

## Truth as the Standard of Correctness for Belief

### I. Shah on Transparency

Some terminology:

*first-personal doxastic deliberation* = when I engage in reasoning about *whether to believe that p* [for some *p*]

According to Shah, the following phenomenon exists and is in need of explanation:

*transparency (in Shah's sense)*: In the context of first-personal doxastic deliberation, the question *whether to believe that p* immediately gives way to the question *whether <p> is true*.

The task of "How Truth Governs Belief" is to find an explanation of transparency, and the task of "Doxastic Deliberation" is to defend Shah's proposal against various objections and residual worries.

Four interpretative issues:

1. Shah takes the label "transparency" from Dick Moran, but transparency in Shah's sense needs to be distinguished from transparency in Moran's sense.

*transparency (in Moran's sense)*: The question *whether I believe that p* gives way to the question *whether <p> is true*.

Shah & Velleman distinguish two different readings of the question *whether I believe that p* and discuss how they relate to transparency in Shah's sense. Our focus today will be on transparency in Shah's sense. (I hereafter drop the qualification.)

2. According to Shah, transparency is a necessary truth:

"...so long as one is considering the deliberative question of what to believe, these two questions must be viewed as answered by, and answerable to, the same set of considerations. This seamless shift in focus from belief to truth is not a quirky feature of human psychology, but something that is demanded by the nature of first-personal doxastic deliberation" (447).

3. Sometimes Shah formulates transparency in descriptive terms, and sometimes he formulates it in normative terms.

In descriptive terms, the following are claimed:

- The deliberative question *whether to believe that p* "immediately" (Shah 2003: 447) or "inevitably" (Shah & Velleman 2005: 499) gives way to or the factual question *whether <p> is true*.
- These two questions are always taken to be "answered" (Shah 2003: 447, 456, 476) or "settled" (Shah 2003: 447, 463) by the same set of considerations.

In normative terms, the following is claimed:

- The two questions "must" (Shah 2003: 447, 453) be seen as being answered or settled by the same set of considerations.

Perhaps Shah is best read as endorsing *both* the descriptive *and* the normative interpretations of transparency. But to do so involves denying the following plausible claim:

*"ought" implies "can not"*: S is obligated to  $\phi$  (or ought to  $\phi$ , or must  $\phi$ ) only if S can not- $\phi$ .

(On this issue, see the Lavin vs. Korsgaard debate.)

4. Shah makes the follow assumption about the nature of evidence:

evidence = considerations that are relevant to determining the truth of  $\langle p \rangle$   
 = considerations that are relevant to answering the question *whether  $\langle p \rangle$  is true*

Given this, we can derive the following corollary from transparency:

*corollary of transparency:* In the context of first-personal doxastic deliberation, the question *whether to believe that  $p$*  always is [or maybe: always must be] taken to be settled by evidential considerations alone.

## II. Shah on the Teleologist's Dilemma

Recall Velleman's way of glossing the slogan "beliefs aim at the truth" in Velleman 2000:

*Velleman's old proposal:* Belief is truth-regulated acceptance.

To accept that  $p$  is to regard or treat  $\langle p \rangle$  as true.

S's acceptance of  $\langle p \rangle$  is *truth-regulated* iff S accepts that  $p$  and whether S accepts that  $p$  is regulated either by *an intention to accept only the truth* or by *a truth-tracking cognitive mechanism*.

An intention/mechanism *regulates* a cognitive attitude iff it causally determines (or helps to causally determine) the way in which that attitude is formed, revised, or extinguished.

A cognitive mechanism is *truth-tracking* iff it was designed (by natural selection and/or by education/training) to ensure that *one accepts a given proposition only if it is true*.

This proposal might appear to be especially well placed to account for transparency, but Shah argues that this appearance is an illusion.

In cases in which *an intention to accept only the truth* is not operative, let us distinguish between two ways in which S's acceptance of  $\langle p \rangle$  can be regulated for truth:

*the weak reading:* Whether S accepts that  $p$  is *partially* regulated by truth-tracking mechanisms, but also *partially* regulated by mechanisms that are responsive to non-evidential factors.

*the strong reading:* Whether S accepts that  $p$  is *entirely* regulated by truth-tracking mechanisms.

Shah then argues that the Velleman's old proposal faces the following dilemma when it attempts to explain why transparency holds:

*the teleologist's dilemma:*

- *first horn:* Take belief to be acceptance that is *strongly* regulated for truth.

*problem:* Then the teleologist is forced to deny that there can be beliefs which are sensitive to non-evidential considerations, such as *beliefs produced by wishful thinking* or *beliefs influenced by the benefits of holding the belief in question* [Shah mistakenly assimilates these two cases].

- *second horn:* Take belief to be acceptance that is *weakly* regulated for truth.

*problem:* Then the teleologist can't explain why, during doxastic deliberation, we take evidential considerations, and evidential considerations alone, to be relevant to answering the question *whether to believe that  $p$* .

If it is part of the nature of beliefs that they can be influenced by both evidential and non-evidential considerations, why isn't (say) the question *whether believing  $\langle p \rangle$  would be beneficial* as relevant as the question *whether  $\langle p \rangle$  is true* when determining *whether to believe that  $p$* ?

What's slightly confusing about this "dilemma" is that it turns out that even the strong reading of the teleologist's proposal isn't enough to explain transparency (Shah 2003: 469).

