Analyzing presumption as a modal qualifier

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ABSTRACT: Although some standard accounts of presumption treat it as an epistemic modality, properly understood it is not. When treated as an epistemic modality, as in cases of default entitlement to standing commitments or for conclusions supported by provisionally adequate cases, presumption is reducible to other epistemic modalities, particularly plausibility or defeasibility. And, the first of these cases does not satisfy a standard analysis of presumption, according to which a positive burden of production is required for presumption-rebuttal. When understood as a modal qualifier in practical reasoning, presumption can be analyzed as a unique modality that can play a distinct role in reasoning and argument.

KEYWORDS: argumentation; epistemic modality; presumption; presumptive inference; qualifiers

1 Presumption as a modal qualifier

Minimally, presumption is a modal qualifier for claims used in reasoning and discourse. When true, sentences of the form ‘Presumably, $p$’ indicate the presumptive status of $p$. This presumptive status, while something less than truth or unqualified acceptability, marks $p$ as having a defeasible but default and actionable acceptability. Thus, utterances of the form “Presumably, $p$” qualify or mitigate a speaker’s commitment to $p$, while asserting $p$’s presumptive status.\(^1\)

\(^1\) On this point, Bermejo-Luque (2016) rightly treats allocations of “Presumably, $p$” as constative, rather than performative, speech acts. While the speech act of presumption (i.e., of presuming that $p$) has felicity conditions for successful performance, those generally differ from the satisfaction conditions for the sentence ‘Presumably, $p$.’ Analogously, assertions can be made without their being either true or warranted. Since the presumptive status of a claim is not, generally speaking, established by its having been presumed, normative theories of presumption should concentrate not on acts of presuming (i.e., kinds of claimings) but on the contents of those acts (i.e., kinds of claims).

Viewed as singular speech acts, utterances of “Presumably, $p$” are assertions – the burden remains with the assertor to establish that $p$ is presumptively acceptable. Against at least some readings of Walton (1993), the burden of proof with respect to $p$ is not shifted in making the speech act of presuming that $p$; rather as Bermejo-Luque recognizes the burden of proof is only properly shifted when the satisfaction conditions for
Presumptive status is standardly explained in terms of burden of proof. As Rescher describes it: “A presumption indicates that in the absence of specific counterindications we are able to accept how things ‘as a rule’ are taken as standing, and it places the burden of proof upon the adversary’s side” (1977: 30; cf. 2006: 14). Accepting this basic notion, we may adopt Pinto’s (2001: 3-4) definition of ‘presumably’ as a modal status:

A proposition or statement has the status of a presumption at a given juncture of an interchange if and only if at that juncture any party who refuses to concede it is obliged to present an argument against it—that is to say, is obliged either to concede it or to make a case against it.

So conceived, the modality of presumption may be understood as making particular allocations of probative entitlements and obligations. Regarding entitlements: a presumptively acceptable claim may be taken to be the case in the absence of countervailing reasons; thereby it may be used as a premise in further reasoning and discourse. Regarding obligations: those who deny the entitlements arising from a claim’s presumptive acceptability are obliged to make some reasoned case against p’s presumptive acceptability.

By redistributing probative obligations and entitlements across discursive standpoints, Hahn and Oaksford (2007: 41) observe that presumptions “favor certain substantive outcomes” over others. This raises the question of whether presumptions do so in reliable, or truth-conducive ways. Are presumptions engineered to track truth? Is ‘presumably’ an epistemic modality? The answer here will determine how presumptions (i.e., presumed claims) ought to be treated in reasoning and argumentation – e.g., what sorts of entitlements they license, what obligations they occasion, and what kinds of inferences may generate, and be based on, them.

Next, ‘presumably’ takes its place among a long list of qualifiers, e.g.: ‘necessarily,’ ‘certainly,’ ‘defeasibly,’ ‘probably,’ ‘all things considered,’ ‘plausibly,’ ‘perhaps,’ ‘hypothetically,’ etc. These expressions have a dual function in reasoned discourse: When used in utterances they serve to modify a speaker’s commitment, or express their propositional attitude, to some claim. As constituents of sentences they operate to mark and track the logical, epistemic, deontic, discursive, or other modal status of propositions. Whether used as commitment markers or modal operators, qualifiers may be operationalized as making assignments of probative entitlements and obligations upon rational actors according to their discursive standpoints.

