

**WHY BELIEVE THE TRUTH?  
SHAH AND VELLEMAN ON THE AIM OF BELIEF**

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The subject matter of this paper is the view that it is correct, in an absolute sense, to believe a proposition just in case the proposition is true. I take issue with arguments in support of this view put forward by Nishi Shah and David Velleman.

**Keywords:** belief; truth; normativity; aim of belief

### **1. Assessing beliefs**

Assessments are often relative to the criteria on which they are based. Restaurants, for example, can be assessed for their food, their wine list, their service, their décor, their prices, or the environmental credentials of their suppliers. Different people attach more or less importance to each of these criteria. Hence people who agree on the extent to which a restaurant satisfies each of them can disagree in their assessment of the restaurant, simply because they are applying different criteria.

Beliefs, like restaurants, can be assessed with respect to several criteria. They can be assessed, of course, with respect to whether they are true or false (*the truth criterion*), and the extent to which they are supported by the available evidence, but many other criteria are in principle possible, as, e.g., the extent to which they promote the subject's utility (*the utility criterion*), or the extent to which they agree with the party's doctrine. People who applied different criteria in their assessment of beliefs would sometimes reach different assessments even if they agreed on the extent to which the criteria are satisfied. Thus, in the standard example of the cuckolded husband, his belief that his wife is faithful will be deemed wrong

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by the truth criterion, but may well be right according to the utility criterion, since this belief, although false, could make a positive difference to his life.

On the view that I am going to label *doxastic relativism*, beliefs count as right or wrong relative to the criterion employed in each assessment, and no particular criterion enjoys a privileged status that justifies speaking of beliefs as right or wrong *simpliciter*, according to whether they satisfy this criterion.<sup>1</sup> On the view that I am going to label *doxastic absolutism*, by contrast, there is a criterion such that whether a belief satisfies it will determine whether the belief is right or wrong in an absolute sense. Beliefs that satisfy this criterion are right, and beliefs that don't satisfy it are wrong, independently of how they fare with respect to other criteria.<sup>2</sup>

On this characterisation, whether a view qualifies as doxastic absolutism is independent of the specific criterion to which it ascribes this privileged status. However, here I want to concentrate on the version of doxastic absolutism that privileges the truth criterion—the view that false beliefs are non-relatively wrong and true beliefs are non-relatively right. Unless I indicate otherwise, I shall use the label *doxastic absolutism* for this specific version of the position.<sup>3</sup> The view is vividly expressed in the following passage by David Velleman, a prominent absolutist:

I take it to be a conceptual truth that beliefs are correct when true and incorrect when false: false beliefs are necessarily faulty or mistaken. What's more, I don't think that the fault in false beliefs can consist in their tendency to misdirect our behavior, and even some false beliefs can direct us well enough. False beliefs are faulty in themselves, antecedently to and independently of any untoward practical consequences. (Velleman 2000: 277-278)

A defence of doxastic absolutism would have to vindicate the ascription of this privileged status to the truth criterion. It would have to identify an intrinsic connection between belief and truth that justifies treating beliefs as correct just in case they are true. The most formidable extant attempts to discharge this task are to be found in the work of David Velleman and Nishi Shah.<sup>4</sup> They consist of two separate arguments, each presented in the first instance by one of these authors individually, but later developed jointly in co-authored

work.<sup>5</sup> My main goal in this paper is to contend that the arguments for doxastic absolutism advanced by Velleman and Shah fail to provide adequate support for the view. My conclusion will be that Velleman and Shah's arguments don't support absolutism, not that absolutism is false.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Normativism

I want to consider first Shah's argument for absolutism. Shah's defence of the privileged status accorded to the truth criterion is based on the contention that accepting the truth criterion is a condition for possessing the concept of belief. He writes: "it is one of the conditions for possessing the concept of belief that one accept the prescription to believe that p only if p is true" (Shah 2003: 470). It follows that "a competent user of the concept of belief must accept the prescription to believe that p only if p is true for any activity that he conceives of as belief-formation" (Shah 2003: 470).<sup>7</sup> Accepting this prescription will involve, at the very least, applying the truth criterion in your assessment of beliefs. I am going to use the label *normativism* for the claim that you are not conceiving of an attitude as belief unless you assess it according to the truth criterion.

Shah is very clear that his claim concerns the conditions for possessing and displaying the concept of belief, not the conditions for having beliefs. Someone who doesn't accept the truth criterion, on Shah's view, will not have the concept of belief, but Shah is not committed to ruling out the possibility that such a subject has beliefs nonetheless (Shah 2003: 468).

Normativism, if correct, would provide considerable support for absolutism. If conceiving of an attitude as belief requires applying the truth criterion to it, then everyone who assesses an attitude that she conceives of as a belief will be assessing it with respect to the truth criterion. The truth criterion will then enjoy a privileged status as the only criterion with

respect to which beliefs can be assessed. You wouldn't be assessing an attitude as a correct or incorrect *belief* unless your assessment was based on the truth criterion.<sup>8</sup>

Shah defends normativism with an inference-to-the-best-explanation argument. He argues that there is a phenomenon that would be adequately explained by normativism but would go unexplained, or receive only inferior explanations, if normativism were rejected. The explanandum that plays this role in his argument is a phenomenon to which he refers as the *transparency of doxastic deliberation*. Doxastic deliberation is “deliberation about what to believe”, (Shah 2003: 447) and the transparency of doxastic deliberation is the following feature of this activity:

The deliberative question *whether to believe that p* inevitably gives way to the factual question *whether p*, because the answer to the latter question will determine the answer to the former. That is, the only way to answer the question *whether to believe that p* is to answer the question *whether p*. (Shah and Velleman 2005: 499)

According to Shah, accepting normativism enables us to provide a satisfactory explanation of transparency, but if normativism is rejected transparency will go unexplained. Here is Shah's account of how normativism explains transparency:

[...] a competent user of the concept of belief must accept the prescription to believe that *p* only if *p* is true for any activity that he conceives of as belief-formation. Because one accepts this prescription insofar as one is deliberating about *whether to believe that p*, determining *whether p is true* will be immediately imperative, to the exclusion of any other question, for anyone who entertains the deliberative question *whether to believe that p*. (Shah 2003: 470)

Shah's thought is that, since doxastic deliberation involves conceiving of the cognitive activity that it generates as belief formation, it requires accepting the truth criterion for this activity, and this makes the question whether to believe that *p* give way to the question whether *p*.

### **3. The relativist and the normativist**

In order to assess Shah's argument, it will be useful to understand the attitude that the relativist can be expected to display towards normativism, as well as towards the phenomena that Shah describes in terms of transparency. The relativist will contend, against Shah, that

there is no criterion that a subject has to accept concerning a propositional-attitude concept  $\phi$  in order for her concept of  $\phi$  to qualify as the concept of belief. The relativist will concede that the truth criterion enjoys more acceptance and is easier to follow in your own doxastic practice than other criteria, but she holds that accepting a criterion other than the truth criterion for a propositional attitude wouldn't prevent your concept of this attitude from counting as the concept of belief. For the normativist, if someone accepts, e.g., the utility criterion, her concept of this attitude is not the concept of belief. For the relativist, by contrast, accepting one of these criteria is no obstacle to your concept of the relevant attitude counting as the concept of belief. My goal is to consider whether Shah's argument offers the relativist a cogent reason to abandon her view in favour of normativism.

Success for Shah would require discharging two tasks. First, he needs to show to the relativist's satisfaction that transparency is a genuine phenomenon calling for an explanation. Second, he needs to show that the explanation of transparency afforded by normativism is preferable to any alternative explanation available to the relativist.

