

# Fiction and Acceptance-Relative Truth, Belief and Assertion

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A speaker may presuppose what is untrue to facilitate communication, as when an anthropologist adopts the presuppositions of his informants in questioning him. Most innocent of all are cases of fiction and pretending: speaker and audience may conspire together in presupposing things untrue. (Stalnaker, 1970, pp. 39–40)

Stalnaker mostly used the notion of presupposition in explaining conversational dynamics. But, as this quotation illustrates, he envisaged applying the notion to fiction. The present paper is largely an elaboration of his idea.

The quotation from Stalnaker shows that he is using “presupposition” to denote something speakers do (as opposed to a relation between propositions). In later work, he elaborates a propositional attitude, *acceptance*, which he contrasts with belief. It’s an attitude one should take to anything one presupposes, and is independent of the dynamics of conversation. Using the later terminology, we could rephrase what, in the quotation, Stalnaker says anthropologists do: they accept, though they do not believe, many of the things their informants believe. It’s this attitude of acceptance that is the target of the present paper. My aim is to illustrate the way in which acceptance contrasts with belief, and to use the contrast to illuminate some intuitions about fiction.

Many people take sentences like the following to be in some sense true:

- (1) Holmes lived in Baker Street.

- (2) Pegasus is a horse.
- (3) Anna Karenina is more intelligent than Emma Bovary.
- (4) Even Dr Watson is cleverer than George Bush.
- (5) The Greeks worshipped Zeus.
- (6) John thought about Pegasus.

These sentences appear to be simple, formed just from a predicative expression plus the appropriate number of noun phrases. For such sentences, it is tempting to suppose that their truth requires the referring expressions to have referents, and the temptation seems irresistible for the first four sentences. Yet everyone should be reluctant to see what has been said so far as a “proof” that there really are fictional characters—that these characters belong to our reality, as opposed to the unreal world of fiction. (Even those who like the conclusion shouldn’t think it can be reached quite so easily.) The plan for this paper is to show how an irrealist—one who denies that our reality contains any fictional entities—can accommodate what has been said so far by drawing on a distinction between the propositional attitudes of acceptance and belief.

*1. A problematic argument*

- I. “Holmes lived in Baker Street” is true.
- II. It is a simple sentence.
- III. “Holmes” is a referring expression.
- IV. If a true simple sentence contains a referring expression, there exists something the expression refers to.
- V. There exists such a thing as Holmes.

Here are some options for those who regard the argument as unsatisfactory (I hope that includes everyone!):

- (A) Reject (I): the sentence isn’t really true, but is only true in the fiction, or is merely faithful to the stories.
- (B) Reject (II): the sentence is not really simple, but is implicitly complex, dominated by an operator that can make a truth from a non-truth (e.g. “According to the *Holmes* stories”).

(C) Reject (III): “Holmes” is not really a referring expression. E.g. it’s meaningless, or we only pretend that it has a bearer. This option requires also rejecting (1).

(D) Reject (IV): Sentences built from “intensional transitive verbs” are counterexamples, e.g. the truth of “Ponce de León looked for the fountain of youth” does not entail that there exists such a thing as the fountain of youth.

The response I propose is closest to (A): rejecting (I). However, I don’t think one can merely assert that “Holmes lived in Baker Street” is not true. One has to explain the perfectly genuine intuitions that make us wish to say that it is true. The essence of the present idea is that we properly take one of two propositional attitudes to the sentence: we accept it; but we do not believe it. Acceptance brings with it a full cargo of acceptance relative notions: truth, assertion and so on. Our judgment that the sentence is true is implicitly relative to accepting the stories. That explains why it is sincerely assertible, even by someone under no delusions about the fictionality of Holmes. Yet acceptance can be withdrawn or bracketed, and when we do that we have to regard the sentence as not true; we do not believe it.

The first step is to spell out the distinction between acceptance and belief, showing that it is available independently of providing some understanding of fiction. Many authors have engaged in this project, but I mostly won’t stop to highlight how my version of this distinction differs from others.