These other modalities occasion a second question: Is the modality presumably different from these others, and if so, how? That is, can a reductive account of presumption be offered by explaining uses of ‘presumably’ in terms of (some disjunctive combination of) other modalities? The theoretical significance here is whether any special analysis of presumption is required. E.g., if ‘presumably’ amounts to nothing more than marking the defeasible acceptability of some claim (because, e.g., a prima facie case has been made for the sentence ‘Presumably, p’ are met, and seen to have been met by the discussants. If disputed, showing that these conditions are met remains the obligation of the one making the presumption.
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it), then the modality presumably might be reduced to the modality defeasibly without loss of content. As such, no special theory of presumption or presumptive inference would be required.

The modality of presumption, then, presents two theoretical questions. Is presumably an epistemic modality? And, is it reducible to some other modality? This chapter undertakes to answer both questions. The thesis is that, while some standard accounts of presumption treat it as an epistemic modality, properly understood it is not. When treated as an epistemic modality, presumption is reducible to other epistemic modalities, particularly defeasibly or plausibly. Yet, when understood as a modality in practical reasoning, as suggested by Edna Ullmann-Margalit (1983), presumably can be analyzed as a unique modality that plays a distinct role in reasoning and argument.

In outline, the chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews two versions of a standard account of presumption, due to Douglas Walton and Nicholas Rescher, on which presumably is held to be a distinctive modality that may be properly used in epistemic contexts. Section 3 considers two uses of presumption as an epistemic modality licensed by such theories: as default entitlement to standing commitments, and for conclusions supported by provisionally adequate cases. I argue that both uses of ‘presumably’ reduce to some other epistemic modality. Moreover, I contend that the first use does not satisfy a standard analysis of presumption according to which a positive burden of production (e.g., to produce negatively relevant evidence or countervailing reasons) is required for presumption-rebuttal. Section 4 argues that the uses of ‘presumably’ as an epistemic modality made by these theories are not properly warranted by the pragmatic considerations offered in justifying those usages. Then, drawing on the theory of Ullmann-Margalit, I present a non-reductive analysis of presumably on which it is a non-epistemic modal qualifier for claims used in practical reasoning. My conclusions are offered in section 5.

2 Presumption as a distinct epistemic modality

Standard accounts of presumption permit epistemic uses for the modality presumably. Rescher (2006: 11) explicitly contrasts his view with those of theorists (such as Ullmann-Margalit (1983)) who “see presumption as merely an action-guiding device,” objecting that “while practice is indeed at issue with presumption, this can also include the practice of information management – of epistemic or cognitive procedure” (11). Contending that “warranted presumption … is an epistemic category” (23; cf. 1977: 42), Rescher distinguishes between cognitive presumptions whose purpose is “filling in gaps in our information” (27) and practical presumptions whose function is “guiding our decisions regarding actions” (27).

Walton’s position is more circumspect. Presumptions enter his theory as a type of defeasible commitment. “[W]hen a presumption is brought forward by a proponent,” Walton writes, “the burden is on the respondent to refute it, or otherwise it goes into place

2 See Godden and Walton (2007), for a survey of theories of presumption, and see Bodlović (2017), for a critical survey of the development of Walton’s account of presumption.
as a commitment” (1996: 29). Walton also holds that presumptive arguments convey probative merit from premises to conclusion. “The [presumptive, schematic] argument serves a probative function whereby probative weight is transferred from premises to the conclusion” (Walton, Reed, and Macagno 2008: 12). Yet, while the qualifier ‘presumably’ modifies the extent of an arguer’s commitment to a claim, Walton does not use it to distinguish the type of an arguer’s commitment or entitlement. Commitments, including qualified commitments, are available for use as premises in further argument regardless of whether the commitment was established on the basis of a dialectical considerations (e.g., discursive concession), practical considerations (e.g., instrumental reasoning), or epistemic considerations (e.g., strictly evidential reasons). Particularly in cases of dialogue shifts or nested dialogues, changes in dialogue type can mean that any commitment amounts to an epistemic commitment. For example, were a negotiation dialogue to shift to an inquiry (e.g., into some factual matter bearing on some policy), that a commitment was initially established by negotiation (e.g., due to some compromise or trade-off made by the negotiating parties) does not restrict the uses that can be made of it when the goals of the dialogue change to a truth-directed inquiry. Rather, what Walton tends to restrict are the kinds of moves that may be made in dialogues of different types. But, if commitments hold in place through shifts in dialogue type, then any commitment can become an epistemic commitment and presumably becomes an epistemic modality.