The first of these tasks is more substantial than Shah seems to think. For, until an argument to the contrary is provided, it is open to the relativist to refuse to acknowledge the phenomenon of transparency. The relativist would certainly acknowledge that we engage in *inquiry*—the enterprise of trying to answer factual questions, which we conduct by consulting the relevant sources of information and assessing the evidence that we gather. But if transparency is a genuine phenomenon, inquiry will have to be the activity in which we inevitably end up engaging when we undertake a different enterprise. What the relativist would deny is the existence of an enterprise that plays this role nontrivially.

According to Shah, this role is played by the enterprise of answering the question whether to believe that  $p$ . However, on the picture of how we answer this question that the relativist can be expected to endorse, Shah's claim does not hold. For the relativist, we can engage in

inquiry concerning whether believing a certain proposition would satisfy certain conditions. In particular, a subject can engage in inquiry concerning whether believing that  $p$  satisfies the conditions that figure in the doxastic criteria that she accepts. Thus, e.g., those who accept the utility criterion (call them *doxastic utilitarians*) can engage in inquiry into whether believing that  $p$  would maximize their overall utility. This, according to the relativist, is how we proceed when we answer the question whether to believe that  $p$ —we engage in inquiry into whether believing that  $p$  would satisfy the conditions that figure in the doxastic criteria that we accept. But this enterprise is certainly not transparent. The question whether believing that  $p$  is sanctioned by the doxastic criterion that I accept does not give way to the question whether  $p$  unless I happen to accept the truth criterion. Thus, e.g., for a utilitarian, the question whether to believe that  $p$  has no tendency to give way to the question whether  $p$ —whether believing a proposition would maximize a subject's overall utility is in principle independent of whether the proposition is true.<sup>9</sup>

Needless to say, for the normativist, if someone tries to answer the question whether to  $\phi$  that  $p$  by considering whether  $\phi$ ing that  $p$  would maximize her overall utility, the question she is trying to answer is not the question whether to believe that  $p$ . Hence, if normativism is correct, we can't get counterexamples to transparency by considering subjects who accept alternative doxastic criteria. Such subjects can't engage in doxastic deliberation, as they lack the concept with which the deliberative question is framed. But this is not something that Shah can expect his opponents to accept at the outset. He has to characterise transparency in such a way that it is recognised as a real phenomenon by those who haven't yet been converted to normativism.

#### 4. The aim of doxastic deliberation

In order to consider how Shah can meet this challenge, the first place we need to look is the characterisation of doxastic deliberation introduced in his joint paper with David Velleman. To deliberate about whether to believe that  $p$ , Shah and Velleman tell us, is to engage “in reasoning that is aimed at issuing or not issuing in one’s believing that  $p$  in accordance with the norm for believing that  $p$ ” (Shah and Velleman 2005: 502).<sup>10</sup> Transparency is then the claim that reasoning that satisfies these conditions inevitably gives way to reasoning about whether  $p$  is true.

As we have seen, if the doxastic utilitarian’s reasoning about the utility of believing that  $p$  is allowed to count as doxastic deliberation, transparency will not hold, as the question whether believing that  $p$  maximizes someone’s utility doesn’t give way to the question whether  $p$ . Hence if Shah and Velleman’s definition of doxastic deliberation is to sustain a vindication of transparency, it will have to entail that the ratiocinations of the doxastic utilitarian don’t count as doxastic deliberation. There are two strategies for trying to show that the definition excludes the utilitarian’s reasoning. The first is to concede that her reasoning may be aimed at issuing or not issuing in her believing that  $p$ , but argue that it is not aimed at achieving this goal in accordance with the norm for believing that  $p$ . The second is to argue that the utilitarian’s reasoning is not aimed at issuing or not issuing in her believing that  $p$ . Let me consider these options in turn.

In order to assess the first option, let’s assume that the utilitarian’s reasoning about the utility of believing that  $p$  aims at issuing or not issuing in her believing that  $p$ . To pursue the line under discussion, Shah and Velleman would need to argue that if the utilitarian’s reasoning achieved the outcome it aims at, it wouldn’t do so in accordance with the norm for believing that  $p$ . Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that, as a result of her reasoning about the utility of believing that  $p$ , the utilitarian actually comes to believe that  $p$ . Needless to say,

according to the normativist, this belief won't have been produced in accordance with the norm for believing that p. For the norm for believing that p is the norm that corresponds to the truth criterion (the *truth norm*), and the process that has led to the production of the belief is not connected in any way to its truth. However, the normativist cannot expect her opponents to accept this point at this stage of the argument. The claim that the truth norm is the norm for believing that p is the intended conclusion of Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument. At this point the normativist is still trying to convince her opponent that there is a phenomenon—transparency—that calls for an explanation. In trying to discharge this task the normativist can hardly expect the relativist to concede that the truth norm is the norm for believing that p. An argument built on this expectation would be blatantly question begging.

The problem for the normativist who wants to use Shah and Velleman's definition in this way is that the only notion of 'the norm for believing that p' that the relativist will acknowledge is the norm corresponding to the criterion for belief assessment that a certain subject accepts. Hence, for the relativist, if the utilitarian came to believe that p as a result of her reflection on the utility of believing that p, she would come to believe that p in accordance with the norm for believing that p. If appreciating the phenomenon of transparency required abandoning this view, Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument would have no force against the relativist. I conclude that Shah and Velleman's definition of doxastic deliberation cannot be taken to exclude the utilitarian's reasoning on the grounds that if it produced belief in p, it wouldn't do so in accordance with the norm for believing that p.

Let me move on now to the second route—the claim that the utilitarian's reasoning doesn't satisfy Shah and Velleman's definition because it is not aimed at issuing or not issuing in her believing that p. In another paper, Shah seems to put forward an argument for this conclusion:

In the sense I have in mind, deliberating whether to believe that p entails intending to arrive at belief as to whether p. If my answering a question is going to count as deliberating whether to believe that p, then I must intend to arrive at belief as to whether p just by answering that question. I can arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether p; however, I cannot



arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether it is in my interest to hold it. (Shah 2006: 482)

On a natural reading of this passage, it puts forward an argument for the conclusion that answering the question whether *p* counts as doxastic deliberation, but answering the question whether it is in my interest to believe that *p* doesn't. This conclusion is derived from a lemma to the effect that I can intend to arrive at belief as to whether *p* just by answering the question whether *p*, but I can't intend to arrive at belief as to whether *p* just by answering the question whether it is in my interest to believe that *p*. This, in turn, is derived from the premise that I can arrive at the belief that *p* just by answering the question whether *p*, but not just by answering the question whether it is in my interest to believe that *p*.

I think it would be wrong to read 'answering the question whether *X*' in this passage as 'coming to a conclusion as to whether *X*', since on this reading the premise concerning how I can and cannot arrive at the belief that *p* would come out as a triviality. But it's clear that Shah regards it as a substantive psychological fact concerning how belief can and cannot be produced. 'Answering the question whether *X*' should be read as the activity of *trying* to come to a conclusion on the truth value of *X*, i.e. as engaging in inquiry into *X*.

We can now extract from Shah's passage an argument for the conclusion that the way in which the utilitarian answers the question whether to believe that *p* doesn't count as doxastic deliberation.

