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Ethics of Acceptance and Its Rational Dynamics

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by

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this work is to try to carve out the rational dynamics of the attitude of acceptance. Building on Laura Soter's work on acceptance, which advocates that moralists of belief should moralize acceptance instead of belief, I motivate the needs of evidential norms that govern acceptance, and propose a theory sketch about what evidential norms of acceptance there are. I design a series of cases in which the agent fails to meet the moral aim by not paying due respect to evidence, and draw different evidential norms from these cases.

INDEX WORDS: Acceptance, Belief, Ethics of belief, Doxastic duty, Doxastic voluntarism

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my friends, whose love, support, and understanding made all of this possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

Some philosophers argue that we can sometimes have moral reasons to believe against the evidence.[1] If Sarah Stroud (2006) and Simon Keller (2004; 2018) are right, the norm of friendship may demand epistemic irrationality, meaning that I have the special duty as a friend to believe my friend's innocence despite evidence of his guilt. If Rima Basu (2019) is right, even if evidence suggests that some racial stereotypes are statistically accurate, I still shouldn't believe it because it's a racist belief. Moralists of belief, as I call them, are philosophers who seek to show how beliefs can wrong and why sometimes we ought to believe against the evidence for moral reasons. Their philosophical project is that of moralizing the doxastic realm.

However, the project of doxastic morality suffers from both normative and descriptive issues raised by evidentialists. On the normative side, they claim that it is irrational to believe against the evidence because only evidence bears on the truth of a belief and leads to correct beliefs.[2] On the descriptive side, they claim that we are, as a matter of psychological or conceptual fact, unable to choose to believe something unsupported by evidence.[3] Indeed, as many philosophers hold, belief is not under our direct voluntary control.[4] If so, then given the doctrine that ought implies can, one cannot have the moral duty to believe something against the evidence.

[1] See also Cusimano and Lombrozo (2021; 2023) for empirical studies on how laypeople share this intuition as well.

[2] See, for example, Kelly (2002), Wedgwood (2002), and Way (2016).

[3] See, for example, Williams (1973) and Shah (2006).

[4] See, for example, Alston (1988), Bennett (1990), and Scott-Kakures (1994).

Moralists of the doxastic realm may get into the muddy water of maneuvering around these normative and descriptive issues, which they do;[5] but they can also opt for an alternative route, which is to moralize *acceptance* instead of belief, as suggested by Laura Soter (2023). Acceptance is a cognitive attitude one can voluntarily adopt towards a proposition, *p*, on practical grounds, in which one takes *p* as a premise in one's practical reasoning in a context.[6] The idea is that instead of asking one to avoid a morally unpleasant belief, moralists can ask one to bracket the belief by accepting otherwise, and restructure one's deliberation and action according to the accepted proposition. This way of moralizing the doxastic realm still captures moralists' intuition that morality can make doxastic demands on us without taking issues with evidentialists. One can thus be an evidentialist about belief while at the same time being a moralist about acceptance.

I agree with Soter that moralizing acceptance is the right way to go, so my goal here is to pick up the work Soter left undone, which I believe is to carve out the rational dynamics of acceptance. Surely, acceptance can be taken up on moral grounds such as one's moral goal to be a supportive friend. But is that the whole story? Or should evidential reasons also play a distinct role in one's moral project of acceptance? I shall answer "yes" and investigate how evidential reasons should guide one in deliberating what to accept. I will design a series of cases to show how acceptance unconstrained by evidence can fail in morality's own terms and why evidential reasons must play a role in determining what one should accept. On the basis of these cases, I will come up with an initial theory of how acceptance is to be evidentially constrained, which

[5] Existing maneuvers include Basu's and Schroeder's (2018) moral encroachment approach in response to the normative issue and Rinard's (2017) appeal to indirect doxastic control in response to the descriptive issue.

[6] This is the standard characterization of acceptance. For reference, see Bratman (1992), Cohen (1995), Alston (1996), Engel (1998), and Soter (2023).

will shed light on the rational dynamics of acceptance. To avoid tackling too many issues at the same time, I shall restrict my discussion to friendship-based cases. But I expect much of it should apply to cases involving other types of morally unpleasant beliefs, *mutatis mutandis*.

Here is the plan. In Sect. 2, I give a profile of acceptance based on previous philosophers' work (readers familiar with the relevant literature may skip this section). In Sect. 3, I motivate the idea that evidential reasons should guide an agent in deliberating what to accept by showing how an agent may fail in friendship's or morality's own terms if she doesn't constrain her acceptance by evidence. In Sect. 4, I design a series of cases to illustrate how evidentially unconstrained acceptance can fail in friendship's or morality's own terms and draw from each of them an evidential constraint on acceptance. In Sect. 5, I address a potential concern about whether by the same line of reasoning other cognitive attitudes such as imagination must also be evidentially constrained, which seems to be an implausible requirement. In Sect. 6, I conclude the whole paper and gesture towards an argument for evidentialism about belief as a potential implication of this paper.