J. Anthony Blair has claimed that “presumptive reasoning/argument represents a sui generis class of reasoning/argument” (1999: 56). Citing several examples of “schematic” argument-types, Blair argues that they are characterized by a distinctive set of features differentiating them from deductive and quantitatively probabilistic arguments (51-55). If correct, presumptive warrant represents a distinct standard of connection between premises and conclusions or between grounds and claim. As such, the modality presumably ought, similarly, to be unique and irreducible to other modal qualifiers.

Such a position accords with Walton’s characterization of schematic arguments as “presumptive” and “plausibilistic” (e.g., Walton 1996: 13; 2001; 2008; 2014: ch.3). Walton, Reed, and Macagno write that, while argumentation schemes include deductive reasoning patterns,

they also include forms of reasoning that are … more tentative in nature and need to be judged circumspectly by reserving some doubts. Such reasoning is presumptive and defeasible. This kind of reasoning is only plausible and is often resorted to in conditions of uncertainty and lack of knowledge. Presumptive reasoning supports inference under conditions of incompleteness by allowing unknown data to be presumed. (2008: 10)

On this view, the defeasible quality of inferential connection at work in presumptive arguments is best understood in rough-hewn, qualitative terms, and is best evaluated using schematically-indexed critical questions designed to “stress-test” stereotypical points of default.

Rescher also explains presumptive reasoning in plausibilistic terms: “Presumption favors the most plausible of rival alternatives” (2006: 39; cf. 1977: 37ff.). He agrees that presumptive arguments are not articulable or assessable quantitatively: “The plausibility of
a thesis will not be a measure of its probability – of how likely we deem it” (1977: 38; cf. 2006: 42). Rather, plausibility is explained in terms of coherence. The plausibility of a thesis “reflects the prospects of its being fitted into our cognitive scheme of things in view of the standing of the sources or principles that vouch for its inclusion therein. … The key issue is that of how readily the thesis in view could make its peace within the overall framework of our cognitive commitments” (1977: 38; cf. 2006: 42).

On these views, presumption is a distinct modality which, having some status in theoretical as well as practical reasoning, is at least partly epistemic. Presumptive warrant constitutes an irreducible standard of support that confers a defeasible but default and actionable acceptability, operationalized as a local shift in burden of proof, on presumed claims.

3 What presumption isn’t (or needn’t be)

Consider now two discursive, epistemic statuses typically classified as presumptive on such accounts: default entitlement to standing commitments, and conclusions supported by provisionally adequate cases. I argue that a reductive analysis of each use of ‘presumably’ is available in terms of the alternative modalities plausibly and defeasibly, and, indeed, that presumably doesn’t properly apply to the former.

Presumptive acceptability, or default entitlement, is sometimes ascribed to select claims or rules. Dialectical theories typically take the fact of acceptance of, or agreement upon, claims in an initial commitment set to confer presumptive acceptability upon them. Since they are not in dispute, they may be unproblematically drawn upon as resolution resources in situations of disagreement. Foundational epistemic theories standardly identify sources or features which are claimed to confer presumptive warrant basic, non-inferred beliefs.

The reasoning involved goes something like this: Reasoning and argumentation do not generate acceptability (justification) ex nihilo; rather, they only transmit acceptability from inputs to outputs via rules. Unless these inputs and rules are initially acceptable, the justificatory activity of reasoning cannot begin. Paths of reasoned support (justification) cannot be circular, since the acceptability of premises must be epistemically prior to, and independent of, that of any conclusion based upon them. Nor can paths of justification be infinite, since claims whose acceptability has yet to be established cannot confer acceptability upon claims inferred on their basis. So, responding that the acceptability of inferential inputs is based on some prior act of reasoning does not answer the justificatory challenge but only pushes the regress back. This line of thinking results in the foundationalist view that at least some claims and rules must “wear their acceptability on their sleeves” – if only initially, defeasibly, and tentatively.