- (1) The utilitarian cannot arrive at the belief that *p* as a result of inquiry into the utility of believing that *p*. (Premise)
- (2) If an activity cannot bring about an outcome, it cannot aim at issuing in this outcome. (Premise)
- (3) The utilitarian's inquiry into the utility of believing that *p* cannot aim at issuing in her believing that *p*. (From (1) and (2))

- (4) An activity won't count as doxastic deliberation on p if it doesn't aim at issuing or not issuing in belief in p. (From the definition of doxastic deliberation)

Therefore:

- (5) The utilitarian's inquiry into the utility of believing that p cannot count as doxastic deliberation on p. (From (3) and (4))

I want to emphasize that, on this construal of the argument, (1) is a psychological premise. It points at the fact that, if the utilitarian came to the conclusion that the evidence at her disposal strongly favours the conclusion that believing that p would maximize her overall utility, belief in p wouldn't automatically ensue. Given that she accepts the utility norm, she would now want to believe that p, but she would still face the task of somehow bringing about this belief. By contrast, if she came to the conclusion that the evidence strongly favours p, this would normally result in her believing that p. Nothing else would need to be done in order for her to come to believe that p.

It seems to me that the relativist cannot reasonably refuse to accept this premise. I also propose to assume that she will accept premise (2), about which I'll have nothing to say in this paper.<sup>11</sup> And as the argument shows, accepting these premises will force the relativist to accept that Shah and Velleman's definition of doxastic deliberation cannot be satisfied by the utilitarian's inquiry into the utility of believing that p.

Now, a natural generalisation of this reasoning would extend this conclusion about the utility norm to every norm for believing that p other than the truth norm:

- (1G) For every subject S and every proposition q (such that S doesn't believe that q is evidentially relevant for p), S cannot arrive at the belief that p as a result of inquiry into q. (Premise)

(2) If an activity cannot bring about an outcome, it cannot aim at issuing in this outcome.

(Premise)

(3G) For every subject S and every proposition q (such that S doesn't believe that q is evidentially relevant for p), S's inquiry into q cannot aim at issuing in her believing that p. (From (1G) and (2))

(4) An activity won't count as doxastic deliberation on p if it doesn't aim at issuing or not issuing in belief in p. (From the definition of doxastic deliberation)

Therefore:

(5G) For every subject S and every proposition q (such that S doesn't believe that q is evidentially relevant for p), S's inquiry into q cannot count as doxastic deliberation on p. (From (3G) and (4))

(5G) entails that the only activity that counts as doxastic deliberation on p is inquiry into p.

But inquiry into p is the way we try to answer the question whether p. Hence (5G) entails transparency. Therefore, if the relativist can be made to accept (5G), Shah will have shown to the relativist's satisfaction that transparency is a genuine phenomenon. Then his inference-to-the-best-explanation argument will finally get started.

We are assuming that the relativist will not take issue with premise (2) Hence, if she accepts (1G), she will have to accept (5G) and a fortiori transparency. I want to assume provisionally that the relativist accepts (1G), in order to consider how Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument develops from here.

## **5. Explanations of transparency**

Having convinced the relativist that transparency is a genuine phenomenon, Shah would need to argue that normativism offers a better explanation of transparency than any alternative

compatible with relativism. Transparency results from the fact that doxastic deliberation about  $p$  always takes the form of inquiry into  $p$ —i.e. from the fact, expressed by (5G), that inquiry into other propositions doesn't count as doxastic deliberation on  $p$ . Hence, we can take (5G) to be the explanandum of Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument. What he needs to argue is that normativism offers a better explanation of (5G) than anything available to the relativist.

Let's consider first how the normativist would explain (5G). According to normativism, the reason why inquiry into propositions other than  $p$  doesn't count as doxastic deliberation on  $p$  is that answering the question whether to  $\phi$  that  $p$  in this way would amount to rejecting the truth criterion for  $\phi$ , and according to normativism it follows from this that the subject would not be conceiving of the activity as belief formation. Hence the activity wouldn't count as doxastic deliberation. Clearly this explanation presupposes normativism. If no non-normativist explanation of (5G) were available, the prospects for Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument would look bright.

The problem for Shah is that there seems to be a perfectly adequate non-normativist explanation of (5G). It is contained in the argument that we have deployed on Shah's behalf to convince the relativist that (5G) holds. According to this explanation, the reason why inquiry into propositions other than  $p$  doesn't count as doxastic deliberation on  $p$  is that such inquiry can't produce belief in  $p$  (1G), inquiry that can't produce belief in  $p$  can't aim at producing (or not producing) belief in  $p$  (2), and inquiry that doesn't aim at producing (or not producing) belief in  $p$  doesn't satisfy the definition of doxastic deliberation (4). If this is an adequate explanation of transparency that doesn't presuppose normativism, postulating normativism won't be required for explaining transparency, and Shah's inference-to-the-best-explanation argument will fail. Shah could try to avoid this outcome in two ways. On the one hand, he could argue that, although this explanation is adequate, it doesn't remove the need to

assume normativism. On the other hand, he could argue that the explanation exhibits some serious shortcoming.

To pursue the first line, Shah would focus on the explanation of (1G). The relativist would want to treat this as a psychological fact that should receive an empirical explanation, but Shah could argue that an empirical explanation wouldn't be satisfactory—that only normativism can adequately explain (1G). However, whatever we think of the prospects for explaining (1G) empirically, this strategy doesn't hold much promise for Shah, since he cannot treat normativism as an explanation of (1G). (1G) concerns how the belief that  $p$  can be brought about—it is the claim that it cannot be produced by inquiry into evidentially unrelated propositions. Normativism tells us that those who form a propositional attitude  $\phi$  towards  $p$  through inquiry into propositions that they regard as evidentially irrelevant to  $p$  are not conceiving of  $\phi$  as belief. But Shah cannot present this as an explanation of why belief cannot be produced in this way, since, as we saw above, he doesn't want to commit himself to the claim that a propositional attitude is not a belief unless the subject conceives of it as a belief. The fact (1G) that belief can't be formed in this way is not explained by the hypothesis (normativism) that someone who proceeded in this way wouldn't be conceiving of her cognitive activity as belief formation, so long as we allow, with Shah, that an activity can count as belief formation even if the subject doesn't conceive of it in these terms.

The other route open to Shah is to argue that the relativist explanation of transparency is unsatisfactory. In "A New Argument for Evidentialism", Shah considers a non-normativist explanation of transparency akin to the explanation that I have presented here. Shah's interlocutor is the *pragmatist*—someone who thinks that there are non-evidential reasons for belief (Shah 2006: 482), but this feature of his discussion needn't concern us. Here's Shah's characterisation of the rival explanation:

The pragmatist might claim [...] that as a matter of psychological fact human beliefs are determined solely by evidence. Given this fact about human psychology, if I fail to focus solely on evidence for and against p, my deliberation will not deliver belief about p. (Shah 2006: 491)

In the next two sections I want to consider the two problems that Shah raises for this explanation.

## 6. The premises of the relativist explanation

One of the problems that Shah raises for the pragmatist explanation of transparency is based on the contention that the explanation relies on a false premise:

In order to explain why the question whether p is true is solely relevant to answering the question whether to believe that p, the pragmatist needs to claim that human beliefs are as a matter of fact solely caused by evidence. This flies in the face of the platitude that evidentially insensitive processes such as wishful thinking sometimes influence beliefs. (Shah 2006: 492)

Now, this objection might not seem to apply to the relativist explanation of transparency. The relativist explanation does assume that inquiry into propositions other than p can't cause belief in p (1G), but it doesn't rule out the possibility that belief in p is produced by processes other than inquiry, as for example wishful thinking. Nevertheless, the point can be easily turned into an objection to the relativist explanation.

