition. If, for example, someone has gone to the market to purchase apples, the available evidence, in terms of measurement of weight on balances available with traders in that area, is insufficient to claim, say, that the weight is 5 kg. The actual weight could be 5.09 kg or 4.91 kg or any of the numerous weights in between. But he accepts the proposition that the weight is 5 kg, based on the insufficient evidence available from the crude balances used in that market. The agent controls his risk of error by voluntarily fixing the domain of application of the acceptance. In the above example, a prudent, sincere purchaser would be careful not to apply his acceptance of the said proposition in scientific discourses because he knows its domain of application. Thus, the limit of application of a particular acceptance is determined, either by the agent or his cognitive community, on the basis of practical considerations.

Michael Bratman (1992) too argues that acceptances are context-sensitive. Practical reasoning determines whether it is reasonable to accept a particular proposition in a given context or not. In this respect, acceptance is different from belief. In the passage below, I elaborate on the idea further.

In every context in which an acceptance is salient, the agent undertakes some project. There are a couple of key questions about the factual state of affairs in every such project. True propositions that answer those questions constitute the means (the cognitive part) necessary for the success of the project(end). False answers are equally efficient as means to the end in question, provided those false answers are true in nearby possible worlds. Put differently, all those false answers, when taken as input(means), do not alter the output of the project; if your answers to those key questions are strictly false but they still yield the same level of practical success when replaced by true propositions, then they are in the *neighborhood of truth*.

Both true answers and false answers in the neighborhood of truth are acceptable answers to the relevant questions within the project. When the doxastic agent accepts certain propositions as true, being fully aware that they could be actually false, the underlying reasoning is that such false propositions are in the neighborhood of truth, where the neighborhood is defined as above. He is permitted to treat them as true but only within the neighborhood where the falsity of the accepted proposition will not alter the success level of the project under consideration. In the above-cited example, the project is to purchase apples weighing 5 kilos. Success of this end requires answer to a few key questions. One of them is—what is the weight of the apples which are presently earmarked for the trade? There are many false answers to this question which are in the neighborhood of the truth. Suppose the actual weight of the apples is 4.96 kg. Then, values such as 5 kg, 5.04 kg, 5.05 kg etc. are in the neighborhood of the truth. The boundary of this neighborhood is often decided by convention. The convention itself is determined on the basis of practical cost/benefit analysis. The above values are in the neighborhood because if you replace the truth with either of these values, the difference in practical benefit/cost, accruing to you is so small that you (or the community) can afford to ignore it.

Outside the said project, the same boundary doesn't work. Suppose the same person were to determine the weight of the same set of apples for a scientific experiment. Say the project now is to find out the rate of dehydration from the apples over a certain period of time. In this project, the change in weight of the apples, measured over the given time frame, would be little. So, practicality of the project demands greater precision in measurement. Naturally, here the boundary of the neighborhood is much smaller than in the previous project. It is up to the person to either accept or reject a certain reading of the weight, based on the convention applicable in that project. Most tokens of our propositional attitudes, which we loosely label as belief, are actually acceptances.

### 5. Distinction between Belief and Acceptance

The attitude of belief is different—it has universal scope. That is, the application of belief claims is not restricted to a particular project or domain. So, for example, if you believe that the distance between your home and office is 5 km, then this claim should not be qualified by the project or purpose of application of that belief. That is, your belief will not change with merely a change in the project at hand, all other things remaining the same. Thus, suppose now that the purpose to which the information is put to use is a prestigious international marathon competition. If you really believe now that the distance is 5 km, this change of purpose should make no difference to your conviction in the proposition, but it does. Therefore, the original attitude is misconceived as belief. Even in first person, it would be bizarre for you to claim, for example, that “I believe that the weight of the apples is 5 kg but only for the purpose of business transactions in fruit markets. However, if the measurement of the weight was required for a scientific investigation, I might not believe it.” The above utterance is however meaningful if you accept (rather than believe) that the weight of the apples is 5 kg.