Several objections that Shah needs to address before his argument is airtight:

- *objection #1*: The teleologist can embrace the first horn as long as he insists that, in cases in which beliefs are influenced by non-evidential factors, the mechanisms producing those beliefs were not *designed* to be influenced by such factors.

*possible reply on Shah's behalf*: It's not very plausible that every case of our beliefs being influenced by non-evidential factors involves our cognitive mechanisms malfunctioning in some way.

- *objection #2*: Maybe the teleologist can explain transparency by appealing to the subject's *intention to accept only truths* during first-personal doxastic deliberation.

*possible reply on Shah's behalf*: It's not very plausible that, in every case of deliberation about *whether to believe that p*, one's verdict is regulated by an intention to *accept <p> only if <p> is true*.

- *objection #3*: The teleologist could avoid the dilemma by embracing a mixed interpretation of truth-regulation, according to which belief is entirely regulated by truth-tracking mechanisms in the special context of first-personal doxastic deliberation, but only partially regulated by truth-tracking mechanisms in all other contexts.

*possible reply on Shah's behalf*: A disjunctive account of this sort is ill-motivated. Also, people can be influenced by non-evidential considerations even in deliberative contexts (it's just that they can't *take themselves* to be influenced by such considerations).

And anyway, even belief's *being strongly regulated for truth* isn't enough to explain transparency, so all-the-more-so belief's *being strongly regulated for truth in the context of doxastic deliberation* isn't enough to explain transparency.

### III. Truth as the Standard of Correctness for Belief

Shah thinks that best way to explain transparency is to appeal to the following fact:

*Shah's proposal*: It is part of the concept BELIEF that:

a belief that *p* is correct only if *<p>* is true.

In other words, it is a conceptual truth that the standard of correctness for belief is truth.

Some comments:

- Sometimes Shah glosses "a belief that *p* is correct" as "one ought to believe that *p*."
- In most of Shah's work, he uses an "only if" here, but in Shah & Velleman 2005, they change this to an "if and only if."
- Why the "only if" reading might seem more plausible: is it really true that one should believe every truth, even trivial ones and ones that are too complex for any human to conceptualize?
- Shah's proposal is compatible with many different meta-normative interpretations of what correctness comes to. In "How Truth Governs Belief" and "Doxastic Deliberation," Shah favored an expressivist interpretation, but he now endorses a realist interpretation.
- Shah's normative account of belief is compatible with Velleman's descriptive account of belief, as long as each is taken to specify a necessary but not sufficient condition on belief. Indeed, Shah & Velleman endorse a hybrid account of this sort.

*Shah & Velleman's hybrid proposal:* It is part of the concept BELIEF that the following hold:

- a belief that  $p$  is correct only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true;
- a state of accepting that  $p$  counts as a belief that  $p$  only if it is weakly truth-regulated (either by an intention or by a cognitive mechanism).

What is unclear to me is whether Shah & Velleman think it is metaphysically possible for there to exist an acceptance state which is weakly regulated for truth but doesn't count as a belief (and thus isn't correct only if true).

Shah thinks his idea *that it is a conceptual truth that the standard of correctness for belief is truth* has a number of important consequences, including the following:

- It explains transparency.
- It entails that there are no practical reasons for belief. (See his "A New Argument for Evidentialism.")
- It entails the falsity of every meta-normative view other than realism (in particular, it entails falsity of an error theory, of expressivism, and of constructivism). (See his "Mental Agency and Metaethics," co-written with Matt Evans.)

Shah on how his proposal explains transparency:

During doxastic deliberation, one's thinking is guided by the question *whether to believe that  $p$* .

So, during doxastic deliberation, one necessarily employs the concept BELIEF.

So, during doxastic deliberation, one necessarily takes one's potential belief that  $p$  to be correct only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true.

So, during doxastic deliberation, one necessarily takes the question *whether to believe that  $p$*  to collapse into the question *whether  $\langle p \rangle$  is true*.

Each step of this explanation is potentially problematic, but especially the second and third steps:

- *objection #1:* The third inference doesn't follow if all we have is a necessary condition on correctness for belief. If the full biconditional is "S's belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $\langle p \rangle$  is true and S's belief that  $p$  has property X," then during doxastic deliberation one needs to answer both the question *whether  $\langle p \rangle$  is true* and the question *whether one's belief that  $p$  would have property X*.

*reply:* Switch to "if and only if" version of proposal.

- *objection #2:* The second inference only follows if we assume that the question *whether to believe that  $p$*  is transparent to the question *whether believing that  $p$  would be correct*. But one need not take the latter question to settle the former one. An analogy: if I'm wondering *whether to move my bishop to square g4*, this question isn't settled by my answer to the question *whether it would be correct for me to move my bishop to square g4*. (Maybe I have good reasons to break the rules this one time, or maybe there are multiple correct moves open to me.)

*possible reply #1:* Switch "a belief that  $p$  is correct" to "one ought to believe that  $p$ " in the statement of the proposal (see Shah 2003: 481n43).

*possible reply #2:* Supplement Shah's explanation with the following assumptions:

- One and only one out of the three options {believing  $\langle p \rangle$ , disbelieving  $\langle p \rangle$ , suspending judgment on  $\langle p \rangle$ } is correct at any one time.
- Because forming one of these three attitudes with regards to  $\langle p \rangle$  is unavoidable (recall Feldman: "It is our plight to be believers"), correctness determines oughtness in this context.