

A New Argument for Evidentialism?

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Let evidentialism be the view that only evidence can be reason to believe that p and let pragmatism be the view that non-evidential considerations, such as whether it would be advantageous to believe that p , can be reason to believe that p as well. Shah (2006) claims to provide a novel argument in favor of evidentialism. I shall be arguing that the argument fails because it begs the question against pragmatism.

The notion of evidence is left undefined by Shah. But for our purposes it suffices to think of an evidence for p as something that indicates that p is true. Shah's main argument for evidentialism has two normative premises and one descriptive premise. The two normative premises are:

B1 R is a reason for X to believe that p only if R is capable of being a reason for which X believes that p .

B2 R is a reason for which X believes that p only if R is capable of disposing X towards believing that p in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation. (2006, 486)

B1 and B2 entail what he calls the deliberative constraint:

DC R is a reason for X to believe that p only if R is capable of disposing X towards believing that p in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation. (2006, 487)

This, together with the following descriptive premise, entails evidentialism. The premise is what Shah calls transparency:

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TR The deliberative question whether to believe that p inevitably gives way to the factual question whether p . (2006, 481)

TR is a thesis about our own psychology and Shah's argument is directed against those pragmatists who accept it (2006, 484). The thesis amounts to the claim that only such factors that the agent recognizes as making the truth of p likely can figure as a premise in her deliberation whether to believe that p . The deliberation can be influenced by other factors, as in the case of wishful thinking, but such factors cannot be acknowledged by the agent as premises in her deliberation. So TR entails that only evidence is capable of disposing an agent towards believing that p in the way characteristic of R 's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation. Thus, TR and DC entail evidentialism: R is a reason to believe that p only if R is evidence for p .

One might wonder whether Shah's premises really entail evidentialism as it can seem that there is serious tension between evidentialism and the constraints on reasons laid out by the premises B1 and B2. There are two such worries that have been discussed recently. First, since Shah holds that only evidence can be reasons, reasons to believe are not mental states: a reason to believe that p must indicate that p is true and for most propositions mental states do not do that. What are reasons, then? The most natural way of interpreting Shah is that reasons are propositions since reasons are supposed to be able to function as premises in deliberation and premises are propositions. Here is a very natural gloss on such a notion of evidence: a proposition e is a reason to believe that p just in case the truth of e makes the truth of p more likely. Now, this might tempt the objection that a reason so understood could not be a *reason for which* one believes that p . After all, a reason for which one believes that p explains why one believes that p and isn't this to be understood as a causal explanation? If so, a reason for which one believes that p must be a cause of the belief that p and this, as Booth (2008, 230) points out, would lead to a serious tension between B1 and B2, on the one hand, and evidentialism which treats reasons as propositions, on the other.

The reply to this worry is that R is a reason for which one believes that p only if R actually functions as a premise in X 's doxastic deliberation. Many reasons to believe that p will not function as premises—e.g., they might not occur to X or X might fail to recognize the relevance of R . If R is a reason for which one believes that p , the belief whose content is R is a *cause* of the belief that p , but it is R that is the *reason for which* one believes that p and it is such a reason-for-which in virtue of functioning as a premise in one's deliberation.¹

¹It might be best for Shah to reformulate B2 slightly to something like: R is a reason for which X believes that p only if recognition of R is capable of disposing X towards believing that p in the way characteristic of R 's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation. This will induce

Secondly, even granting the above point one might still share a worry voiced by Steglich-Petersen (2008) that evidence cannot be a reason for which one believes. For saying that there is evidence to believe that p is most naturally understood as saying that there is some kind of permission or entitlement to believe that p . But recognition of one's being entitled or permitted to do something is rarely, if ever, the reason for which one does it and this should be no different in the case of belief. As Steglich-Petersen puts it, "There is no sound deliberative route from being entitled to ϕ , or from regarding oneself as being entitled to ϕ , to ϕ ing." (2008, 546) If so, evidentialism turns out to be inconsistent with the constraint on reasons laid out by B1 and B2 since evidence that p could not be a reason for which one believes that p which means that according to B1 evidence cannot be reason to believe.

According to Shah, a doxastic deliberation whether to believe that p is not a process that first leads to the belief that one has a reason to believe that p which then issues in the belief that p . This is the point brought out by transparency: deliberation whether to believe that p does not concern itself with whether there is reason to believe that p but exclusively concerns itself with whether p . This means that even though it is entirely correct that the recognition that there is reason to believe that p cannot be the reason for which one believes that p , it is still true that the evidence itself is the reason for which one believes that p . For example, the proposition *that Lady Macbeth has blood on her hands is evidence that she killed Duncan* is not the reason for which one believes that she killed Duncan; nevertheless, the proposition *that she has blood on her hands* can be the reason for which one believes that she killed Duncan. After all, there is a sound deliberative route from the belief that Lady Macbeth has blood on her hands to the belief that she killed Duncan. The fact that evidence at most gives us entitlement or permission to believe is consistent with Shah's acceptance of B1 and B2.

The above worries are that Shah's premises cannot entail evidentialism since evidentialism is inconsistent with the premises. These objections can be successfully addressed. But even if the premises do entail evidentialism, the argument's success depends on whether Shah's opponents can be forced to accept DC. His argument presented above for DC depends on B1 and B2 and while B2 may look reasonably uncontroversial, B1 is much more questionable. B1 is an instantiation of a principle that Shah takes from Williams (1980): R is a reason for X to ϕ only if R is capable of being a reason for which X ϕ s. This is not an uncontroversial principle. Externalism about reasons rejects this. So a pragmatist about reasons to believe need only adopt an externalism about reasons for action to resist the argument for evidentialism presented above. It would also be very natural for a pragmatist who

a corresponding change in DC but will not alter Shah's argument in a substantive way.

accepts TR to reject B1. After all, given transparency pragmatic reasons are incapable of being acknowledged as premises in our deliberation whether to believe that p . If so, they are not reasons for which one believes. If pragmatic factors are still reasons to believe, B1 must be false.