2 A PROFILE OF ACCEPTANCE

On basically all accounts (Bratman 1992; Cohen 1995; Alston 1996; Engel 1998; Soter 2023), acceptance is taken to be a propositional attitude that can be voluntarily taken up on pragmatic grounds (and, of course, moral grounds too), where to accept that *p* is to take *p* as a premise in practical reasoning in a context. For example, in preparing a dinner party, I accept that there will be vegetarian guests tonight. Given the premise that there will be vegetarian guests, and my desire to satisfy my guests as much as possible, I begin making some vegetarian food. In fact, I don't have any evidence that there will be vegetarian guests tonight (I forgot to check with them in advance), nor do I have any belief on this matter. My acceptance that there will be vegetarian guests tonight is based on pragmatic grounds only: it avoids the high cost of error (my vegetarian guests, if any, will be very upset) and simplifies my decision-making (I don't have to laboriously check with them one by one). These two pragmatic considerations, in the context of preparing the dinner party, lead me to voluntarily adopt the proposition that there will be vegetarian guests tonight as a premise in my practical reasoning, which together with my desire leads me to arrive at the decision to make vegetarian food. But I can also voluntarily drop it in the context where you ask me whether there will be vegetarian guests tonight, if I don't want to assert something that I merely take for granted but don't know.

Given the standard story that belief is an involuntary response to evidence, it follows that what one accepts need not overlap with what one believes. Some authors think that a belief doesn't guide one's deliberation and action unless one accepts its content, thus committing to the view that acceptance and belief can overlap to a large extent (Cohen 1995, 17–18; Engel 1998, 148). Others seem to think that a belief guides deliberation and action without needing to be accepted first, thus committing to the view that acceptance is by nature deviated from belief

(Alston 1996, 10; Soter 2023, 2219–20). Since I will only talk about occasions when one accepts what one doesn't believe, I shall accept the latter view, but the paper is really silent on this issue.

When one accepts but doesn't believe that *p*, it can be the case that one doesn't have a belief about whether *p* or not, or the case that one believes not-*p*. An example of the former will be my acceptance above that there will be vegetarian guests tonight. An example of the latter may be a lawyer who believes her client is guilty but accepts otherwise when defending the client. Michael Bratman has a useful pair of terms to describe when one accepts something one doesn't believe. He calls belief one's default cognitive background and acceptance one's adjusted cognitive background (Bratman 1992, 11). The idea is that one's web of belief provides one with a default set of premises to rely on in practical reasoning in any given context, and acceptance provides one with another layer of premises that are not included in the default set of premises in the contexts where acceptance may serve one's pragmatic or moral goals.

I speak of acceptance as a mental act of taking a proposition as a premise in practical reasoning, but it wouldn't make too much sense to say that one accepts that *p* but doesn't have a disposition to act upon *p*. Accepting that there will be vegetarian guests tonight seems to involve not only the mental act of taking it as a premise, but also the restructuring of my deliberation and action in accordance with this accepted proposition, such as making some vegetarian food. Indeed, several authors have pointed out that they prefer to see acceptance as a *policy* of restructuring one's deliberation and action based on the proposition one now takes for granted (Cohen 1995, 4; Alston 1996, 9; Soter 2023, 2223). What this means is that acceptance is not just a "one-off" mental act. The random daydream I come up with in an afternoon may be seen as a one-off mental act. It is discharged after my immediate purpose of fantasying is fulfilled. I don't structure my subsequent action and deliberation according to my daydream. Acceptance is not

like fantasy or daydreaming. It not only involves taking a proposition as a given premise, but also involves structuring one's action and deliberation accordingly. This is the view I shall follow here.

I've delineated the profile of acceptance on which my discussion hereafter will be based. To recap in one sentence, acceptance is a propositional attitude one can voluntarily take up on practical grounds, where one commits to a policy of restructuring one's deliberation and action according to a proposition one doesn't believe but now takes as a premise in practical reasoning.

3 WHY NOT BE A NAÏVE MORALIST ABOUT ACCEPTANCE?

Soter suggests that moralists of belief should be moralists about acceptance instead. One reason she gives is that since acceptance involves an agent's restructuring her deliberation and action according to the proposition she now takes for granted, it is "decidedly cognitive" and the moralizing of it captures the intuition of the moralists of belief that certain moral norms, such as that of friendship, can make cognitive demand on us (Soter 2023, 2232). Since I find her overall arguments convincing, I will assume that moralizing acceptance instead of belief is the right approach. Under this approach, what friendship demands is partiality in acceptances rather than in beliefs. What we doxastically owe to our friend is acceptances, rather than beliefs, that picture them in a good light. When we find ourselves having a negative view about our friend, the duty we have as a friend is to accept, rather than believe, otherwise. These will do as a first pass.