## *2. Exemplifying the distinction in non-fictional cases*

Sales assistants need to accept the following, even if they do not believe it:

(7)           The customer is always right.

There’s no chance of someone with ordinary common sense believing this. We all know there are customers who lie, who try to defraud, who suffer from buyer’s remorse, and so on. But to do their job properly, in certain circumstances sales assistants have to act as if they believed it.

That means: listening carefully to what the customer says, not challenging it, making remedial proposals that take for granted the customer's story; and so on. Although acceptance does not involve belief, it does not involve disbelief either. Sometimes an accepted account is believed, sometimes not. The acceptance is required only in delimited contexts, in this case, when interacting with a customer (or a representative of one). After hours, it's quite all right for sales assistants to tell one another about how wrong many of their customers were.

The example gives an initial fix on the distinction. In the remainder of this section, I'll give a range of further examples. In §3 I'll apply the distinction to fiction. Finally, in §4, I'll offer an abstract presentation of the essential marks of the distinction between acceptance and belief.

The distinction has been said to be needed in order to enable us to give adequate descriptions of such forward looking activities as planning. Here's an example from Bratman (1992):

You are planning to build a house. You need to see if you can afford it before you begin. You sum the highest estimates from the various trades, reaching a total of \$200k. You don't *believe* your house will cost this much, but you *accept* that it will: this is your working assumption.

Although intended to be on the side of the distinction between acceptance and belief, the example seems to me hostile to it. There is an obvious way in which, instead of using the distinction between propositional attitudes, we can describe the case in terms of a single attitude, but to different contents, both of which you believe: that the cost will not exceed \$200k, and that the cost will be less than \$200k. The contrasting descriptions can be displayed thus:

two attitudes, one content	one attitude, two contents
1. You accept that the cost will be \$200k 2. You do not believe that the cost will be \$200k	1. You believe that the cost will not exceed \$200k 2. You believe that the cost will not amount to \$200k.

In my opinion, the one attitude plus two content view gives a more plausible description of the case. The beliefs are perfectly consistent, could readily be acknowledged by the subject, and will be fully adequate to explain the behavior.

This tells us one thing to look out for in examining cases designed to illustrate the distinction between acceptance and belief: check whether the case could as well or better be described in terms simply of the attitude of belief, though to different contents. We'll raise that question for the examples that follow.

*Robbery* (adapted from Lewis, 1979): We are planning a bank robbery, though not in order to commit a robbery but to enable the bank to improve its security. The plan currently under discussion is one we both agree is likely to fail, and we are rehearsing it to see exactly where it goes wrong.

*I say*: "We'll get an accomplice to do a classic stick-up. While everyone's busy with that ..."

*You interrupt*: "We'll go in through the underground ductwork."

*I agree*: "Exactly".

You're sincere when you say that we'll go in through the ductwork. I have a positive attitude to what you say ("Exactly"). But you don't really believe it. Nor do I. At that moment, we *accept* that we'll go in through the ductwork. It's the right thing to say and think. The natural description of the case is in terms of two attitudes to a single content: it is *accepted* but not *believed*.

Could we describe the case using a single attitude but two contents? There are two questions. One is: what semantic content should we ascribe to the utterances? Another is: how should we best describe the

underlying states of mind of the participants?<sup>1</sup> There's only one answer to the first question: when you utter the words "We'll go in through the underground ductwork" you say that we'll go in through the underground ductwork; and you say nothing else.

That is strictly consistent with not including this content in an explanatorily optimal description of your mental state.<sup>2</sup> However, given that you've uttered these words in a sincere fashion, one would expect the content to show up in a full description of your mental state. You don't *believe* we'll go in through the underground ductwork, or ever embark on a robbery. So if the content is to feature in your mental states, it needs to be related to an attitude other than belief. Acceptance is the proposed alternative.