Wishful thinking can be characterised as a process by which belief in the proposition that it would be very nice if p were true causes belief in p. Consider Sophie, an inveterate wishful thinker who often ends up believing that p when she believes that it would be very nice if p were true. So when Sophie engages in inquiry into whether it would be nice if p were true and this inquiry has a favourable outcome, she often ends up believing that p. So Sophie is someone who can arrive at the belief that p as a result of inquiry into a proposition other than p that she regards as evidentially irrelevant to p—the proposition that it would be very nice if p were true. Hence, Sophie provides a counterexample to (1G). Furthermore, if we suppose that she is aware of her propensity to wishful thinking, there is no obvious reason why her inquiry into whether it would be nice if p were true shouldn't aim at issuing or not issuing in her believing that p. And if we suppose, in addition, that Sophie accepts the doxastic norm

that it is correct to believe that  $p$  whenever it would be nice if  $p$  were true, her inquiry into whether it would be nice if  $p$  were true would count for the relativist as doxastic deliberation.

Clearly, the relativist explanation of transparency presupposes (1G). Hence, if we accept that the principle has counterexamples, it would seem that the relativist explanation of transparency relies on a false premise. Does this objection undermine the relativist's position? I want to argue that it doesn't. Cases like Sophie's might move the relativist to abandon her commitment to (1G) in favour of a weaker principle:

(1W) For most subjects  $S$  and most propositions  $q$  (such that  $S$  doesn't believe that  $q$  is evidentially relevant for  $p$ ),  $S$  cannot arrive at the belief that  $p$  as a result of inquiry into  $q$ .

To be sure, (1W) does not sustain an adequate explanation of (5G), but this is not a problem for the relativist. For the (1G)-based argument provides, not only her explanation of (5G), but also the only reason she has been given for accepting (5G). If she abandons (1G) in favour of (1W), she will also abandon (5G) in favour of a weaker principle:

(5W) For most subjects  $S$  and most propositions  $q$  (such that  $S$  doesn't believe that  $q$  is evidentially relevant for  $p$ ),  $S$ 's inquiry into  $q$  cannot count as doxastic deliberation on  $p$ .

(5W) is the only explanandum that the relativist will recognise if she abandons (1G) in favour of (1W), but (5W) can receive a (1W)-based explanation that mirrors the (1G)-based explanation of (5G). It follows that the normativist cannot undermine the relativist explanation of transparency with the contention that there are counterexamples to (1G). If (1G) is false, the relativist hasn't been offered a cogent argument for the existence of the phenomenon (5G) that she would explain with the help of (1G). And the explanandum that she would still recognise (5W) can be adequately explained by the weakening of (1G), namely (1W), that takes account of the counterexamples.

## 7. The phenomenology of the pragmatist explanation

The other objection that Shah raises against the pragmatist explanation of transparency is based on the impression that the explanation is ‘phenomenologically off-key’:

It is not as though, in deliberating about whether to believe that *p*, the reason why one focuses on whether *p* is the case is that one has noticed that as a matter of psychological fact one has come to believe only what one has ascertained to be the case. This would involve an inferential step: ‘Should I believe that *p*? Well, I shall end up believing that *p* if and only if I ascertain that *p* is true, so I had better consider whether *p* is true.’ But there is no such inferential step involved in moving from the question whether to believe that *p* to the question whether *p* is true. When I ask myself whether to believe that it is raining, the question whether it is raining becomes immediately and solely relevant. I recognize immediately that the only way to answer the former question is to answer the latter. (Shah 2006: 491)

On the picture that Shah ascribes to the pragmatist, we engage in inquiry because, having formed the intention to form a belief as to whether *p*, we realise that inquiry into *p* is the only efficacious means to achieve the intended result.<sup>12</sup> The normativist has another explanation of how a subject’s intention to form a belief about *p* results in inquiry into *p*: since the intended outcome is conceived of as belief, “a disposition to be moved by considerations that he regards as relevant to the truth of *p* and a disposition blocking considerations that he regards as irrelevant to the truth of *p* are activated” (Shah 2003: 467).

I agree with Shah that the picture that he ascribes to the pragmatist is, at the very least, phenomenologically off-key. But rejecting it doesn’t force the relativist to embrace the normativist story. Shah portrays his opponent as accepting a crucial feature of his own view—that inquiry into *p* is often the result of an intention to form a belief as to whether *p*. Then he attributes to his opponent an indefensible account of how inquiry results from this doxastic intention. But the claim that inquiry is initiated by doxastic intentions is open to question. The relativist could argue that when we engage in inquiry into *p*, it’s not as a result of the intention to form a belief as to whether *p*, but simply as a result of the intention to find out whether *p* is true. Inquiry is initiated, on this picture, not by the deliberative question, whether to believe that *p*, but by the factual question, whether *p*.<sup>13</sup> We don’t ask the factual question because the deliberative question inevitably gives way to it. We ask the factual question, quite simply,



because that's the question we want an answer to. Of course, if we find an answer, we will have formed a belief as to whether *p*, but forming such a belief, to repeat, was not our original intention. Our original intention was to find out whether *p*.<sup>14</sup>

This move exposes a crucial weakness in Shah's case. What he interprets as the immediacy with which the factual question is given way to can also be interpreted as indicating that the factual question is the only question that's ever asked in inquiry. So long as his opponent can hold on to the latter picture, Shah will have failed to show that transparency is a genuine phenomenon. Given the importance of this point for Shah's argument, he has remarkably little to say in support of the claim that inquiry into *p* is ever initiated by the question whether to believe *p*. I can only find two lines of reasoning, both in Shah and Velleman's joint paper.

The first argument is an appeal to linguistic intuitions:

When someone makes an assertion that is not in itself convincing, the question that naturally comes to mind is whether to believe what he has said. When the president asserts that Iraq is harboring weapons of mass destruction, the natural question to ask is not "*Is* Iraq harboring weapons of mass destruction?" but rather "Should I believe that?"—whereupon this question transparently gives way to an inquiry into the truth of the president's claims. (Shah and Velleman 2005: 502)

I think that this line of reasoning could be easily dismissed by the relativist. She could argue that when I ask "Should I believe that?" I am simply asking whether the evidence supports *p*—i.e. I'm not asking the question that frames doxastic deliberation about whether to believe that *p*, but the question that frames inquiry into *p*. She could invoke in this context the familiar fact that although the sentence, e.g., "I believe that Iraq is harboring weapons of mass destruction", taken literally, seems to report a doxastic state, it is often used instead to assert a proposition about Iraq. Then the use of "Should I believe that?" to ask a factual question could be treated as another aspect of this phenomenon. Concerning Shah and Velleman's example, the relativist could accept that we have the intuition that in that kind of case we are not initially focused on the state of affairs reported by our informant—"Is Iraq harboring weapons of mass destruction?". But this is not, she could argue, because we are focused on

the deliberative question, but because we are focused on a different factual question: “Is this person telling the truth?”

The second of Shah and Velleman’s arguments for the role of doxastic deliberation is based on a comparison between what they regard as inquiry initiated by doxastic deliberation and a phenomenon to which they refer as ‘idly wondering’:

[...] deliberation whether to believe that  $p$  need not be initiated by an articulation of the deliberative question: one can start right in with the factual question *whether p* and yet be recognizably deliberating whether to believe. What makes one’s reasoning recognizably deliberative becomes clear upon comparison with non-deliberative reasoning about the same question. One can consider *whether p* in the spirit of idly wondering, without aiming to make up one’s mind—in which case, one isn’t deliberating about whether to believe that  $p$ . (Shah and Velleman 2005: 505)

I can’t see that this observation provides strong support for the involvement of doxastic deliberation in inquiry. I would suggest that the relativist could easily explain the intuitive contrast that Shah and Velleman have identified in terms of the strength of the subject’s desire to find out whether  $p$ .