My job here is to take up the work Soter left undone, which I believe is to carve out the rational dynamics in the ethics of acceptance. What this means is that I wish to carve out the norms that govern acceptance. Since the moral norm of friendship demands partiality in acceptance, there are moral norms that govern acceptance. But are moral norms the only norms that govern what one is to accept? Are there no evidential norms that govern what to accept? In other words, do evidential reasons play no role at all in determining what to accept? It can seem that as far as morality is concerned, the answer is yes. After all, why would evidential norms govern acceptance, if the point is not to accept the truth? Call this view that only moral norms govern what to accept the naïve moralism about acceptance. I'll show that this naïve view doesn't get the rational dynamics we want in the ethics of acceptance, and must be supplemented with a theory of how evidential norms should guide an agent in her deliberation of whether to accept that *p*.

To help bring out what is at stake in the naïve view, let me take a detour by considering a worry about moralizing belief. Moralists of belief claim that it is sometimes our moral duty to believe against the evidence. And a worry evidentialists have about believing against the evidence is that we could end up duping ourselves and losing our grip on reality by ignoring the evidence. William Clifford (1877) expresses this worry by a cautionary tale in which a shipowner's irrationally formed belief that his ship was seaworthy eventuated in a shipwreck. An example in friendship may be that by ignoring the evidence of my friend's guilt of a crime, I end up duping myself into thinking that he is innocent when he in fact is not. I lose my grip on the actual character of my friend, which not only compromises the very idea of being a friend with him,[7] but also stops me from helping him become a better person.

Moralizing acceptance instead of belief resolves the worry about losing grip on reality. However, if acceptance guides deliberation and action in a similar way belief does,[8] then a false acceptance can presumably have a similar downstream effect as a belief with the same false content. In other words, if a false belief can lead one astray in navigating the world, then a false acceptance can also lead one astray the same way a false belief does. Clifford's shipowner could have merely accepted, rather than believed, that his ship was fine on the pragmatic ground that accepting so saved his time and money, and he would have received his insurance money again.

Some may think that this worry about false acceptance cannot arise due to the context-relativity of acceptance. That is, while a false belief may lead one astray cross-contextually, false acceptance won't have the same downstream effect since acceptance is always context-relative

[7] This idea that knowing the character of your friend is part of what being a friend is can be traced back to Aristotle. For a recent reference, Cathy Mason (2021) proposes a Murdochian conception of friendship in which knowledge of a friend's character traits or personal qualities is essential to loving the friend.

[8] When the agent believes that she is in the right setting for acceptance, that is. See Van Leeuwen (2009).

(Bratman 1992, 4). I agree. But even if acceptance is always relative to specific contexts, it can still lead one astray in those very contexts even if it doesn't do so cross-contextually, as the above variation of Clifford's case shows. Besides, not all notions of acceptance take acceptance to be context-relative. For example, Soter characterizes acceptance as the gating of belief (roughly). Since a belief can be used as a premise in one's practical reasoning cross-contextually, if acceptance is characterized as the gating of belief from serving as a premise in practical reasoning, then acceptance as such will be able to guide an agent cross-contextually.

Others may say that this worry can't arise because the purpose of acceptance is to avoid high cost of error (Bratman 1992, 6). My response is that avoiding high cost of error is one possible pragmatic reason to accept, but it is not the only one. One can also accept something so as to simplify one's practical reasoning, to save one's time and energy (Bratman 1992, 5), which is what happens in the above variation of Clifford's case.

By the same token, if it is possible for someone who has false beliefs about her friend to fail to be a good friend, then it is also possible for someone who merely has false acceptances to fail as a friend. The worry here is that one could fail to be appropriately responsive to the perceived features of one's friend by acting upon a false acceptance about the friend.[9] For example, let's say this time I correctly believe, based on the compelling evidence (such as the court decision, fingerprints at the crime scene, and the witness' testimony), that my friend is guilty of the crime. But despite the compelling evidence to the contrary, I accept that my friend is innocent with the intent to fulfill my moral goal to be a good friend. As I act on this false acceptance, I become complicit in accusing the victim of false accusation and attempting to help

[9] My wording here is borrowed from Lindsay Crawford (2019, 1587).

him get away with the acceptedly unjust legal consequence. This is catastrophic. I not only do a serious wrong to the victim, but also fail in friendship's own terms. For I fail to do what a truly good friend would do, which is to be appropriately responsive to my friend's guilt by helping him recognize his wrong and be a better person.