On a two content view, your relevant states are to be described only in terms of your beliefs, so that *we'll go in through the ductwork* will not be included. What should we put in its place? It would have to be some kind of conditional. It can't be: *if we rob the bank, we'll go in through the ductwork*. We mutually know that this is the worst plan, so if we were to rob the bank, we wouldn't do it this way. Maybe it's something like: *if we were to put this plan into effect, we would go in through the ductwork*. In the example, the idea of going in through the ductwork was meant to have struck us with something like the force of an insight. It wasn't an element in an already determined plan. Maybe all that defined "this plan" was that we'd use a conventional stick-up as a distracter, and our prior low ranking of any plan of this kind was based on the thought that the resulting police presence would thwart anything else we might try to do. In the reported conversation, we are searching for possible alternatives. This suggests that perhaps some other conditional would match our mental state better, e.g. one in which "would" is replaced by "could" or "might": *if we were to put this plan into effect, we could/might go in through the ductwork*. It would be hard to choose

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Stacie Friend for clarifying this distinction.

<sup>2</sup> An example of this consistency: In *Problems of Philosophy*, Russell suggested that proper names have only their bearer as public content. But to give an illuminating account of the mind of a user of the name, you need to mention not the public content, but the description the user associated with the name on that occasion.

among similar candidates to be believed contents. The effort seems to get us no closer to a good account of the minds of the participants, and to involve speculation that goes beyond what's given in the story. By contrast, the account in terms of acceptance seems accurate, precise and illuminating.

*Lawyer:* A lawyer and his assistant are poring over a draft contract. Frowning, the lawyer says:

If interest rates rise more than 1.7%, we'll owe the other side a million dollars a month!

The lawyer is fully sincere: he *accepts* what he says. The upshot might be that the contract needs to be revised before he could recommend his client to sign. The lawyer does not *believe* what he says: he knows it's not true now, and he will act so as to ensure that it remains false.

As before, there's no room for doubt about the semantic content of the lawyer's utterance, so the only question is whether this content should feature in an optimal description of his mental states. The fact that he has said this gives a *prima facie* reason for answering that it should. But then it can't feature as the content of a belief.

A suitably related content the lawyer might believe may well, as in the case of *Robbery*, be conditional, perhaps: *if this contract were in force, then, if interest rates rise more than 1.7%, we'll owe the other side a million dollars a month!* But can that be quite right? The lawyer might know that if the contract were in force, his client would have fired him by the time the debt to the other side arose, so that the "we" in the consequent would be inappropriate. And can we count on everyone being able to operate mental contents with double conditional embeddings? At the very least, there are niggly doubts about whether we can extract an appropriate content for belief. By contrast, the appropriate content for acceptance stares us straight in the face.

*Violinist:* A disturbed patient is recounting his (entirely fictitious) early history to his therapist:

When I was young, I played the violin. I performed Beethoven's sonata in E flat at the Wigmore Hall.

The therapist knows this is false, but decides it's best to roll with her patient's delusions and says:

Did you play an encore?

The question presupposes that the violinist performed at the Wigmore Hall, though the therapist does not believe this presupposition. Even so, the content *my patient played at the Wigmore Hall* can quite properly be among the contents of the therapist's mental states, accepted but not believed. In this case, it's hard to see how one could explain the therapist's mental states without introducing this content. That's because it's presupposed by the question, and the therapist must accordingly be at least implicitly aware that this is so.

*Anthropologists:* Here are two sentences one might find in a description of Latin American culture a few hundred years ago:

- (8) When he was not among the clouds, Chac could be found near falling waters.
- (9) The moon goddess was the wife of the sun, but her true name has not passed down to us.

The anthropologists who affirm these sentences may combine full sincerity with firm and clear-sighted atheism; yet the truth of the sentences presupposes the existence of Chac and the moon goddess. The proposed explanation is that the anthropologists accept but do not believe what they are saying, along with the attendant presuppositions.

As in every case, an account of what the anthropologists *say* cannot be other than homophonic, and, as always, it would be surprising if the content of what a person says does not figure as the object of a propositional attitude that person holds. But if, for some reason, we are determined to admit only believed contents, we would have to consider possibilities like:

- (10) According to the Maya, when he was not among the clouds, Chac could be found near falling waters.
- (11) According to the Maya, the moon goddess was the wife of the sun, but her true name has not passed down to us.