Thus, it seems that we have been conflating acceptance and belief in cases like the above. Both acceptance and belief are truth-directed and they both involve a commitment to the truth of the proposition under consideration. However, acceptance has limited scope of application whereas beliefs are constitutively unconstrained / global in scope of their application. Here is one more example where we must be careful not to conflate acceptance with belief. We generally do not (and ought not to) bear the attitude of belief to propositions concerning the so called ‘felicitous falsehoods’. We accept them as a matter of policy so that we can overcome / take a leap over our physiological and physical limitations and enhance our understanding of the dominant theme of the cognitive project under consideration. For example, it is instrumentally rational for us to accept that the centre of mass of a certain material object extended in space is concentrated within a particular, calculated geometric point, but only if the application of this acceptance is limited to reasoning or acting on matters related to the angular momentum of the body or rigid body dynamics and similar stuff. It is not instrumentally rational for us to accept the same if for example, we wish to measure air resistance of the body in question. This is because we know that, in this case, the error made in acceptance obstructs the success of the project; The extension or distribution of mass of the body is a determining factor in calculating air resistance. Means-end rationality prohibits us from making the said acceptance in the latter project. Thus, our entitlement to acceptance comes from the particular purpose the accepted information is used for.

Although Cohen does not directly endorse the above basis for the distinction between acceptance and belief, he observes that reasons for acceptance may not always be reasons for belief. He offers several examples from different fields: “an advocate may have a professional reason to accept that his client is innocent, though no reason at all to believe that this is so. Another such case (where scientific knowledge would normally be reckoned to arise) is where there are sufficient experimental and simplicity regarding reasons for accepting a scientific theory even in the face of acknowledged anomalies that constitute good reasons for not feeling the theory to be true in all its implications.” (op. cit., 102-103)

The function of both acceptance and belief is to fit the way the world is. However, only acceptance is purely voluntary; The agent is free to define the boundary of the neighborhood of truth within which he accepts a certain proposition on the basis of a given body of evidence. Acceptance is necessitated in individual cases by pragmatic considerations of the agent. The acceptor adjusts or manipulates or conforms the world—by drawing the boundaries within which her acceptance is valid so that it fits the judgment accepted by him, on the basis of the available evidence. With beliefs, things get reversed. The believer has no way to modify the world, since the applicability of a belief is not restricted within a project. Instead, he has to modify his attitude so that it is proportioned according to available evidence. This simple observation has implications.

### **Implication I: a short-cut to success**

Since our cognitive and physical resources are limited, we are often not in a position to deliberate on every variable that has the potential to affect the truth value of the proposition. And yet it might be practically urgent to commit to a determinate value of a certain proposition because of the role that information plays in deciding on the right course of action. In such situations, we can minimize the epistemic risk of being wrong, by narrowing the boundary of the application of that judgment. For example, we accept that the weight of the fruits is 5 kg though we are aware that the weight might not be exactly 5 kg since the instrument used for measurement is not very sensitive. So, we lower the threshold of evidence that can entitle us to having that attitude which is effective for successful execution of the project. This is a prudential move, given the resource constraints and the urgency of the project.

