

A New Argument for Pragmatism?

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Abstract Shah, N. The Philosophical Quarterly, 56, 481–498 (2006) has defended evidentialism on the premise that only it (and not pragmatism) is consistent with both (a) the deliberative constraint on reasons and (b) the transparency feature of belief. I show, however, that the deliberative constraint on reasons is also problematic for evidentialism. I also suggest a way for pragmatism to be construed so as to make it consistent with both (a) and (b) and argue that a similar move is not available to the evidentialist. Thus, far from settling the debate in favour of evidentialism, considerations concerning the deliberative constraint on reasons support pragmatism.

Keywords Epistemology · Evidentialism · The ethics of belief · Pragmatism

In a recent article, Shah (2006) has offered a new argument for evidentialism. Evidentialism, as he puts it, is the view that “the only reason I can have for the belief that p is evidence of p ’s truth” (Shah 2006, p. 482); according to this view there can be no non-epistemic reasons for belief, where an epistemic reason to believe that p is simply an indication that p is true. Pragmatism about reasons for belief, on the other hand, is the view that there can be non-epistemic reasons for belief. Such a view, as Shah notes, has recently been defended by Foley (1993), though historically the view is most often associated with William James’ famous essay “The Will to Believe.” The latter was a reply to W.K. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief,” thought by many to be the classical and original defence of evidentialism; indeed, the debate between pragmatists and evidentialists is often rehearsed as a debate between Clifford, who thought that it was always a moral wrong to believe against sufficient evidence, and James, who argued that there were times when believing against sufficient evidence could have morally salutary consequences. However, Shah’s

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defence of evidentialism should not be construed as a contribution to that debate, since it does not rely, as he puts it “on dubious claims about the moral consequences of belief” (Shah 2006, p. 484). According to Shah, evidentialism is precisely the thesis that beliefs cannot be adequately morally appraised, nor, indeed, be appraised from any non-epistemic perspective, so that for Shah the debate between Clifford and James is ill-conceived. The modern pragmatist does not necessarily side with James, either; rather he is concerned with defending the idea that a debate such as theirs is legitimate.

Shah begins his argument for his type of evidentialism by noting the transparency feature of belief, which even modern pragmatists like Foley seem committed to. The transparency feature of belief is a putative psychological fact about doxastic deliberation, namely that: “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” (Shah 2006, p. 481). Some (e.g. Moran 1988) think that this feature of doxastic deliberation has an obvious normative implication, i.e. that there can only be epistemic reasons for belief, where such reasons justify S ’s belief that p – i.e. that it implies evidentialism. However, as Shah points out, transparency (a psychological observation) alone cannot establish evidentialism (a normative doctrine), since it is open to pragmatists like Foley to consider transparency a ‘psychological barrier’ to S ’s believing for the right reasons. In other words, that S may have good reason to believe that p , despite it being impossible for S to believe that p for that reason.

However, this last claim is just what Shah thinks is at issue in the argument between pragmatists and evidentialists. Shah asks us to consider an argument for what he calls the Deliberative Constraint on Reasons (which is a generalised form of the one offered by Williams 1981). The argument goes like this:

1. R is a reason for X to ϕ (where ϕ ranges over actions and beliefs) only if R is capable of being a reason for which X ϕ s.
2. R is a reason for which X ϕ s only if R is capable of disposing X towards ϕ ing through R ’s role in X ’s deliberation whether to ϕ .

Therefore:

3. R is a reason for X to ϕ only if R is capable of disposing X to ϕ in the way characteristic of R ’s functioning as a premise in deliberation whether to ϕ . (Shah 2006, pp. 484–487)

The thought is simply that if one could not have a reason to act or believe where one could not be motivated to act or believe for that very same reason, it follows that when one is deliberating as to whether to act or believe, only reasons that are capable of motivating one into belief or action count (i.e. be considered reasons at all). As Shah puts it: “deliberation, or reasoning, is connected to the nature of reasons by being that through which agents are guided by reasons” (Shah 2006, p. 486). However, Shah continues, given the transparency feature of belief, the deliberative constraint on reasons is incompatible with pragmatism. This is because if it is an unalterable fact about our psychology that we are unable to consider non-epistemic considerations when we deliberate on the question whether to believe that p , then no non-epistemic ‘reason’ can be even be considered a reason in answer to the question