The moral of the story is not that we should only accept the truth, which would collapse acceptance into belief. Rather, the story indicates that there is something intuitively wrong with accepting a proposition when there is compelling evidence to the contrary, by showing us a clueless friend who neglects the evidence against what he intends to accept, only to find that he has done a serious wrong to the victim and failed in the very moral goal he tries to fulfill through acceptance, which is to be a good friend. If so, then it cannot be the case that only moral reasons guide an agent in deliberating whether to accept that *p*.[10] Evidential reasons must in some way constrain what the agent is to accept such that she doesn't end up failing in morality's own terms. Naïve moralism is thus wrong and must be supplemented with a theory of how acceptance should be constrained by evidence.

Before I move on, I want to address two possible concerns about the conclusion I draw from the story. First, one may have the reaction that it is the protagonist's conception of what friendship demands him to do, rather than naïve moralism, that goes wrong. That is, what the protagonist has the moral reason to accept may be some other proposition than the proposition that his friend is innocent. I agree. But this is exactly what I want to claim: to work out what friendship really demands, an agent must follow the guidance of evidential reasons in

[10] My point here is that one's moral project of acceptance cannot only be guided by considerations that refer to the fact that acceptance fulfills one's moral goal, but must also be guided by considerations that are relevant to the truth of a to-be-accepted proposition. Some philosophers are inclined to think that every evidential reason for belief is also a moral reason for belief. I am not disagreeing with them here.

deliberating whether to accept that *p*. Second, one may think that the context sensitivity of acceptance can do the work. Even if an agent accepts a proposition when there is compelling evidence to the contrary, she only needs to act upon it in those contexts where doing so will indeed benefit her friend and thus fulfill her moral goal to be a good friend. Maybe. But since what those contexts are cannot always be exhaustively predetermined, this still leaves open the question: how is the agent to know whether she should act upon the accepted proposition in the *particular* context she's in? My claim remains that the agent must follow the guidance of evidential reasons in deliberating this question. More on this later.

If this doesn't yet convince you that evidence should play a role in determining what one should accept, there is more to come in the next section. But if the reader follows my reasoning, then moralists about acceptance must not be naïve. On behalf of moralists of acceptance, I will in the next section come up with a theory of how evidence should constrain what one is to accept.

4 A THEORY OF EVIDENTIAL CONSTRAINT

In this section, I will investigate how evidential reasons should guide an agent in deliberating the question of whether she should accept that *p*. One can deliberate this question either as a *global* question or as a *local* question. The global question is whether one is to commit to a policy of accepting that *p* in an *indefinite* range of contexts where acceptance that *p* can presumably satisfies one's moral aim. But after committing to a policy of accepting that *p,* one can still ask the local question of whether in the *particular* context one's in, one should carry the policy out by acting upon *p*. It is meaningful to separate these two questions because it is possible for one to commit to a policy of taking it that *p,* while still not carrying the policy out in a particular context, if one judges that acting upon *p* in that context will fail one in friendship's or morality's own terms. Thus, I will first look into how evidential reasons help settle the global question, and then turn to how they help settle the local question.

Before jumping into the discussion, let me bring out a helpful reminder that evidential reasons for and against a proposition are themselves registered by *beliefs*. Whatever one takes to be one's body of evidence, that body of evidence is constituted by beliefs at the very least. The cognitive attitude I have towards what I take to be evidence is one of believing. When I accept that my friend is innocent, the evidence that speaks against this accepted proposition is registered by my beliefs, such as beliefs that the court decision has ruled that my friend is guilty, that my friend's fingerprints has been found at the crime scene, and that the witness has testified the presence of my friend at the scene. So, my main task in this section, if put differently, is to investigate how an agent's beliefs relevant to the truth of *p* should guide an agent in deliberating whether to accept that *p*. With this in mind, I will now design several cases where an agent either fails to be a good friend or ends up failing a more general moral demand because her acceptance

is not constrained by evidence, and use these cases as a basis for me to work out evidential norms that should govern an agent in deliberating the global and the local questions.

4.1 A Global Constraint on Acceptance

First, consider the following scenario. Suppose one day a good friend of mine sent me several videos of his speech and told me he wanted to be a spokesman for the political party X. As I was watching his videos, I found his speech dry, ineloquent, and full of insufferably trite analogies. I thus came to believe that my friend's speech was bad and that he wouldn't be a good spokesman. However, as a naïve moralist of acceptance, I believed that I had the moral duty as a friend to accept otherwise. Seeing that he was so passionate about his dream and feeling that I must support him, I committed to the policy of accepting that his speech was good and that he would be a good spokesman for the party, regardless of all the contrary evidence. As a result, I praised his speech highly and encouraged him to apply for the job. I told those of my friends who were in the X party that he would be their next spokesman and shared his videos on my YouTube channel. It turned out that the videos received a mostly negative review and my friend embarrassed himself at the interview. He is now severely depressed.

