

Nishi Shah, "How Truth Governs Belief"

Philosophical Review 112, no. 4 (2003): 447–482

Readability: Hard

Note: The core argument of the paper should be manageable for students who have read a bit of epistemology/metaethics/mind, but I think substantial familiarity with these areas is necessary to get the paper as a whole.

Thesis: The best explanation of the fact that whether a claim is true strikes us as the only relevant consideration in deciding whether we should believe that claim entails that "belief" is a *normative* concept.

Summary:

Shah's central question is: "Why, when asking oneself *whether to believe that p*, must one immediately recognize that this question is settled by, and only by, answering the question *whether p is true?*" (447). In other words, why is *first-personal doxastic deliberation* (one's deliberation about what to believe) essentially *transparent* (normatively governed exclusively by the truth of the belief one is deliberating about, apparently without mediating principles)?

Shah builds the case for his explanation of the transparency of doxastic deliberation by examining the shortcomings of two alternative views: Alan Gibbard's noncognitivist account of normative judgments (449-457) and J. David Velleman's teleological account of truth's normative governance of belief (457-465). The problem with Gibbard's account is that it lacks the resources to show that there's anything incoherent about someone's understanding the concept of "belief" as wholly truth-insensitive (454). The argument here is interesting, but in general it just points out that expressivists can't hold that there's any incoherence in, for example, thinking belief is governed exclusively by pragmatist considerations (they can, at most, yell and bang the table about such views).

Velleman's view is much more promising: according to him, for one's mental state to count as belief, it must "aim at truth;" that is, belief is essentially teleological (459). If this were true, it would seem to explain the transparency of doxastic deliberation: since belief necessarily aims at truth, deliberating about a belief would require one to figure out what's true. Shah likes the teleological account, but thinks it falls victim to the following dilemma: What it is to "aim at truth" either permits the causal influence of nonevidential processes, or it doesn't. If it permits such influence, then the teleologist cannot explain transparency in doxastic deliberation, contrary to phenomenological evidence. If it does not permit such influence, the teleologist can explain transparency, but then offers an unrealistic view on which genuine beliefs are never influenced by wishful thinking and the like (462-465).

How do we fix the teleological account of truth's normative governance of belief and explain transparency in doxastic deliberation? In brief, Shah notes that deliberating about what to believe requires one to deploy the concept of belief, and if the concept of belief (as distinct from imagination or other propositional attitudes) necessarily includes truth as a normative standard, then doxastic deliberation is necessarily normatively governed by truth (467). This conceptual point about belief becomes "prescriptive" (normative) for the agent engaging in doxastic deliberation, since engaging in such deliberation at all requires deployment of the concept of belief (469). At least for first-personal doxastic deliberation, then, belief should be understood normatively in order to explain the phenomenon of transparency in such contexts.

SECTION TWO

Article/Essay Title: “How Truth Governs Belief”

Author: Nishi Shah

Possible Applications:

- Epistemology
- Philosophy of Mind
- Metaethics
- Philosophy of Action (esp. deliberation)

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- William James, “The Will to Believe”
- J. David Velleman, “On the Aim of Belief,” in *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Chapter 11
- Mark Schroeder, Chapter 2 of *Noncognitivism in Ethics*
- Tamar Gendler, “Alief and Belief”

Possible Class Activities:

- Divide up the sections of the paper among several groups of students and have them carefully outline that section and share it with the rest of the class.
- Assign the Shah at the end of a semester, since it addresses the relationships among a wide variety of views (cognitivism, non-cognitivism, teleological account of belief, internalism, etc.).
- Excerpting the criticism of Velleman to interact with chapter 11 from *The Possibility of Practical Reason*.
- Assign students different positions (Gibbard’s, Velleman’s, Shah’s) and do a debate, maybe centered around a specific case that you come up with.
- Ask students to highlight precisely where Shah is building his own positive case.