of whether to believe that p . Thus that non-epistemic reason could never be the reason for which an agent believes (i.e. it could never be a reason at all). So although transparency does not guarantee evidentialism on its own, transparency and the deliberative constraint on reasons does. Consider Pascal's Wager, often used as a consideration against evidentialism. According to Pascal's Wager, it is in one's interests to believe in God (even were one has very little evidence of God's existence), since the negative consequences of not doing so in a world where there is a God far outweigh the negative consequences of doing so in a world where there is not. Therefore, we have good practical reason to believe that God exists, despite having little evidence for the latter claim. Shah's answer to this challenge is not to deny that it may be in our interests to believe that God exists. Instead, Shah denies that the fact that it is in our interest to believe that God exists can confer a reason for having a belief. Why? Because something cannot count as a reason for us if it is unable to move us into doing whatever the reason recommends. And if the transparency feature of belief is true, then we cannot be moved to believe by considering whether it is in our interests to believe (so that most people do not generate the belief that God exists on hearing Pascal's wager, even where they recognise its normative force). Thus, Pascal's Wager provides us with no foil to evidentialism. According to proponents of evidentialism, then, faith or any other non-epistemic consideration cannot provide us with reason to believe in God (or to have any other belief, for that matter).

Although I agree with Shah's deliberative constraint on reasons, I do not think that it can adequately be used as a means of adjudicating between pragmatism and evidentialism, since the pragmatist can run a *tu quoque* argument against evidentialism on this matter. To see this consider what a reason for belief is according to proponents of transparency (and evidentialism): namely, a reason to believe that p is simply an indication that p is true. This means that such a 'reason' applies only to the propositional objects of belief and not the belief states themselves, since they do not bear truth-conditions. The thought is that what explains (or even justifies) why a belief state has been formed or maintained is quite a separate matter to whether the belief is justified, e.g. the desirability of believing that there is a God may explain (or even justify) why S believes that there is a God, but that does not mean that S 's belief that there is a God is justified. Shah seems to think this a consideration in favour of evidentialism, as he puts it:

Only evidence for and against the truth of p is relevant to answering the doxastic question whether to believe that p , whereas only the desirability of believing that p is relevant to answering the practical question whether to bring about the belief that p (Shah 2006, p. 498).

By Shah's own admission, then, only non-epistemic considerations are relevant in answering the question of whether to bring about the belief that p . But it is curious that Shah uses the deliberative constraint on reasons to secure this claim when the result clearly flouts that very constraint, or, at least, one of the premises onto which it is built. Recall:

R is a reason for X to ϕ (where ϕ ranges over actions and beliefs) only if R is capable of being a reason for which X ϕ s.

If reasons to believe that p are always simply indications that p is true, then no reason for belief is capable of being a reason *for which* someone believes that p , since the reason for which someone believes that p is not itself an indication that p is true. So, to run a *reductio* against Shah: what justifies my belief that p cannot be what motivates my belief that p , so the reason that is said to be ‘justifying’ my belief is not really (according to the deliberative constraint) a reason at all. Thus, mere evidence for p cannot be considered a reason to believe that p . So the deliberative constraint on reasons poses a problem for evidentialism as much as it does for pragmatism.

Further, there is a way for the pragmatist to reply to this challenge (where there is not one for the evidentialist). For the pragmatist can say that if there is, indeed, a difference between the question “whether to believe that p ” and the question “whether to bring it about that I believe that p ”, then what the deliberative constraint shows us is that the question “whether to believe that p ” is irrelevant to answering the question of whether there is a reason to believe that p where the question “whether to bring it about that I believe that p ” is not. So that only the practical question of whether to bring it about that I believe that p is relevant to answering the question of whether there is reason for me to believe that p . The move is consistent with the deliberative constraint on reasons: my desire to bring it about that I have true beliefs both justifies and motivates my believing that p ; the move is consistent with transparency, because we can still hold that only evidential considerations are relevant to answering the question whether to believe that p . The claim is just that the question is not relevant to whether there is reason to believe that p (as the deliberative constraint shows us). Further, though there may be a psychological barrier to our considering anything other than p ’s truth when we deliberate as to whether to believe that p , there is no psychological barrier to our considering non-epistemic reasons to answer the question of how desirable it would be to believe that p , nor any psychological barrier to our bringing it about (through indirect means, perhaps) that we believe it. This guarantees pragmatism – there can be non-epistemic reasons for belief – but it does not deny that there can also be epistemic reasons for belief. An epistemic reason for belief, according to the pragmatist, is a reason to believe that p that is justified (as well as motivated) by the desirability of the epistemic aim of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods; thus, one has an epistemic reason to ϕ just in case ϕ -ing will help in the attaining of that aim. So it is not as if the pragmatist has removed the possibility of epistemic justification for belief.

The evidentialist cannot make the similar move of rejecting the relevance of the doxastic question its opponent thinks is the important one in considering whether S has reason to believe that p , because it is in thinking that the question whether to believe that p (i.e. the question the evidentialist thinks is the important one) is relevant to whether there is reason to believe that p that we get into problems vis-à-vis the deliberative constraint on reasons. Thus, far from identifying evidentialism as the victor in the debate between evidentialists and pragmatists, as Shah seems to think, the deliberative constraint on reasons adjudicates the debate on the pragmatist side.

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