One problem with the first suggestion is that the anthropologists in the conversation, while accepting the utterance about Chac, may disagree about what the appropriate operator prefix is. One of them might indeed think that a Mayan belief is being reported, but the other might have

some skeptical doubts about the cohesiveness and integrity of the so-called Mayan empire, doubts that make the very use of the term “Maya” suspect in his eyes. Intuitively, this disagreement does not prevent them agreeing about Chac; but the operator-prefix suggestion does not guarantee a common content for them to agree on.

For the second utterance, the prefixing suggestion faces a distinct problem: the Maya never thought about us; in particular they did not think that their name for the moon goddess had not come down to us. The scope of the prefix must therefore end after “the sun”. It is then hard to explain how the anaphoric pronoun “her” functions. By contrast, there’s no problem at all, if the content of the original utterance is accepted but not believed.

The anthropological example introduces myth, arguably a species of fiction. But the contrast between acceptance and belief is plainly the same contrast as that involved in the other cases, going right back to “The customer is always right”. So we have a contrast that’s robust outside fiction and, as Stalnaker said, is all ready for application to fiction. How, exactly, should that application go?

### *3. Applying the distinction to fiction*

People often have rather vacillating intuitions about whether sentences like “Holmes lived on Baker Street” are true. Those who wish to say that it is will cultivate a particular kind of context. For example, they invite you to imagine yourself in a Literature 101 multiple choice exam, where you have to decide whether to check “Holmes lived on Baker Street” or “Holmes lived on Dover Street”. We all know the right answer. But what makes it *right*? It’s natural to say that it’s because the sentence “Holmes lived on Baker Street” is *true*.

Theorists who wish to persuade us that the sentence is not true will try to make other contexts salient. They will ask us about the absence of a suitable Holmes from any of the potentially relevant censuses of England (1871, 1881, 1891), about his absence from any local memoirs of the period, and about the apparent nonexistence of any such address

as 221b. Imbued with the high seriousness of this context, we are likely to record the sentence as not true. After all, it was just a story.

A proper account needs to explain both of these seemingly conflicting intuitions. The contrast between acceptance and belief does the job to perfection. The first intuitions arise from our accepting the *Holmes* stories, and so accepting that Holmes lived in Baker Street: we accept this when reading, thinking about, or rehearsing the stories. The second intuitions arise from our not believing that Holmes lived in Baker Street: taking the most austere position, there is no such person, and so no question of his living anywhere. It is perfectly consistent to both accept that  $p$  and not believe that  $p$ . Both intuitions are vindicated as entirely reasonable, and this is a desirable result. I'm not aware of any other account which gives such a simple and fitting account of these facts.

The account can also explain what, from many other viewpoints, is a surprising asymmetry. Let's suppose that the *Holmes* stories recount an incident in which Holmes met Gladstone. Most people think that "Holmes met Gladstone" is a lot better, in some truth-like way, than "Gladstone met Holmes". Yet the sentences are necessarily equivalent. Here's the explanation that a belief–acceptance theorist can offer: it's often the case that the first word in a sentence sets up a framework that needs to be accepted in the course of interpretation. When the first word is "Holmes", the framework is typically set to the *Holmes* stories: we are primed to accept what they say. If they say that Holmes met Gladstone, we accept this. When the first word is "Gladstone", the framework is typically set to the real world. We know that Gladstone can't really have met Holmes. So we have no inclination to accept the sentence. This account is supported by the fact that replacing "Gladstone" by a little-known name, or by a name that is both a name for a real person and for a fictional character, undermines the contrast.