## 8. Reasons

I want to close my discussion of normativism by considering a different line of reasoning in support of transparency that can be extracted from Shah’s work. On the approach that we have been considering, the claim that reasoning about the utility of believing that  $p$  can’t count as doxastic deliberation on  $p$  is supported with the contention that such reasoning can’t cause belief in  $p$ . One could argue, however, that this is not the restriction on which Shah wants to focus. Even if, as in Sophie’s case, inquiry into an evidentially unrelated proposition could bring about belief in  $p$ , that might not count for Shah as bringing it about in the specific way that is characteristic of doxastic deliberation. On this interpretation of Shah’s reasoning, his central thought is not that inquiry into evidentially unrelated propositions can’t bring about belief in  $p$ , but that it can’t bring it about in the way that defines doxastic deliberation.

This train of thought is brought to prominence in “A New Argument for Evidentialism”, where Shah spells out in some detail what type of belief production counts as doxastic deliberation. On this conception of doxastic deliberation, a piece of reasoning that produces a belief won’t count as doxastic deliberation unless the belief has been produced by the subject’s recognition of the characteristic motivational/normative force of considerations arrived at in this reasoning (Shah 2006: 485). The crucial concept of this approach is that of belief produced *under the guidance of reasons*. Producing belief (/action) in this way is presented as a defining feature of doxastic (/practical) deliberation: “Deliberation, or reasoning, is connected to the nature of reasons by being that through which agents are guided by reasons” (Shah 2006: 486).

This suggests a different line of argument in support of excluding inquiry into evidentially unrelated propositions from the realm of doxastic deliberation. This argument would invoke the following defining feature of doxastic deliberation:

(4R) In deliberation on whether to believe that p, belief as to whether p is produced under the guidance of reasons. (Definition of doxastic deliberation)

The argument would exploit this feature of doxastic deliberation with the observation that inquiry into an evidentially unrelated proposition cannot satisfy this constraint:

(1R) For every subject S and every proposition q (such that S doesn’t believe that q is evidentially relevant for p), S cannot come to believe that p under the guidance of reasons supplied by inquiry into q. (Premise)

From these two premises, (5G) would follow directly. This gives us a new line of reasoning in support of transparency.

This argument seems to have the potential for overcoming the difficulties encountered by Shah. Suppose that, after abandoning (1G) in favour of (1W), the relativist comes to accept

this argument for (5G). This would involve treating Sophie as a counterexample to (1G) but not as a counterexample to (1R). Sophie would be arriving at the belief that *p* as a result of inquiry into whether it would be nice if *p* were true, but she wouldn't be forming her belief that *p* under the guidance of reasons supplied by her inquiry into whether it would be nice if *p* were true.

This would put the relativist in a difficult position. Her acceptance of the argument would force her to embrace (5G). But since she has abandoned (1G) in favour of (1W), she cannot endorse the explanation of (5G) that we considered in the previous section. Instead, she could try to explain (5G) in terms of (1R), but the problem with this line is how (1R) should be explained. The normativist has an appealing explanation of (1R). (1R) holds, according to the normativist, because receiving the guidance of reasons for belief involves conceiving of the resulting cognitive activity as belief-formation. As a result, “a disposition to be moved by considerations that he regards as relevant to the truth of *p* and a disposition blocking considerations that he regards as irrelevant to the truth of *p* are activated” (Shah 2003: 467). If the relativist can't supply an alternative explanation of (1R), Shah seems to finally have at his disposal a cogent inference-to-the-best-explanation argument for normativism.

I want to argue that the relativist doesn't have to face this challenge, because she doesn't have to accept the new argument for transparency. Notice that (5G) entails transparency only on the assumption that inquiry into *p* counts as doxastic deliberation on *p*. (5G) then ensures that no other inquiry counts as doxastic deliberation on *p*. If inquiry into *p* didn't satisfy the definition of doxastic deliberation on *p*, then (5G) would not establish transparency. The outcome would be instead that doxastic deliberation does not exist.

The relativist could maintain that (4R) has this effect. She could argue that, once the notion of reason-guided belief formation is properly understood, (4R) can be seen to lead ineluctably to the conclusion that the phenomenon is not exemplified by any process of belief formation.

It would follow from this that an argument for (5G) that takes (4R) as a premise does not establish transparency, but rather the conclusion that there's no such thing as doxastic deliberation.

Let's focus on the notion of reason-guided belief formation, as it figures in (4R). Clearly the normativist will want this notion to be exemplified by cases in which S's belief that p is formed as a result of inquiry into p that has a favourable outcome—i.e. cases in which S comes to believe that p as a result of concluding that the evidence strongly favours p. However, the normativist can't simply define reason-guided belief formation as coming to believe that p as a result of concluding that the evidence strongly favours p. For this would turn transparency into a trivial consequence of the definition of doxastic deliberation, and hence not a suitable explanandum for an inference-to-the-best-explanation argument. If transparency is to count as a substantive psychological phenomenon, the notion of reason-guided belief formation that figures in (4R) has to receive a different characterisation.

Shah's approach is to anchor the notion in its practical correlate—to think of reason-guided belief formation as the theoretical analogue of reason-guided action. When the notion of reason-guided belief formation is construed in this way, we will get an argument for normativism if S's forming the belief that p as a result of inquiry into p is the theoretical analogue of reason-guided action, and nothing else is.

The claim that forming the belief that p as a result of inquiry into p is the theoretical analogue of reason-guided action corresponds to a conception of belief associated with Descartes. Reason-guided action consists in considering what we regard as the relevant factors and deciding how to act on that basis. On the Cartesian conception, belief-formation is very similar to this. When you want to make up your mind on a certain matter, you consider the relevant evidence and then decide what to believe on that basis.<sup>15</sup> According to this picture, in evidence-based belief formation, as well as in reason-guided action, we make a

decision after taking into account the relevant factors. Hence, if the Cartesian conception of belief-formation were correct, forming the belief that *p* as a result of inquiry into *p* would have to count as a theoretical analogue of reason-guided action. Then there would be no conflict between (4R) and the claim that forming the belief that *p* as a result of inquiry into *p* counts as doxastic deliberation.

But the Cartesian account of belief formation is controversial. A prominent alternative, associated with Hume, is to think of belief formation, not as something that we do, but as something that happens to us. This picture would apply not only to cases of automatic, non-reflective belief formation, but also to cases in which belief results from deliberate assessment of the available evidence. If, after considering the available evidence, we find ourselves believing that it strongly favours *p*, then, more often than not, we will also find ourselves believing that *p*.<sup>16</sup> On the Humean picture, in these cases we haven't decided to believe that *p* in light of the evidence at our disposal. Deciding to believe that *p* is not something we can do, either in light of the evidence or in light of practical considerations, because belief is one of the mental phenomena, along with, e.g., fear, happiness or disgust, that aren't under the direct control of the will.<sup>17</sup> Rather, on the Humean picture, by considering the evidence on *p*, we have brought about a situation that has led to belief in *p* occurring in us.<sup>18</sup>

If the Humean account were correct, evidence-based belief formation would not be analogous to reason-guided action. Coming to believe, say, that human activity is contributing to global warming upon finding that the evidence strongly favours this hypothesis would not be analogous to deciding to go to the cinema after taking into account all relevant considerations. It would be analogous instead to becoming depressed upon hearing a sad story, or embarrassed upon being reminded of a certain incident.

Hence, the Humean account entails that reason-guided action has no theoretical analogue.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, if we conceive of reason-guided belief formation as the theoretical analogue of

reason-guided action, (4R) will entail that no process of belief formation can count as doxastic deliberation. The normativist will be able to establish (5G), but this won't amount to having established transparency. Instead, (5G) will be a special case of the general result that doxastic deliberation doesn't exist.