It should be admitted that our acts of reasoning must, as a matter of practical necessity, begin somewhere. Ordinarily we begin in the epistemic situation we find ourselves, with the epistemic resources we have to hand, and we make additions and corrections to our beliefs as we discover particular instances of ignorance or error. We may even reconceptualize our view of the terrain, shifting our whole frame of reference, so as to gain a better understanding of what there is and how it “hangs together.” Yet, that this is our
epistemic lot does not warrant conferring the status of presumptive acceptability to all – or even some select subset of – the claims in our current belief set.

That a claim, \( p \), is presumptively acceptable confers upon it a status of acceptable-by-default, and places a positive burden to make a case against \( p \) (or against \( p \)’s presumptive acceptability) upon all those who would not accept it. But, no such burden exists for those who would doubt or deny any claim in our existing commitment set – not even ourselves! Granted, ordinarily we only revisit the acceptability of our present beliefs, i.e., address the question of whether we should make any changes to them, when faced with some reason to do so. Yet, while objectors to a presumption must show cause, i.e., provide some reason counting against the presumption, all that is required to challenge our entitlement to a standing commitment is to call it into question – to raise doubt, to demand reasons, to withdraw commitment, any of which may be done without bringing any directly negatively relevant evidence to bear.\(^3\)

To appreciate this point, consider Aijaz, McKeown-Green, and Webster’s (2013) distinction between attitudinal and dialectical burdens. When unchallenged, our shared or background commitments do not have dialectical burdens, understood as a requirement to “provide sufficient evidential support for one’s position,” attached – yet, we still bear an attitudinal burden, or a requirement to “possess sufficient evidential support for one’s position” (261, emphasis changed). Challenges to standing commitments only require shifting a standing, attitudinal burden to a dialectical one – i.e., challenging one to produce what they must already possess: their warrant, or entitlement, to some view. Practically such demands typically occur on the basis of some reasonable and particular doubt; when frequent, general, and unmotivated, such demands exhibit a skeptical frivolity. Yet epistemically these demands needn’t be occasioned only by negatively relevant evidence specific to the claim challenged. Rather, the obligation to possess adequate warrant for our beliefs is a standing one, and a paradigmatic criterion for possession of adequate warrant is that we are able to produce it on demand.

Further, let’s grant that typically we are both correct and justified in thinking that overall our beliefs reliable, and that we had some sufficiently good reason for adopting the particular beliefs we’ve got. Yet, when challenged to demonstrate our entitlement, that we already accept the claim should not count as a reason in favor of its acceptability.

The mere availability of cognitive attitudes other than our own rationally obliges us to have some sufficient reason for the view we elect to retain rather than adopt some other view in its stead (Godden 2014). And, as fallible knowers, we ought to recognize that at least some of our standing beliefs are false or unwarranted. The problem, epistemically speaking, is we don’t know which. The hope is that argumentation and critical inquiry are self-correcting procedures, reliably sorting commitments good from bad. The acceptability of our commitments, then, is best understood as a consequence of their standing at the end of our rational and argumentative undertakings, not their status at the beginning.

To sum up: While our ordinary epistemic practices demonstrate that we typically

\(^3\) In holding that schematic presumptive arguments can be rebutted by asking a critical question that has no positive burden of production for the questioner, Walton’s theory implicitly acknowledges this point. If posing a critical question sometimes amounts only to asking “Why \( p \)?” then it is not clear how presumptive arguments shift a burden of proof to an objector.
proceed on the basis that we are epistemically entitled to our existing commitments, this is normally done on the basis of good reasons. Ordinarily we rightly take ourselves to possess adequate warrant for our views, and, except in cases of disagreement, we normally confer this same entitlement upon others, while recognizing that each of us has a standing obligation to possess this warrant and may be called upon to produce it more-or-less on demand. So understood, this practice does not attribute presumptive acceptability to standing commitments, since our entitlement to them does not impose an obligation of a reverse burden of proof upon objectors.

Instead, plausible seems a modality that more aptly and accurately describes our entitlements and obligations concerning our standing commitments. Rescher explains plausibility as the fit, or coherence, particular claims have within the overall framework of our cognitive commitments. While plausibility conveys a tentative, defeasible but actionable entitlement, it does not connote the reverse burden of proof characteristic of presumptions, whereby objectors must either concede the claim or make some positive case against it. Rather in cases of disagreement where each disagreeing party maintains one of several individually plausible but mutually incompatible views, no view is presumptively acceptable, and each party must produce their attitudinal warrant for their standing view. Thus, plausibility is a more epistemically egalitarian modality for standing commitments, which better accords with our epistemic practices in cases of challenge and disagreement.