As Stalnaker (2002) stresses, participants in a conversation can get along fine even if they have different *beliefs* about matters their conversation presupposes, provided they coincide in their *acceptance* of the relevant presuppositions. An example outside fiction: atheists can debate with theists about the best version of the doctrine of the Trinity. The conversation presupposes that there is a God; one party believes

this, the other does not. However, the conversation could not take place at all (in the constructive spirit I envisage) unless both parties accepted that there is a God. Acceptance is local: as with “The customer is always right”, acceptance in a context carries no commitment to acceptance in any other context. Belief, by contrast, like truth, is seamless.

Can an irrealist about fictional characters count on the acceptance–belief contrast to rid her of all ontological anxieties? Certainly not. Contrast the following three sentences:

- (12) Holmes lived on Baker Street
- (13) Ponce de León looked for the fountain of youth
- (14) The Greeks worshipped Zeus.

 We have seen that the contrast does a good job of explaining our attitudes to (12). It has nothing to offer with respect to (13): this is a sentence we ought not merely to accept, but to believe absolutely and from the most austere perspective. Unlike (12)’s presupposition of Holmes, the truth of (13) does not presuppose that there exists a fountain of youth. We should reject, or at least restrict, the semantic principle previously labeled IV:

If a true simple sentence contains a referring expression, there exists something the expression refers to.

The restriction should exclude sentences built from intensional verbs like “looks for”. Formulating it properly is no doubt a difficult matter. For present purposes, it’s enough that “lived” is definitely not an intensional transitive, and “looked for” definitely is. There is a straightforward way to show that the contrast between acceptance and belief will not help us understand (13). Contrast:

- (15) There’s no Sherlock Holmes, but he lived in Baker Street (all the same).
- (16) There’s no fountain of youth, but Ponce de León looked for it (all the same).

(15) is not acceptable. The first phrase sets the context to reality, and so to a situation in which we do not accept the stories, and so do not accept



who place their trust in operator approaches, since Tolstoy's novel did not speak about Emma, and Flaubert's novel did not speak about Anna.

(6) is normally taken to pattern with (13) ("Ponce de León looked for the fountain of youth"): built from an intensional transitive, it can be true (absolutely) even if there is no Pegasus. If we apply the earlier test, there's some room for doubt:

(18)        There's no such thing as Pegasus, but John thought about him (all the same).

Those who think this is unacceptable may prefer to classify it with (5) rather than, as is more customary, with (13).

(4) asks us to accept that Dr Watson (of the *Holmes* stories) and Bush can be compared, which in turn requires accepting that there are such people as Dr Watson and George Bush. Is that the same as accepting that there are such *real* people as Dr Watson and George Bush? For this example, it may not matter how one answers. But consider the following familiar sentence:

(19)        Holmes is more famous than any real detective.

If accepting this involves accepting that Holmes is a real detective, we seem to be committed to accepting that Holmes is more famous than himself. The more cautious formulation of the previous paragraph seems more appropriate: in accepting (19) we accept that there is such a detective as Holmes, and we are committed to accepting that he is not real.

The upshot is that an irrealist should not in every case appeal to the acceptance–belief contrast to explain away apparently pro-realist intuitions. But they should do this in some cases. Panaceas should not be trusted.

#### *4. Nine marks of acceptance as opposed to belief*

This section aims to get a more theoretical fix on the contrast, which up to this point has mostly been explained by examples.

*One*: “To accept a proposition is to treat it as a true proposition in one way or another” (Stalnaker, 1984, p. 79). One may treat something as true without believing that it is true. Cohen also takes something like this idea as a starting point. 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 premisses for deciding what to do or think in a particular context, whether or not one feels it to be true that  $p$ . (Cohen 1992, p. 4)

What it is to *treat as* true will vary from case to case. To treat it as true that the customer is always right is to behave in a certain way towards customers; one does not have to persist in this behavior out of hours, or if one’s role is reversed and one is the customer oneself. Treating the Holmes sentence as true involves not challenging it, in the context of retelling or discussing the stories, and using it as a basis for inference and further imaginative exploration of the circumstances described in the story. It does not require one to take seriously a search for a Holmes in the residential records of the Borough of Marylebone.