This is not the place to adjudicate the contest between the Cartesian and the Humean conception of belief formation. My claim is simply that, so long as the Humean picture is a live option, the relativist will be able to resist any attempt to establish transparency by imposing a constraint along the lines of (4R). For the normativist's assumption that doxastic deliberation is still possible after imposing this kind of constraint rests on a conception of belief formation that the relativist might want to reject.

## 9. Teleologism

Let me turn now to the argument for absolutism initially presented by David Velleman. Velleman's argument is based on the claim that the following is a necessary condition for an attitude to count as a belief: "[...] an attitude doesn't qualify as a belief unless it [...] has a tendency to be constrained by input in ways designed to ensure that it is true" (Velleman 2000: 255). I am going to refer to this view as *teleologism*.<sup>20</sup> It is this feature of belief that justifies, according to Velleman, the description of false beliefs as 'faulty in themselves'.

Thus, in the continuation of the passage that I quoted in Section 1, he writes:

In what sense are they faulty? The most plausible answer, I think, begins with the observation that we conceive of beliefs as constitutively regulated by input. Faulty or mistaken beliefs are the ones whose regulation has not succeeded in producing the kind of cognitions that it was designed to produce. The fact that beliefs are conceived to be faulty when false indicates that the regulation conceived to be constitutive of them is regulation for truth. Truth-directedness thus appears to be enshrined in our concept of belief. (Velleman 2000: 277-278)

The link between teleologism and absolutism presented by this passage is, I think, entirely unobjectionable. If it is one of the conditions for an attitude to count as a belief that it should be regulated in ways that are designed to ensure the production of true beliefs, this will seem

to sustain a clear sense in which false beliefs are non-relatively wrong—in order to qualify as beliefs they must have been regulated in ways that were designed to exclude them.

Hence the cogency of Velleman's argument turns on the status of teleologism. Velleman defends teleologism by arguing against the *purely motivational* conception of belief—the view that “all that's necessary for an attitude to qualify as a belief is that it dispose the subject to behave in ways that would promote the satisfaction of his desires if its content were true” (Velleman 2000: 255). He argues that

[...] this motivational role, far from being definitive of belief, is definitive instead of the subdoxastic attitude of acceptance, which is involved in assuming, [...] as well as other cognitive attitudes, such as imagining. (Velleman 2000: 247)

Hence defining belief requires identifying a feature that differentiates belief from other types of acceptance. And this, according to Velleman, is what teleologism achieves: “[...] belief must be characterised, not just as the attitude having the motivational role, but rather as a truth-directed species of that attitude” (Velleman 2000: 247).

Thus Velleman's strategy is to argue that beliefs have the same motivational role as other cognitive attitudes, such as assumings and imaginings, and that the best way of specifying which of the attitudes with that shared motivational role count as beliefs is by reference to how their production is regulated. I want discuss two aspects of Velleman's argument. I'm going to argue first that the motivational conception might have the resources to avoid classifying assumings and imaginings as beliefs, without embracing teleologism. Then I want to question the plausibility of treating regulation for truth as definitive of belief.

## **10. Belief and other cognitive attitudes**

As we have seen, the main premise of Velleman's argument against the motivational conception is that cognitive attitudes other than beliefs have the same motivational roles as beliefs. For the case of imaginings, on which Velleman concentrates, the premise of his argument dictates an affirmative answer to the following question: “does imagining that *p*, for



example, typically dispose the subject as would be desirable if p were true?" (Velleman 2000: 256). Velleman discusses a variety of cases in which imaginings can be said to motivate behaviour. I find his arguments for the claim that imaginings can motivate behaviour persuasive, but notice that this is not enough for the purposes of his defence of teleologism. The premise that his argument requires is not that imagining that p has some motivational role or other, but that it has the same motivational role as believing that p. However, Velleman's discussion doesn't seem to lend support to the stronger conclusion. Take, e.g., his case of a child imagining that he is an elephant as part of a game of make-believe.<sup>21</sup> This imagining may well motivate the child to do certain things, but it is clear, I think, that it doesn't motivate the child to do what he would be motivated to do if he believed that he is an elephant. The point has been very clearly expressed by Lucy O'Brien:

If I somehow could come to believe—rather than have a delusion—that I (LOB) am an elephant then, it would seem to have a very different motivational role to the corresponding imaginings. I would probably be trying to find ways to resign from my job, break it to my family, buy a new bed and so on. I feel motivated to do none of these things when I imagine I am an elephant. And the same seems to be true of the child. (O'Brien 2005: 59)

Velleman is aware of this difficulty, but he thinks he has the means to overcome it. Thus, about the imagining examples that he discusses he writes:

These examples show that imagining that p and believing that p are alike in disposing the subject to do what would satisfy his conations if p were true, other things being equal. Admittedly, the examples have also suggested that other things are rarely equal between cases of imagining and believing, and hence that the actual manifestations of these states are often different. But the differences do not undermine my thesis. (Velleman 2000: 271-272)

Velleman points out, correctly, that differences in behaviour actually caused are compatible with sameness of motivational role, since a given disposition will cause different behaviours in different circumstances. He then argues that the circumstances surrounding imaginings and beliefs are typically different in ways that would make identical behavioural dispositions issue in different behavioural output:

[...] most deliberate imagining is accompanied by countervailing beliefs, embodying the subject's knowledge of the facts that he is imagining to be otherwise [...]. Ordinary beliefs are not regularly accompanied by countervailing beliefs [...]. (Velleman 2000: 272)

If this is correct, then the differences in the behaviour caused by beliefs and imaginings will be compatible with the hypothesis that their motivational roles are the same. Notice, however, that this is not quite what Velleman needs. He needs to argue that the motivational roles of beliefs and imaginings *are* the same. This would require showing that the hypothesis that the motivational roles are the same is preferable to the hypothesis that the differences in behavioural output correspond to differences in motivational role. According to this rival hypothesis, imagining that I am an elephant disposes me to behave in elephant-like ways *within the confines of the game of make-believe*, whereas believing that I am an elephant would dispose me to behave in elephantine ways in all contexts. Until this hypothesis is shown to be inferior to the alternative favoured by Velleman, he hasn't shown that sameness of motivational role underlies differences in behaviour.

In any case, I want to concede for the sake of the argument that some cognitive attitudes that shouldn't be classified as beliefs have the same motivational role as the corresponding beliefs. It follows from this that a strict version of the motivational conception would be forced to misclassify some cognitive attitudes as beliefs. However, I want to argue that the most plausible strategy for avoiding this outcome results in a view that is still recognisably motivational, and distinctly non-teleological. The strategy that I want to defend is to take the motivational role that defines belief to include dispositions to cause not only behaviour, but also other mental states. In particular, in order to count as a belief that *p*, a cognitive state would have to have the disposition to cause episodes of the conscious state variously known as assent to *p*, conscious belief that *p* or conviction in the truth of *p*. What I have in mind is the passive, involuntary, self-intimating conscious state of feeling that a proposition we are entertaining in consciousness is true.<sup>22</sup> My proposal is that the absence of a disposition to cause this feeling of conviction in the truth of *p* if the question whether *p* is entertained in

consciousness is a strong prima facie reason for thinking that the attitude in question should not count as a belief that p.

This, I take it, is the most obvious difference between beliefs and assumings. Suppose, e.g., that, on my way back from work, I have no belief either way concerning whether there's bread in the house, and to be on the safe side I decide to assume that there's none and stop to buy some. Let's suppose that this assuming makes me disposed to behave in every respect exactly as if I believed that there's no bread in the house. Nevertheless, if I entertain in consciousness the question whether there's bread in the house and my attitude is a belief, I will feel convinced that there is none, but if I entertain the question and my attitude is an assuming, I will feel no conviction either way. So someone who expands the motivational role of belief in the way I am suggesting will have a straightforward strategy for avoiding classifying assumings as beliefs. And she will achieve this without imposing restrictions on how beliefs are regulated.