### **Implication II: Explaining recalcitrant beliefs**

It is often alleged that we can have mutually conflicting beliefs. Because such beliefs are mutually logically inconsistent, it is puzzling how reflectively conscious rational beings like us can have such beliefs simultaneously. For example, all of us believe that we can die anytime. However, our everyday dispositions and acts suggest that we hardly act on this belief; we think, plan and act as if we will live, and that too in good health and wealth, in the near future. Similarly, a God-fearing scientist may believe in God but he still accepts modern scientific cosmological theories on the pretext that the later are true only in the human realm, not in the overall scheme of things designed by God, which is beyond cognitive grasp of humans. Prof. Prafulla Ray's students believed that eclipses can be explained entirely in mechanical/scientific terms. Yet they could, at the same time, believe that eclipses are divine interferences. My submission is that in cases like the ones above, appearances are deceptive; there is no lapse in rationality. Two meta-level judgments regarding the same proposition can be in logical conflict only if (i) they lead to the same attitude and (ii) they have the same scope of application. Acceptance and belief are different attitudes. There is no logical contradiction in a person accepting  $p$  to be true and simultaneously believing that  $p$  is false<sup>iv</sup> provided that epistemic support (evidence) for both is sufficient<sup>v</sup>. There is no contradiction even if someone accepts that  $p$  in a cognitive project,  $k$ , based on sufficient evidence  $e_1$  but accepts that  $\sim p$  in some other cognitive project,  $j$ , based on sufficient evidence  $e_2$ . However,  $p$  and  $\sim p$  would be in contradiction if the two projects overlap. Why then does it intuitively appear to the third person, in many cases like the ones cited above, that the person in question is irrational? In any given instance, the third person does not have privileged access to the mental states of the doxastic agent. They are not in a position to distinguish between mere acceptance and belief of that agent. So, when the agent expresses his conviction in a certain state of affairs through utterance or behaviour, the third person assumes that the underlying mental state is not just acceptance, it constitutes the state of belief too; otherwise, he reasons, the agent wouldn't make the assertion he makes. Thus, it appears from the point of view of the third person that the doxastic agent is irrational as he believes (not just accepts or is committed to accept) two mutually contradictory claims. The reality instead could be that the agent believes only one of the two claims and merely accepts its negation to be true (but does not believe it yet). So, one can hold mutually contradictory positions without 'blowing up' his system of beliefs (a genuine contradiction would blow up the system). That is, how some cosmologists and evolutionary biologists can be theists too. Or for that matter, a teacher can teach Darwin's theory effectively to the class and yet believe in creationism.

## **6. Conclusion**

In our attempt to delineate the distinguishing feature of beliefs, our initial suggestion that commitment or conviction in the concerned judgment that  $p$ , beyond a certain threshold, is the essence of the belief that  $p$ , culminated in a slight modification: The modified proposal is that the essence of a belief is a conviction in the believed proposition, beyond a certain threshold, *with an*

*intended global application*; That is, the believer doesn't intend to artificially restrict his conviction in the proposition concerned. With that modification, mere conviction in the truth of a proposition is sufficient to distinguish belief in that proposition from other truth-directed propositional attitudes, including its close relative, acceptance.

The clarification of the distinction between belief and acceptance is crucial because mistaking one for the other can lead us astray in our analysis of epistemic notions like justification, knowledge and understanding. We have already discussed above how a clarification of the distinction between the two can help us explain how someone can hold two mutually contradictory beliefs simultaneously. Here is another example. A prominent theory of justification takes it to be contextual. But one has to be careful in arguing for this theory since many cases of contextual variance in a commitment to the truth of the concerned proposition are not instances of belief but acceptance. Thus, a clear distinction between belief and acceptance can help us avoid confusions and engage with the true reasons, if any, for contextual justification. In explicating the distinguishing feature of beliefs, this article has hopefully also clarified the distinction between belief and other truth-oriented propositional attitudes like acceptance.

<sup>i</sup> A perusal of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on belief confirms this claim.

<sup>ii</sup> Similar ideas can be seen in Harman (1986, chapter 5) who regards belief as 'full acceptance' being the end of inquiry. Hieronymi (2009) too argues that "believing is a matter of having settled some question for oneself."

<sup>iii</sup> However, one can have a non-truth-oriented attitude of fear or aversion towards the state of affairs designated by a proposition simultaneously with that of belief.

<sup>iv</sup> A similar claim can be made about imagination and belief. If you already believe that p, then imagining or assuming the negation of p requires effort but it is not impossible; there is no logical impediment in doing so.

<sup>v</sup> Note though that their threshold of sufficiency could be different.

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