*Two*: Acceptance does not entail belief. That’s the essential part of the story. I follow most accounts in using “acceptance” so that belief entails acceptance. One treats as true what one believes to be true, but one may treat as true something one does not believe to be true.

*Three*: Acceptance is voluntary. Many take this as a contrast with belief, which has been argued not to be voluntary. Given the ruling in *Two*, that belief is a species of acceptance, this mark is to be understood as applying only to acceptance that is not belief.

To illustrate the voluntary character: a sales assistant whose concern to keep his job is not overriding may decline to accept that the customer is always right, thereby putting his employment at risk. The therapist might have declined to accept that her patient played at the Wigmore Hall, thereby plunging into a different style of therapy.

The alleged involuntary character of belief does not sit easily with the assumption that belief is the key locus for evaluating an agent’s rationality, praising agents who believe rationally, blaming those who do not. Involuntary behavior is often said to be exempt from praise or

blame. As Cohen (1992) hints, it might be that acceptance is a better locus for such evaluations.

*Four:* Sometimes (though not always) what is accepted is what is *presupposed*, in the way that “The present King of France is bald” presupposes that there exists a present King of France. Here I’m thinking of presupposition as a semantic relation between propositions. One should accept all the presuppositions of any proposition one accepts. Speech acts that are not sayings, but, for example, questions, may have presuppositions (the question “Did you play an encore?” presupposes that you performed at the venue in question). That’s consistent with presupposition being a relation between propositions; questions that have presuppositions can be regarded as involving propositions (in mickey mouse form: Is the proposition that *you played an encore* true or false?).

*Five:* In conversation, participants may need to share contents as “common ground” (in the sense of Stalnaker [2002]). They do not need to believe these contents (as with atheist and believer discussing the Trinity): what one believes, another may accept without believing.

*Six:* Acceptance is not essentially conversational. It can play a similar role in silent soliloquy. An atheist philosopher of religion, preparing an academic paper alone in his study, may need to accept God’s existence in order to work out the best version of the doctrine of the Trinity.

*Seven:* Acceptance is local but belief is not: accepting something in one context involves no commitment to accepting it in another. A shift of context can properly involve rejecting something previously accepted. After hours, the experienced sales assistant can straighten out the inexperienced one: “Don’t believe what they say about the customer being always right”. This means that there’s nothing necessarily irrational about accepting that *p* and also (in another context) accepting that not-*p*. Belief is different in this respect, being what I earlier called seamless: setting aside change over time, if in some context you believe that *p*, there’s no context in which it’s correct to believe that not-*p*. Belief “aims at truth”, and truth meets the analogous condition: if *p* is true, then not-*p* is not.

*Eight:* Acceptance carries commitments (and in this respect resembles belief): normally, to accept something (within a context) involves a

commitment to accept obvious relevant consequences of it (within that context). Once you've accepted that Holmes lived in Baker Street you are committed to accepting that he lived in London.

*Nine:* There are acceptance-relativized notions of *sincerity*, *correctness*, *truth* etc. Given appropriate acceptances, it is true, "really" true if you like, that Holmes lived in Baker Street. Sincerity demands that this is what you assert, if the situation is fitting.

Consider the view that knowledge is the norm of assertion: it's right to assert that  $p$  only if you know that  $p$ . It's not obvious that this view has to convict someone of wrongdoing if she asserts that  $p$  in a situation in which she accepts that  $p$ , though doesn't (globally) believe that  $p$ , and so doesn't (globally) know that  $p$ . The examiner in Literature 101 asks: Where did Holmes live? Your answer, "Baker Street", sounds like an assertion that he lived in Baker Street. Although you have not mistaken the fiction for factual narrative, you are fully sincere. Relative to what is being accepted in this context, you know Holmes lived in Baker Street. So it's far from obvious that the full legitimacy of such fictional assertions conflicts with knowledge as a norm of assertion. Once acceptance-relative truth is admitted, acceptance-relative knowledge follows, as does the propriety of evaluating assertions relative to what is accepted in the context.<sup>4</sup>

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