One possible route for Shah would be to defend the kind of reason internalism that B1 depends on. But that is *not* the route he takes. Instead, he offers a different argument for DC: one cannot accept TR and simultaneously reject DC. If this argument succeeds, Shah need not rely on potentially controversial principles such as B1. This also means that even if the objections raised by Booth and Steglich-Petersen are successful and Shah can be forced reject B1 and B2, Shah would still have an argument for evidentialism available to him.

Shah's new argument for DC is that it is entailed by the best explanation of TR. According to Shah, TR is due to the kind of activity deliberation is together with a norm built into the concept of belief. The norm covering belief is the following norm of truth:

NT A belief that p is correct iff. p is true. (2006, 489)

Doxastic deliberation is an activity which aims at producing a belief that is correct according to the norms governing belief. Since NT specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for a belief's being correct, the agent can regard only evidence as relevant in deciding what to believe (2006, 488–90; see also his 2003). One might worry whether this explanation really is the best explanation of TR.² But let us grant him that this is the best explanation.

How exactly is this explanation supposed to entail DC? DC is a claim about reasons to believe. But the explanation of TR just stated says nothing about reasons. We need a way to connect this explanation to reasons to believe. The obvious thing to look for is a connection between reasons and norms. Shah tells us that '[r]easons for ϕ ing are considerations which indicate whether ϕ ing would be correct according to the norms for ϕ ing.' We can instantiate believing that p for ϕ ing and NT for the norm for ϕ ing and rewrite it as the following principle of reason-norm connection:

RN R is a reason to believe that p if and only if R is a consideration that indicates whether believing that p would be correct according to the norm NT.

The argument for DC would appeal to the following thought that is part of the explanation of TR connecting indication of correctness with doxastic deliberation:

²(Steglich-Petersen 2006) argues that Shah's explanation does not succeed. For some other objections and replies see (Shah and Velleman 2005).

CD If R is a consideration that indicates whether believing that *p* would be correct according to the norm NT, then R is capable of disposing X towards believing that *p* in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation.

CD and RN entail the deliberative constraint DC. DC and TR entail evidentialism.

The trouble for Shah is that one can be a pragmatist even if one accepts that there is a perfectly good sense in which a belief that *p* is correct iff *p* is true. A pragmatist would simply hold that there can be reasons to have an *incorrect* belief just as there can be reasons to commit immoral acts. In short, a pragmatist who accepts NT will simply reject RN. And if he does this, he can accept Shah's explanation of transparency without accepting evidentialism. RN, after all, just is evidentialism: given NT, what RN says is that R is a reason to believe that *p* only if R indicates that *p* is true, i.e. only if R is evidence for *p*. To appeal to RN in an argument against pragmatism is to assume the falsehood of pragmatism. It begs the question.

It is instructive to compare RN with a similar but weaker principle that is acceptable to pragmatists:

RN- R is a reason to believe that *p* if and only if R is a consideration that indicates whether believing that *p* would have positive normative/evaluative status.

This is consistent with pragmatism: if believing that *p* were to save mankind, that would indicate that believing that *p* would have positive normative/evaluative status, and pragmatism holds that this would make the fact that believing that *p* will save mankind a reason to believe that *p*. But RN- cannot be used to argue for DC since it is agreed by both sides of the debate that a belief's being desirable on pragmatic grounds cannot dispose an agent 'towards believing that *p* in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation.'

Of course, we could compensate for this by a strengthening of the norm of truth to:

NT+ A belief that *p* has positive normative/evaluative status iff. *p* is true.

But this principle, first of all, is deeply implausible. In fact, it is something Shah himself denies as he accepts that a belief may be desirable for pragmatic reasons (e.g. 2006, 487). Secondly, NT+ is really a flat denial of pragmatism. If, as pragmatism holds, non-evidential factors can turn a consideration into a reason to believe, then something can have positive normative status because of factors that have nothing to do with truth. Appealing to NT+ as a premise against pragmatism begs the question.

It will also not help to interpret 'positive normative/evaluative status' as applying not to any old positive status but to only that kind of normative/evaluative

status that has reason-giving force. This may sound strange but according to Shah a belief that p may be desirable without this desirability being a reason to believe that p . Thus, for Shah, a positive normative/evaluative status does not entail reason giving force so that we could interpret NT+ as restricted to positive normative/evaluative status that has reason giving force. But NT+ so understood begs the question against pragmatism: pragmatism holds that things other than a proposition's truth can have reason giving force. NT+ understood as suggested in this paragraph would simply amount to a denial of pragmatism and cannot be a premise in a cogent argument against pragmatism.

The problem for Shah is that in order to argue for DC from his explanation of TR he needs a way to connect the correctness of belief as characterized by NT with what one has reason to believe. And the connection he needs is either RN, or RN-in combination with NT+. Either way, the connection is that only factors indicating a belief's correctness can be reason to hold the belief. But this is evidentialism. It turns out that Shah needs to appeal to evidentialism in order to get his argument for DC going. This means that he cannot give an argument for evidentialism from DC and TR in a way that does not beg the question against pragmatists. A pragmatist is free to accept Shah's explanation of TR without committing himself to DC and hence to evidentialism.

Thus, Shah's new argument for evidentialism fails.

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