Notice that the strategy that I am proposing doesn't involve embracing the discredited Humean position which identifies belief with the feeling of conviction.<sup>23</sup> It doesn't even require identifying belief with a disposition towards this feeling.<sup>24</sup> All it requires is including the disposition to feel convinced of the truth of p when prompted in the motivational role that defines belief, along with the dispositions to produce behaviour that beliefs might share with other attitudes.<sup>25</sup>

Now, while this strategy can deal with assumings, handling imaginings in this way might prove more problematic. The difficulty is that, in some cases, my phenomenological reaction to the question whether p if I imagine that p might not be all that different from conscious assent to p. Consider, for example, waking up imagining that there are intruders in the house, or a nervous flyer who imagines that her plane is about to crash.

The difficulty might not be real. It might be possible to distinguish these imaginings from instances of assent phenomenologically. But even if this is not possible, the revised motivational conception has the resources to deal with these cases. In order for an imagining to count as a hard case for the revised motivational conception, it's not enough that it is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the corresponding belief. It also has to be associated with the same behavioural dispositions as the belief. The revised motivational conception will misclassify as beliefs any imaginings that satisfy these conditions.

I want to suggest that the proponent of the revised motivational conception shouldn't accept that there are imaginings satisfying these conditions. She should argue that so long as (a) S has a cognitive attitude towards p associated with exactly the same behavioural dispositions as the belief that p, and (b) if S entertained in consciousness the question whether p her reaction would be indistinguishable from assent to p, S's cognitive attitude towards p is no longer an imagining, but a belief. The claim that an attitude satisfying these conditions might fail to be a belief doesn't receive unambiguous support from pre-theoretical intuition. And any argument in defence of this claim would have to invoke premises that beg the question against the revised motivational conception.

Thus the proponent of the revised motivational conception would concede that a cognitive attitude towards p might fail to be a belief even though it is associated with the same behavioural dispositions as the belief that p *or* it is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the belief that p. But she will contend that a cognitive attitude that satisfies both these conditions is the belief that p, and hence that her account of belief doesn't result in misclassifications.

## 11. Design hypotheses

The second issue that I want to consider in connection with Velleman's defence of teleologism is the plausibility of treating regulation for truth as part of the nature of belief. The precise content of Velleman's claim depends on how we construe the task of characterising belief that teleologism seeks to discharge. One possibility is to understand the task along the lines of a traditional conception of definition. On this construal, teleologism would be a contribution to the task of specifying necessary and sufficient conditions for belief that are knowable a priori. The correctness of teleologism, thus understood, could not depend on the truth value of propositions that are only knowable a posteriori. Velleman seems unwilling to commit on the question whether his characterisation of belief is meant to satisfy this traditional conception. He writes:

Perhaps we could discover that the attitudes we call beliefs are actually regulated in ways designed to promote something other than their being true. Would we conclude that these attitudes weren't really beliefs, after all? Or would we revise our conception of belief, to reflect this newly discovered aim?  
I do not have an answer to this question. (Velleman 2000: 278)

What, if anything, the attitudes that we call beliefs are actually regulated for is only knowable a posteriori. Hence, on the traditional conception, the correctness of Velleman's characterisation of belief cannot depend on how things stand in this respect. It follows that, on the traditional conception, Velleman is committed to the first of the two options that he contemplates. If his characterisation of belief is correct, then if we discovered that the attitudes we call beliefs are not regulated for truth, we would have to conclude that these attitudes are not really beliefs.

The second option corresponds to an alternative to the traditional conception, inspired by the work of Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam on the semantics of natural-kind terms (Kripke 1980; Putnam 1975).<sup>26</sup> On the Kripke-Putnam picture of the semantics of, say, the term 'water', water is initially identified by a cluster of surface properties, or as the stuff that fills our lakes, etc. What counts as water is determined by the underlying molecular structure of

that stuff. On this conception, since the molecular structure of that stuff is H<sub>2</sub>O, something counts as water just in case its molecular structure is H<sub>2</sub>O.

Clearly the claim that water is H<sub>2</sub>O doesn't satisfy the traditional conception. The claim that the transparent liquid that fills our lakes is H<sub>2</sub>O is only knowable a posteriori. But on this conception the correctness of the identification of water with H<sub>2</sub>O will depend on the truth value of this claim. If we discovered that this stuff has some other molecular structure, then we would have to revise our characterisation of water in light of this discovery.

The second of Velleman's options would apply if his characterisation of belief were modelled on this picture. On this account, we identify beliefs by our folk-psychological methods, and then discover that the attitudes that we have picked out in this way have a certain underlying nature. If it is part of this underlying nature to be regulated for truth, then being regulated for truth will be part of our characterisation of belief. But the claim that these attitudes are regulated for truth is only knowable a posteriori. If we discovered that they are actually regulated for something else, we would have to revise our conception of belief in light of this discovery.

Let me consider first how plausible teleologism would be if it were read along the lines of the traditional conception. I am going to concentrate on the question whether it is acceptable for our account of belief to entail that if we discovered that the attitudes that we call beliefs are not regulated for truth we would have to conclude that they are not beliefs after all.

Velleman argues briefly that this discovery would be extremely unlikely, but his argument seems to apply only to cases in which regulation for truth is realised by the subject's intentions (Velleman 2000: 278). Velleman allows that regulation for truth can be realized, in addition, by sub-personal systems that produce beliefs without the mediation of intentional processes. I want to concentrate on the second kind of case. Here, regulation for truth is the

claim that the relevant sub-personal systems were designed by natural selection to form, revise and extinguish beliefs in ways that ensure that they are true. But the claim that natural selection designed these systems for the production of true beliefs is an empirical hypothesis, no more secure than any other hypothesis in this area. I find it by no means unimaginable that evolutionary biologists discover that some or all of the systems that are mainly responsible for the regulation of belief were designed by natural selection to perform a role other than the production of true beliefs. These systems might fail to produce mostly true beliefs, but even if they did, this fact might be, from the evolutionary point of view, nothing but a happy accident.

In any case, if teleologism is construed on the model of the traditional conception, the likelihood of this kind of discovery is not particularly relevant to our assessment of the view. What is relevant is what we would say if we discovered that these sub-personal systems were not designed by natural selection for the production of true beliefs, however unlikely this result might be.<sup>27</sup> And I want to suggest that this discovery would not have the slightest tendency to make us reclassify the attitudes produced by these systems as something other than beliefs. Take, e.g., the automatic beliefs about my immediate surroundings that my perceptual systems constantly produce and update without the mediation of intentional processes, allowing me, most of the time, to avoid tripping, bumping into walls and knocking things over. It seems to me that the status of these attitudes as beliefs is not in any way contingent on any biological hypothesis concerning the evolution of my perceptual systems. If we discovered that these systems were not designed by natural selection for the production of true beliefs, we wouldn't have the slightest inclination to question their status as beliefs. If this is correct, then, if teleologism is construed along the lines of the traditional conception, we have to conclude that it offers a mistaken account of belief. And notice that this outcome would not ensue only if we made certain surprising discoveries in evolutionary biology. If my

characterisation of our intuitions is along the right lines, then teleologism, construed on the traditional model, has to be rejected here and now, even if, as it happens, the biologists don't produce any untoward results.

Let's consider next the situation if teleologism is construed along the lines of the natural-kind model. On this construal, teleologism is not threatened by the intuitions that I have described concerning how we would react to the discovery that the attitudes we call beliefs are not regulated for truth. On the natural-kind construal, teleologism would allow us to continue to call these attitudes beliefs if we discovered that they are not regulated for truth.