Next, the modality presumably is sometimes used to mark claims in reasoned discourse that have some probative merit, just not enough to meet some applicable threshold of acceptability. So-called “presumptive” arguments (e.g., informal schematic arguments) are standardly described as making defeasible, provisional, or tentative – rather than conclusive – cases for their conclusions. As such, commitment to the conclusions of presumptive arguments should be tempered accordingly. Walton writes: “Presumption requires a notion of provisional commitment, not characterized by an obligation to defend the proposition in question, if challenged” (1996: 18). Similarly, Rescher introduces the notion of presumption saying: “To presume in the presently relevant sense of the term is to accept something in the absence of the further relevant information that would ordinarily be deemed necessary to establish it” (2006: 1).

Both Rescher and Walton develop their accounts of presumption in terms of pro tanto reasoning and argument. Rescher uses the notion of a prima facie case, writing:

To make out a prima facie case for one’s contention is to adduce considerations whose evidential weight is such that – in the absence of countervailing considerations – the “reasonable presumption” is now in its favor, and the burden of proof ... is now incumbent on the opposing party. (1977: 28; cf. 2006: 7)

Walton uses the notion of an insufficient but plausible inference:

A presumption may be defined as a plausible inference based on a fact and a rule as premises, where the premises are insufficient to support the conclusion in accord with the link of warrant presenting the argumentation scheme joining the premises to the conclusion, and where a further boost is needed to gain a proper acceptance of the
These accounts share the notion of a “provisionally adequate case,” which Rescher (1977: 28) introduces to capture the idea of an argument, which may offer the best available reasons at the time, that nevertheless is insufficient to conclusively establish its conclusion, or otherwise falls short of some applicable standard of adequate support.

Sometimes, we may rely on tentatively accepted conclusions supported by provisionally adequate cases. As with standing commitments, that claims supported by pro tanto reasoning be qualified as presumptively acceptable is not itself a problem. Given the foregoing explanations, the modality is perspicuous and readily applied in most cases.

Yet, if this is all that presumption amounts to, the label ‘defeasibly’ applies just as readily. After all, this modality also connotes a defeasible, but default and actionable, acceptability. And, reducing such uses of ‘presumption’ to defeasibility offers a robust analysis of presumptive acceptability, by indicating the defeasibility conditions for the default acceptability of a presumed claim, thereby signaling how the reverse burden of proof may be discharged. Further, a probabilistic understanding of defeasible acceptability analyses tentative, presumptive commitment as partial commitment, thereby highlighting that partial commitment to a claim entails partial commitment to its contradictory.

A more pressing objection is this. Positions advocating a usage of ‘presumably’ as an epistemic modal qualifier typically don’t restrict presumptive justification to epistemic justification. Quite the opposite. Standardly presumptive justification essentially involves practical or methodological considerations. Specifically, presumptions are presented as licensed or warranted, in part, by the practical need to move forward with reasoned discourse at some stage, whether initially or when some impasse is subsequently reached. The claim that tentative, presumptive acceptability may be warranted on the basis of otherwise insufficient evidence is often invoked when the practical exigencies of circumstance call for a resolution of reasoned dialogue. Walton, for example, writes: “[A] proposition can be tentatively accepted as having the status of presumption even though the evidence supporting it at that present point in the dialog is insufficient for accepting it. The reason for accepting it [is] typically a practical one” (2008: 234-235). Similarly, Rescher claims: “A cognitive presumption, stakes a claim that outruns the substance of actually available information; it is a proposition that, in suitably favorable circumstances, is accepted as true in the absence of any counterindications” (2006: 27).

Yet, as Godden observes “the mere need to get on with things and bring an argumentative discussion to a close is not a good reason to distribute probative responsibilities one way rather than another. Instead, we require principled reasons why a claim should be presumed when insufficient evidence is available” (2015: 102). What we tend to find, then, in such practical justifications of presumption is reference to some non-epistemic end of the discursive activity.