What seems to be wrong in this scenario is that my acceptance was too distant from my evidence, in the sense that the accepted proposition was incoherent with too many of my beliefs. By watching my friend's speech, I have formed many beliefs about his abrupt stops in the middle of sentences, the boring and irrelevant details he mentioned, and his awkward analogies. These were all beliefs that registered the flaws of his speech. They were also the evidence that made me come to believe that my friend's speech was bad and that he wouldn't be a good spokesman. In the presence of these beliefs, it wouldn't be wise for me to accept that my friend's speech was good and that he would be a good spokesman, which was incoherent with all these beliefs. The

great incoherence between my acceptance and my web of beliefs led to my friend's unrealistic assessment of his speech skill, which eventually embarrassed his dream.

Hence, we can draw the following global constraint on acceptance from this case:

> *Principle of Least Incoherence* (PLI): When one is deliberating what to accept for a moral aim, one should accept the set of propositions that is the least incoherent with one's web of beliefs while still satisfying the moral aim one tries to achieve through acceptance.

(PLI) is called a global constraint because it refers to how evidential reasons (that are registered by one's beliefs) should guide one in deliberating the global question. The idea of (PLI) is that as long as one's moral aim can be satisfied, one should cohere one's acceptance with one's beliefs as much as possible. If there are two policies of acceptance, both of which are able to satisfy one's moral aim, then one should choose the policy that coheres more with one's web of beliefs.

If according to (PLI) I should not accept that my friend's speech was good and that he would be a good spokesman, then what could I accept in that case? I could accept, for example, that although my friend's speeches in the videos were bad, my friend could still become a good spokesman if given proper training, or that my friend still got the potential despite the flaws in these speeches. Accepting these propositions would still be able to achieve my moral goal to be a supportive friend, and since these propositions are more coherent with my web of beliefs, accepting them would not give my friend an unrealist assessment of his speech skill and spoil his dream.

One may wonder whether the problem of accepting something too distant from evidence only depends on the contingent outcome of the case. What if I am a poor assessor of my friend's

political speech? In that case, my friend would happily get the job, and there seems to be no problem with my accepting something too distant from my evidence. After all, my beliefs are not accurate indicators of the quality of my friend's speech.

The problem doesn't depend on the contingent outcome. If I'm a bad assessor, then the outcome is the same. My friend is going to happily get the job anyway. It doesn't matter too much whether I accept something too distant from evidence or not. But if I'm a good assessor, then there is a difference between accepting something too distant from evidence and accepting something that is more or less coherent with evidence. In the former case, I will likely give my friend a high self-regard, and there will be a huge gap between his high self-regard and his poor end result, which will frustrate my friend very badly. In the latter case, I won't likely give my friend a high regard, and so there won't be a huge gap between the two, which avoids frustrating my friend very badly.

One may also wonder here why I couldn't just *believe* those propositions that are more or less coherent with my evidence rather than accept them. But the point is that given that beliefs are by and large involuntary, even if I couldn't make myself believe these propositions, I should still accept them.

4.2 Local Constraints on Acceptance

Secondly, consider this scenario. Suppose I happen to be a professional producer of rock music, and I've been helping a friend of mine in producing her debut solo rock album. She wants the album to have a mild commercial success so that she can start a music career. Although I think her music is good considered by itself, I don't believe it will enjoy a mild commercial success, since her approach is super experimental and may not be well received by the listeners. However, as a naïve moralist of acceptance, I believe that I have the duty to accept otherwise, so

I commit to the policy of accepting that her music will have a mild commercial success because of its good quality, and keep working with her under this premise. One day she asks me, very specifically, to give her a "brutally honest" evaluation of her music and its chance to succeed. I then assure her that her music, though experimental, will have the success she wants because its quality is good. Though she doesn't object to my view during the conversation, she still feels unconvinced afterwards. For her worry about how the super experimental approach she takes might hinder her success is still unaddressed and unsettled.

In this case, my acceptance satisfies (PLI). Maybe her music is a little too experimental, but experimental music has received acclaim from time to time, and it's not that the quality of her music is bad. My acceptance is largely coherent with my beliefs. But it still seems that in this particular context, I should not act upon my acceptance. For the demand of honesty is very high in this context. What my friend demands here is a brutally honest opinion, not just a sugarcoated opinion on her work, which I don't even believe myself. So, if acting upon my acceptance in this context prevents my friend from knowing what I really think about her music and the chance for it to succeed, then I should not act upon my acceptance.

In light of this case, I propose the following constraint on acceptance:

> *Principle of Honesty* (PH): In a given context, the higher the demand of honesty is, the more coherent one's acceptance should be with one's evidence, and if the demand of honesty is high enough that one cannot but report one's beliefs on the matter, then one should not act upon the acceptance in this context.