When teleologism is construed along these lines, it's not vulnerable to intuitions concerning epistemic counterfactuals—about what we would say if we made certain discoveries. It is vulnerable instead to intuitions concerning metaphysical counterfactuals—about what we would say if things were different from how they actually are. Suppose that the attitudes we call beliefs are, as a matter of fact, regulated for truth. Then, on the natural-kind reading, teleologism entails that a situation in which beliefs are not regulated for truth is impossible.<sup>28</sup> We might think that we can imagine this situation, but what we are actually imagining is a situation in which our beliefs are replaced by some other cognitive attitudes with the same contents. I want to argue that this outcome is highly implausible. Consider once more our automatic perceptual beliefs about our immediate surroundings. Suppose that the systems that produce these beliefs were actually designed by natural selection for the production of true beliefs. It seems to me that if we discussed a counterfactual situation in which these systems were designed by natural selection for some other end, we would be discussing a situation in which our automatic perceptual beliefs were not regulated for truth. But according to teleologism, on the natural-kind reading, this description of the situation is necessarily incorrect. In that situation, according to teleologism, we wouldn't have automatic perceptual beliefs. Our perceptual systems would produce some other kind of cognitive



attitudes that don't count as beliefs. I am suggesting that this outcome is profoundly at odds with our intuitive conception of what beliefs are. Vindicating this intuitive conception requires rejecting the natural-kind version of the teleological account of belief.

## 12. Conclusion

I have argued that the lines of reasoning advanced by Nishi Shah and David Velleman in favour of absolutism fail to provide genuine support for this view. Of course absolutism might still be true, but the onus is now firmly on its advocates to provide a cogent line of reasoning in its support.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Notice that doxastic relativism does not entail relativism about truth. A doxastic relativist can hold that many propositions are non-relatively true or false. What she would question is the claim that believing true propositions is non-relatively right and believing false propositions non-relatively wrong.
- <sup>2</sup> In "On the Aim of Belief", David Velleman offers three reasons for being interested in the debate between absolutists and relativists (Velleman 2000: 244-246). One that has received considerable attention in recent years arises from the thought that absolutism, if correct, would lend support to the thesis that mental content is normative. This thesis, in turn, is seen by some as posing an obstacle to the naturalization of mental content, although Velleman appears to think that his own version of absolutism might help remove this obstacle. On the threat to naturalism posed by the normativity of content, see (Kripke 1982). On the connection between absolutism and the normativity of content, see (Boghossian 2003, 2005).

- <sup>3</sup> It may seem that doxastic absolutism presupposes a substantive conception of truth, but, as Shah and Velleman have argued, it might be possible to formulate an analogue of the truth criterion within a deflationist setting. See (Shah and Velleman 2005: 523-525).
- <sup>4</sup> See (Velleman 2000; Shah and Velleman 2005; Shah 2003, 2006).
- <sup>5</sup> Other contemporary absolutists include Paul Boghossian (Boghossian 2003) and Ralf Wedgwood (Wedgwood 2002). Earlier endorsements of the view can be found in (Edgley 1969) and (Griffiths 1962-63).
- <sup>6</sup> Forms of relativism have been advanced, among others, by Richard Foley and David Papineau. See (Foley 1993; Papineau 1999).
- <sup>7</sup> In later papers, this feature of the concept of belief is expressed with a biconditional norm: “Classifying an attitude as a belief entails applying to it the standard of being correct if and only if it is true” (Shah and Velleman 2005: 498). See also (Shah 2006: 489). I don’t think this change of formulation reflects a change in Shah’s views.
- <sup>8</sup> Notice, though, that endorsing absolutism does not require endorsing normativism. For example, David Velleman’s initial defence of absolutism in “On the Aim of Belief” carried no commitment to normativism.
- <sup>9</sup> Unless, that is, the utilitarian subscribes to a crude pragmatist account of truth, according to which maximizing utility is what makes a belief true. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this point.
- <sup>10</sup> See also (Shah 2006: 489).
- <sup>11</sup> One could argue that all that aiming requires is that the subject *believes* that the activity can bring about the outcome, and this wouldn’t sustain a cogent argument for transparency. I am grateful to an anonymous referee on this point.
- <sup>12</sup> See also (Shah 2003: 469).
- <sup>13</sup> I follow Shah and Velleman in setting aside cases in which *p* is nonfactual. See (Shah and Velleman 2005: 530, fn. 12).
- <sup>14</sup> My point can also be expressed in terms of a distinction between the intention to form a belief as to whether *p* and the intention to form a *true* belief as to whether *p*. I claim that the second kind of intention is identical with the intention to answer the factual question, whether *p*. Hence it doesn’t provide instances of transparency. The first kind of intention, by contrast, is different from the intention to answer the factual question, but it doesn’t provide instances of transparency either, because the question whether to believe *p*, in this sense, doesn’t inevitably give way to the factual question. Imagine a variant of Pascal’s wager, adapted

to a religion in which eternal damnation is reserved for the agnostics: any belief concerning the existence of God will spare you this fate. I am indebted on this point to an anonymous referee.

- <sup>15</sup> For Descartes' views on this point, see (Williams 1978: Chapter 6).
- <sup>16</sup> The Humean will observe that there are exceptions to this general claim about how belief that *p* is produced. The cases that we would describe as 'believing in the teeth of the evidence' are cases in which the belief that the evidence strongly supports *p* doesn't bring about the belief that *p*.
- <sup>17</sup> There is no reason why the Humean shouldn't accept that the case of belief exhibits peculiarities that are not present in other non-voluntary mental phenomena. In particular, she could accept Bernard Williams's point that acquiring a false belief will often require acquiring many other false beliefs. See (Williams 1973).
- <sup>18</sup> Shah and Velleman's explanation of why we cannot form beliefs arbitrarily is predictably different from the Humean explanation. See (Shah and Velleman 2005: 502-505).
- <sup>19</sup> Alternatively, the Humean might preserve the analogy between theoretical and practical reasoning by arguing that intention formation, no less than belief formation, is something that happens to us, sometimes as an effect of considering the relevant evidence. I am grateful to an anonymous referee on this point.
- <sup>20</sup> Velleman draws a distinction between two theses: the thesis that belief involves regarding a proposition as true and the thesis that belief aims at regarding a proposition as true only if it really is true (Velleman 2000: 243). The view that I am labeling teleologism is Velleman's construal of the second of these theses.
- <sup>21</sup> See (Velleman 2000: 256-263).
- <sup>22</sup> Some authors have objected to the idea that the putative instances of this phenomenon exhibit any degree of phenomenological uniformity. See (Ramsey 1978; Kneale 1949). But accepting this point shouldn't force us to deny the phenomenon. On this issue see (Price 1969: 275-289; Mellor 1980). However, my proposal is incompatible with Mellor's dispositional account of assent.
- <sup>23</sup> See (Hume 1978: 624; 2000: sec. 5, part 2).
- <sup>24</sup> A position along these lines was put forward by L. J. Cohen. See (Cohen 1992).
- <sup>25</sup> I think that a position along these lines also has the resources for accommodating cases of self-deception, in which you believe a proposition but you are not disposed to feel convinced of its truth when prompted. I am not going to develop this point here.
- <sup>26</sup> See also (Burge 1979).

- <sup>27</sup> The notion of regulation for truth than Shah and Velleman put forward in “Doxastic Deliberation” is weak enough to be compatible with the influence on belief of evidentially insensitive processes (Shah and Velleman 2005: 500). Hence the discovery that we need to consider is not simply that some beliefs are influenced by evidentially insensitive processes, but that belief is not regulated for truth even in Shah and Velleman’s weak sense.
- <sup>28</sup> See the preceding footnote.

### Notes on contributor

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