Rescher, for example, writes that “Presumptions are validated by their functional efficacy within their operative context and not by their statistical accuracy [i.e., reliability]” (2006: 9). He elaborates:

[the] justificatory rationale of our presumptive practice is in the end pragmatic. …
The processes of justification – the way of going at it – is always one and the same: pragmatic efficacy in regard to the functional/purposive teleology of the particular domain at issue. And, given the pragmatic justification of presumptions, the domain of epistemic presumption is a crossroad where considerations of practical and theoretical reason intersect. Those epistemic presumptions are, in effect, practical policies justified by their serviceability in the furtherance of our cognitive interests. (2006: 63; cf. 53-55)

Walton’s dialogical theory of presumption provides an equally explicit statement of the practical and non-epistemic rationale for presuming. Generalizing Walton’s language slightly, the last three conditions for a presumption that \( p \) can be stated as follows:

1. \( p \) is not sufficiently warranted by the available evidence;
2. there is a condition (e.g., a presumptive inference rule) that supplies an appropriate practical warrant for \( p \) (in the circumstance);
3. when this practical warrant is factored in, \( p \) is sufficiently warranted to shift a local burden of proof to an objector.\(^4\)

On each account, presumptions are insufficiently warranted by purely epistemic considerations. Rather, an essential design feature of presumption is that it is tied to, and partly justified by, some non-alethic discursive end. Often this is presented as the need to move reasoned discourse forward in some way. And, the obstacle presented as causing the stagnation of reasoned progress is standardly a lack of available evidence or other epistemically-determinative resources.

Yet, in situations where only the only discursive values or ends are epistemic, a lack of available evidence is not an obstacle to progress, so much as an indication that the right epistemic attitude in that circumstance is to suspend judgement. Generally we should weight our credences according to the available evidence. The need to reach some conclusion beyond this (e.g., to take a decision or form a determinative judgment about the matter at hand) will be motivated by some non-epistemic end.

Yet, if the acceptability of a presumed claim is not sufficiently warranted on the basis of purely epistemic considerations, why treat \( presumably \) as an epistemic modality? Moreover, if it is admitted that we can consistently or coherently presume things that we know aren’t so (Bermejo-Luque 2016: 10), why treat presumptions as having any role in epistemic discourse? Doing so seems to mismanage the epistemic risks involved in theoretical reasoning, and in ways that are entirely avoidable given that a perfectly serviceable account of presumption as a non-epistemic modality is ready-to-hand (Godden 2017).

\(^4\) Walton presents the conditions in the context of presumption in argument stating them as:

[i] The argument is not sufficiently strong, based only on the evidence supporting the … premises to shift a burden of production to the respondent’s side. [ii] The presumptive rule has a practical justification in line with the goal of the persuasion dialog. [iii] The argument is sufficiently strong, with the practical justification counted in, to shift a burden of production to the respondent’s side. (2008: 235) The remaining conditions are not relevant to the point being made.
4 Presumption as a modality in practical reasoning

As distinct from the preceding accounts, Ullmann-Margalit (1983) has formulated an account of the modality presumably that reflects the inherently practical aspects of presumptive justification. Presumption, Ullmann-Margalit writes, “is concerned not so much with ascertaining the facts as with proceeding on them. … Presumption rules belong to the realm of praxis, not theory. Their point is to enable us to get on smoothly with business of all sorts, to cut through impasses, to facilitate and expedite action” (147).

Three important features of Ullmann-Margalit’s account serve to avoid the confusions and bad epistemic risk-management that comes from mistakenly treating pragmatically justified claims though they thereby have some positive epistemic status.

First, presumption rules, which are used to inferentially generate presumptively acceptable claims, have rule subjects, such that they are “directed to any person who is engaged in a process of practical deliberation whose resolution materially depends, among other things, on an answer to the factual question of whether q is or is not the case” (147). In this way, presumptive entitlement is restricted to reasoners who are engaged with some specific set of practical concerns. Correspondingly, the probative obligations generated by presumptive entitlements are only binding upon subjects of the presumption rule – i.e., those beholden to the non-alethic discursive goals backing the presumptive warrant. So restricted, presumptive entitlements and obligations do not extend beyond the scope of those immediate concerns involved in licensing the presumption. As such presumptions cannot be carried over into theoretical reasoning or even to practical reasoning about other matters.