(PH) is called a local constraint because it refers to how evidential reasons should guide one in deliberating the local question of whether one should act upon acceptance in a particular context. Here, one may wonder in what sense (PH) is still an *evidential* constraint on acceptance. That is,

how does (PH) still count as a way in which evidential reasons should guide one in deliberating the local question? The idea is that an agent has to check whether her acceptance coheres with her web of beliefs to a sufficient degree such that acting upon it can still satisfy the demand of honesty in the current context. The higher the demand of honesty is, the higher the degree of coherence should be. Since the agent still needs to check the degree of coherence between her acceptance and her beliefs that are relevant to the truth of her acceptance, it is in this sense that (PH) is still an evidential constraint on acceptance.

Finally, consider this scenario. Suppose I and my friend are both in the Go club in our high school. Though my friend's performance is unstable from time to time, all these times, I've been accepting that my friend is a good player. At one time he won a match with a much better opponents with surprising moves and tactics before. But if you ask me whether I really believe that he's a good player, I will say I'm really unsure. After all, his performance is unstable, and his record is not that bright compared to others in our club. But I accept that he is a good player anyway, for I have faith that the game he had with the much better opponent signals something good about him. One day, I am asked to assemble a team from our club to partake in a national tournament against other schools, and I'm deciding the final spot of our team, for which only two candidates are plausible: my friend and another acquaintance in the club, Q. They are equally eager to partake in the tournament, equally easy-going, and equally supportive of the club. The only difference is that Q has a better record than my friend because of his stable performance. It seems that I should choose Q. But I act upon my acceptance once again, and let my friend be in the team. The club is disappointed at my decision, thinking that I'm being unfair.

Assuming my acceptance is more or less coherent with my evidence to the necessary extent, it still seems that in this particular context, I should not act upon my acceptance. For there

is a very high demand of fairness in this context, which requires me to fairly consider every members in a way that I don't on the one hand rely on my evidence to judge some members, but on the other hand rely on something not entirely coherent with my evidence to judge some other members.

In light of this case, I propose the following local constraint on acceptance:

> *Principle of Fairness* (PF): In a given context, the higher the demand of fairness is, the more coherent one's acceptance should be with one's evidence, and if the demand of fairness is high enough that one cannot but act on one's beliefs on the matter, then one should not act on the acceptance in this context.

(PF) is a local constraint on acceptance because it refers to how evidential reasons should guide one in deliberating the local question. Again, (PF) is an evidential constraint in the sense that an agent has to check whether her acceptance coheres with her web of beliefs to a sufficient degree such that acting upon it won't make her decision fail to satisfy the demand of fairness in the current context. The higher the demand of honesty is, the higher the degree of coherence should be between her acceptance and her beliefs that are relevant to the truth of her acceptance.

The reader will immediately notice that what is at stake in this scenario is not really friendship, but a more general moral demand of fairness. In formulating (PF), I don't intend to take a stand on the issue of whether the special duties of friendship and the general demands of morality can genuinely conflict. Rather, (PF) is predicated on our intuition about the current case. If our intuition is that supporting one's friend through acceptance should not lead one to take morally questionable acts, then a theorist who moralizes acceptance should respect this manifest image. Though (PF) may seem strange given the framing of this paper, I believe it is meaningful to include it here as the idea that in supporting one's friend through acceptance, it is

still important that one not transgress some moral norm the transgression of which we would find counterintuitive.

These will be the evidential constraints I want to propose in this paper. To recap, while (PLI) is a global constraint on acceptance that an agent should follow in deliberating the global question of whether she should commit to a policy of accepting that *p*, (PH) and (PF) are local constraints that the agent should following in deliberating the local question of whether she should act upon her acceptance in a particular context.

Two remarks are in order before the conclusion. First, I don't mean to present the three principles in this section as constituting a complete theory. I suspect that there may be more, but given the space of this paper and the exploratory nature of the project, I should confine myself to only these three, and leave the rest to a future project. Second, though I am not able to offer a complete theory here, I do hope that by presenting these cases, the reader can see the need to add an account of how acceptance should be evidentially constrained in the ethics of acceptance. Whatever the exact detail of such an account is, I hope that at least one message is clear: acceptance should be constrained by evidential reasons.

