

ON KEITH LEHRER'S BELIEF IN ACCEPTANCE*

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1. *Introduction*

David Hume offered an explication of belief according to which to believe is to conceive an idea in a specific manner. But Hume was not entirely satisfied with his theory of belief. He wrote: "I confess, that it is impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term that everyone sufficiently understands in common life." (Hume 1739, 146). This negative point concerning belief is my starting point: I know quite well what belief is, but it is hard to give a theory of belief in more fundamental terms. The notion of belief seems by itself to be basic for our conceptual frame. I can explain different doxastic attitudes, such as to expect, to conjecture or to be sure, but in doing so I always have to make reference to the basic attitude of believing.

Keith Lehrer has introduced another notion, the notion of acceptance, and if he does not want to claim that he has found a new or until now disregarded faculty of man, "acceptance" has to be analyzed in terms of, or in relation to, our notion of belief.¹

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1. My starting point is not that any reductive analysis of "belief", as materialists or behaviorists intend to give, must fail, I merely want to claim that the notion of belief cannot be reduced to any other notions of the same category.

2. A Coherent Picture of Lehrer's Theory of Acceptance

What is Lehrer's reason for using the notion of acceptance? In order to know that *p*, a person must have a specific epistemic attitude. If someone believes that *p* just because having this belief is pleasurable for him, then, according to Lehrer, he does not know that *p*, regardless of whether the other conditions of knowledge are satisfied or not. In order to know, one has to follow the aim of truth. To accept that *p* is a condition for knowing that *p*, and acceptance has to do with the aim of truth. That is the basic idea. But what exactly is it to accept something?

It will make no sense to take an ordinary language approach here, investigating the occasions on which people say that they accept something. "Acceptance" in our context is a technical term, and Lehrer has adopted this term "because in one of its uses it seems ... to be a relative term in which there is some implicit reference to some purpose or aim." (KR 1989, 135). This gives us the most basic characteristic of "acceptance" in the way that the term is used by Lehrer: If a person accepts something, then he does so for a specific purpose.² By adding a *genus proximum* to this description we get: Acceptance is a doxastic attitude which is related to aims.

It may be considered as an analytical truth that whatever is directed to aims belongs to the field of actions (or decisions). Acceptance then would be a special kind of action (or decision).

Most actions involve bodily movements, we cannot act without them – acceptances, on the other hand, require no movement. Consider as an example for an action without bodily movements the action of not helping someone, just staying beside and doing nothing. Even such an action differs from an acceptance because here deliberations about bodily movements will be involved – one decides against specific movements. To find a case similar to what acceptance might be, one has to think of something like a purely "psychic action". To direct one's attention to some given premise of an argument might fit as an example. Support for the view that such an event is an action can be got from the applicability of

2. This claim about "acceptance" can be found in every explanation of this concept Lehrer has given; e.g. MM 10, 1986, 228: "Acceptance ... is essentially relative to some purpose."