Second, Ullmann-Margalit explicitly recognizes that, because the justification of presumptions is at least partly non-evidential, the status of presumptions is not epistemic. “Where one has reasons for belief sufficient for grounding the action, there is no deliberation problem: it is to pave the way to action in default of such reasons that presumption rules come about” (152). One needn’t presume (although one may in the right circumstances) where one can know or reasonably believe. As such, presumably is clearly demarcated as a non-epistemic modality.

Finally, because of this, Ullmann-Margalit restricts the application of presumption rules to practical, deliberative reasoning. Presumptively warranted entitlements and their correlative obligations are similarly restricted. “The [presumption] rule entitles one to hold q as true for the purposes of concluding one’s practical deliberation on the impending issue; it neither requires nor entitles one to believe that q. … [A presumption] rule sanctions the practical passage from p to q while at the same time acknowledging the possible falsity of q” (149). In this way, the propositional attitude licensed by presumption similarly non-epistemic: it is one of proceeding as if q, rather than taking it that q, or taking q to be the case. As such, although ‘presumably’ indicates a propositional attitude, the attitudinal stance modified is one of commitment not belief (see Godden 2010).

A position along the lines of Ullmann-Margalit’s permits the modality presumably to do the rational work it is properly suited to do, while preventing its mislabeling the epistemic modal status of claims in theoretical reasoning and truth-directed discourse.
(Godden 2017). It grants that “cognitive presumptions function as instrumentalities of rational economy” (Rescher 2006: 27) without mistaking those instrumentalities for actualities.

5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued, in agreement with Ulmann-Margalit (1983), that presumably is best understood as a non-epistemic modality, modifying commitment to – not belief in – a claim, among agents engaged in particular, purpose-specific episodes of deliberative reasoning or discourse.

Accounts that treat presumably as an epistemic modality fail to distinguish it from other modalities, particularly defeasibly or plausibly. Discursively, each of these modalities functions to moderate commitment to the claims they qualify; logically, each marks and tracks the modal status of the sentences they modify. Ordinarily, ‘defeasibly’ and ‘plausibly’ are applied in ways roughly equivalent to, or corrective of, the prescribed uses of ‘presumably’ in the accounts considered. And, they may be operationalized to have the same rational and discursive effects as presumably – redistributing probative burdens across standpoints by shifting a local burden of proof with respect to some plausible or defeasibly acceptable claim.

Accounts like those critiqued in the chapter take a reductive approach to analyzing presumption – they effectively reduce the modality presumably to other discursive modalities. By itself, this is not a criticism. After all, to the extent that accounts of these other modalities are well worked out, reduction to them would neatly solve the analytical problem of specifying the nature of presumption. The point becomes critical when it is noticed that these accounts do not provide an exclusively epistemic basis for presumption, but also invoke practical considerations tied to non-alethic discursive ends. Yet, such accounts proceed to treat presumption as an epistemic modality.

This is the move that I claim is mistaken, misleading, and avoidable. It is mistaken because it operationalizes a modal status of a claim that is partly founded on practical considerations as an epistemic modality. Yet, doxastic, deliberative, and other discursive attitudes towards a claim may differ, since they may rely on considerations of different sorts. While deliberative attitudes may be based on practical, non-alethic considerations, doxastic attitudes, if held rationally, should be based solely on alethically-oriented, epistemic (e.g., evidential, reliabilist) considerations. Mistakenly basing epistemic modalities on practical considerations misleadingly labels claims as having one epistemic status when their actual or proper status is quite different. Such mislabeling defeats the logical purpose of modal qualifiers which serve, in part, to manage epistemic and deliberative risk by marking and tracking the statuses that claims have been established to have in reasoning and discourse. Accuracy in labeling contributes to an inferential risk-rating and risk-management system that prevents errors in reasoning and argumentation. Such errors can occur when, for example, we mistakenly rely on a claim in our theoretical reasoning as though it had some epistemic status when in actuality it has only been established as having a comparable status in practical or deliberative contexts. Mislabeling of this kind is avoidable because other modal qualifiers are available to do the work of
‘presumably’ in theoretical reasoning and discourse. The modal qualifier ‘presumably’ may then be reserved for use in practical reasoning and deliberative discourse in a way that accurately reflects the practical foundations of presumption as a modality and discursive status. Adopting such a stipulative policy of use for ‘presumably,’ based on the analysis of presumption proposed herein, would help avoid ambiguity-based confusion and epistemic risk in reasoning and argumentation.

References