5 MUST OTHER COGNITIVE ATTITUDES BE EVIDENTIALLY CONSTRAINED?

The reader of this paper may be concerned about whether the main motivation of my theory of evidential constraint motivates too much. The theory is motivated by the consideration that acceptance governs action, and so it had better not be too distanced from one's evidence such that one would not be led to morally questionable actions. If so, then can't we say the same thing about other cognitive attitudes that govern action? Take imagination for example. Imagination can govern one's action in a game of make-believe. When I engage in a make-believe play with my nephew, I imagine that the plastic stick in my hand is a lightsaber, and as a result of this imagining, use the plastic stick to prick the plastic plate my nephew is wearing on his arm. However, one would not think that the content of my imagination need be constrained by evidence at all, despite the fact that imagination governs action. Requiring imagination to be evidentially constrained seems to go against the playful nature and purpose of imagination. It thus seems that my theory of evidential constraint is motivated by a consideration that can motivate us to implausibly constrain imagination by evidence.[11]

Aside from imagination, it would also be absurd to require other action-governing cognitive attitudes such as supposition, assumption, and pretense to be constrained by evidence. If in supposing that *p* we are interested in exploring the implications of *p*, then it would be odd to require the supposed proposition to be constrained by evidence, which is to implausibly forbid us

[11] This is a problem that cannot be easily blocked by saying that all we need is just to constrain imagination by evidence to the extent that is necessary for the practical purpose at hand. First, I don't see how this proposal would work out. Second, prima facie, it doesn't make too much sense to say that imagination should be constrained by evidence, even if the constraint should be rendered quite weak or even vacuous. If the consideration that motivates my theory could motivate us to say that imagination should be constrained by evidence, then I take this fact itself to be a prima facie problem that needs to be addressed.

from entertaining the implications of some far-fetched possibilities or impossibilities. If in assuming that *p* we are interested in giving a proof by reductio that not-*p*, then our *p* may well be logically incompatible with the evidence when our set of premises consists of evidence, but there doesn't seem to be any problem at all with assuming *p*. If in pretending that *p* we are interested in engaging in playful activities, then as is in the case of imagination, it again seems absurd to say that the pretended proposition must be constrained by evidence.

Let us call imagination, supposition, assumption, pretense, acceptance, and other similar attitudes "imagining attitudes". They are so-called because these attitudes are similar to imagination in the way that they all involve representing as true a proposition one does not necessarily believe for various purposes, such as engaging in make-believe play, constructing proof by reductio, or exploring hypothesis. To use Bratman's terminology, they can all be seen as an adjusted background for reasoning (practical or theoretical), which is deviated from the default cognitive background of belief. It is in this particular sense that I call imagination, supposition, assumption, pretense, acceptance, etc., imagining attitudes.

The question of the reader is thus asking why only acceptance, but not other imagining attitudes, should be constrained by evidence, if they all govern actions. To respond to this question, I wish to distinguish between two kinds of action they give rise to. What separates the attitude of acceptance from other imagining attitudes is that actions governed by acceptance often depend on the truth of the accepted content in order to be successful. On the other hand, actions governed by other imagining attitudes tend not to depend on the truth of the imagined (construed broadly) content in order to be successful. If we think that belief had better be formed on sufficient evidence because it governs actions whose success depends on the truth of the

believed content, then the very same consideration should also motivate us to constrain acceptance, but not other imagining attitudes, by evidence.

Let me illustrate my point by first considering two cases in which an imagining attitude motivates an action whose success does not depend on the truth of the content. Consider the case of assuming for reductio. In constructing a proof by reductio, I assume that *p* in order to prove that not-*p*. Whether I will successfully construct such a proof is entirely independent of whether *p* is in fact true. That *p* may be true or false. But to construct the intended proof by reductio, all I need is that it be true that *p* is logically inconsistent with the given set of premises. That *p* need not be true for the success of my proof. Indeed, when the given set of premises consists of true propositions only, the success of my proof cannot possibly depend on the truth of *p*.

This case of assuming for reductio is a mental act of manipulating representations. Now consider my imaginative play with my nephew, which is an outward physical action. In battling with my nephew, I imagine that I'm holding a lightsaber and use it to hit the armor of my nephew. What counts as a successful action here may be a bit tricky to spell out, which depends on my intention in waving my plastic stick around. If I'm engaged, wanting to win this imagined battle, then my action is only successful when it manages to convince my nephew that I have destroyed his armor. If I'm being lackluster, then my action is successful as long as it pleases my nephew. But whatever one takes the successful condition of my playful action to be, the success of it cannot depend on the truth of my imagination, for the simple reason that my imagination is false. The success of my action depends on it being represented as true that I'm holding a lightsaber. It does not depend on it being true that I'm holding one. If that were the case, then there would be no such thing as imaginative play.

The above two examples should lead the reader to see how actions governed by other kinds of imagining attitude than acceptance often do not depend their success on the truth of the imagined content. Since the truth of the imagined content does not matter for the success of action, this explains why it seems absurd to require other imagining attitudes to be constrained by evidence. I should note that here the qualification "often" must be added since there may be cases where the success of one's action depends on the imagined content being true. As some philosophers argue, imagination can have an epistemic or instructive purpose (Kind and Kung 2016, 1). For example, I may imagine what it would be for me to be an English teacher in Taiwan, with the intent to know whether I will enjoy the job. Since my purpose in this case of imagining is to know what the future holds, my imagination had better be true in order for my prediction to be successful. If so, then it may no longer be absurd to require imagination to be constrained by evidence in cases like this, where the truth of the imagined content matters.

On the other hand, actions informed by acceptance often depend their success on the truth of the accepted content. When a doctor doesn't have a belief about the matter whether cutting the appendix will save the patient's life yet the situation calls for immediate action, the doctor may rely on the acceptance that cutting the appendix will do and act accordingly. The success of the doctor's action then depends on the truth of the accepted content. Whether the patient's life will be saved depends on whether cutting the appendix will do the trick. In the case of friendship, the situation is quite similar. I may not have a belief on the matter whether my friend is trustworthy. But I accept that he is anyway. I accept that when I share the most embarrassing moment of my life with him I can count on him keeping the secret to himself. Again, whether my action of trusting him with my secret is successful depends on whether the truth of the accepted content.

Whether my secret will be kept depends on whether he really is a trustworthy friend who can be counted on keeping the secret.

These two examples of acceptance should lead the reader to see how actions governed by acceptance often depend their success on the truth of the accepted content. Since the truth of the accepted content matters for the success of action, this explains why acceptance should be more or less consistent with evidence to a suitable extent, i.e., to the extent that one still fulfills one's doxastic duty as a friend. I should note that I add the qualification "often" again. For there may again be cases where the success of one's action doesn't depend on the truth of the accepted content. For example, in the dinner case example I gave in Sect. 2, even if my acceptance that there will be vegetarian guest tonight turns out to be false, it won't frustrate my effort to please my guests. My guests can equally enjoy those vegetarian cuisine I have prepared.

In this respect, acceptance is like belief. The actions they inform often depend their success on the truth of the accepted or believed content. Pragmatists of belief often like to say that we have pragmatic reasons to form beliefs on the basis of evidence because lots of our actions depend their success on beliefs being true. While we need not agree with their voluntarist view of belief, the kernel of truth in the pragmatism about belief is that true beliefs are useful in guiding actions, and therefore it would be good if our beliefs are formed on sufficient evidence. This is a point both voluntarists and involuntarists can agree on. The only difference lies in whether one takes the evidence-responsiveness to be a feature of our belief forming mechanisms or a normative requirement of rationality we should strive to live up to.

By the same token, acceptance should also be constrained by evidence because the success of our actions can depend on the truth of acceptance. One's acceptance had better be more or less consistent with one's evidence as long as they still fulfill one's moral aim, so that

one won't be led (too far) astray in acting on one's acceptances. It is this commonality between belief and acceptance that motivates my theory of evidential constraints. If other imagining attitudes in general do not govern actions whose success depends on the truth of the imagined content, then there is no motivation for us to require them to be evidentially constrained.

6 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have motivated the idea that acceptance should be constrained by evidential norms and proposed an initial theory of how acceptance should be so constrained. What this paper contributes to the current landscape of the ethics of belief/acceptance is that it highlights an important point that even though acceptance can be voluntarily taken up on moral grounds, it should still be constrained by evidence such that it doesn't fail in morality's own terms. And it has also made some initial attempts to spell out what evidential constraints there can be on acceptance, by proposing the principles of (PLI), (PH), and (PF).

Although I only focus on friendship-based cases in this paper, I believe the discussion here can be extended to cases involving other kinds of morally unpleasant beliefs and even cases involving pragmatically ineffective beliefs, mutatis mutandis. One upshot of this is that if acceptance is a cognitive attitude the formation of which can and should be guided by moral, pragmatic, and evidential reasons, then it will seem to be a better playground than belief for theorists who are interested in the dynamics between these three kinds of reasons. But before a discussion of this sort is possible, one must first justify the claim that acceptance should be constrained by evidence, and this paper is one such attempt.

Lastly, as promised, I will gesture towards a potential argument for evidentialism about belief as another implication of this paper. This paper argues that evidential reasons should guide an agent in deliberating whether to accept that p. As mentioned in the beginning of Sect. 4, evidential reasons that are relevant to the truth of p are registered by beliefs. So, another way to put this idea is to say that acceptance must be guided by beliefs that are relevant to the truth of a proposition to be accepted. If this claim is true, then it suggests that these beliefs had better be formed on sufficient evidence such that they can be a firm basis for one's moral project of

acceptance. For the idea that acceptance should be guided by these beliefs presupposes that these beliefs should by and large be an accurate map of the world, which will only be the case if they are formed on sufficient evidence. In other words, a non-naïve moralism about acceptance, if true, presupposes an evidentialism about belief. This is only a sketch of a possible new argument for evidentialism as another implication of my paper, but I believe this idea can be worth developing in a future project.

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