

Handout 5: Shah and Velleman

1. Primary Thesis

Initial assumption: “Believing that p, assuming that p, and imagining that p involve regarding p as true-or, as we shall call it, accepting p. “

Naïve metaphysical question: What distinguishes these various forms of “acceptance” from one another? What distinguishes belief from the rest?

Shah and Velleman replace this with a more sophisticated psychological question. They assume that there are fairly stable concepts that we associate with “belief,” “assumption” and “imagination,” and ask what it is to conceptualize a frame of mind as a belief or an assumption or a state of imagination or fantasy.

The Primary Conceptual Thesis: “We claim that conceiving of an attitude as a belief, rather than an assumption or an instance of imagining, entails: (a) conceiving of it as an acceptance that is regulated for truth, while also (b) applying to it the standard of being correct if and only if it is true.”

Secondary theses:

(1) If you ask yourself whether to believe that p—if you’re deliberating about whether to believe p—you “must” inquire into whether or not p. (They say an attempt to answer the later question is the “inevitable” consequence of trying to answer the first.) The first question is “transparent” insofar as it gives way to the second.

(2) The best explanation of (1) is that we don’t conceptualize a state of mind as a belief unless we are prepared to criticize its falsity or approve of its truth depending on whether it captures or fails to capture the facts as we see them.

2. Preliminary Matters

S&V assume the standard propositional attitude analysis on which belief and desire are distinguished by their respective directions of fit. Beliefs have truth conditions whereas desires have conditions of satisfaction. The initial question arises because suppositions and fantasies also have truth conditions (according to S&V). They’re assuming that when you’re assuming or imagining something, you’re representing a certain state of affairs as actual or a proposition as true. So what distinguishes belief from these frames of mind?

The second assumption is that the “motivational role” of belief doesn’t distinguish it from the other states of mind in question. In defense, Velleman just cites the essay we

discussed last week and a piece by Bratman. (I guess it goes without saying, but I don't think these arguments against the pragmatic analysis are irresistible.)

3. The First Half of the Intellectualist View: Conceiving of someone's frame of mind as a belief requires conceiving of it as "regulated" by that person out of a concern for accurately representing the truth on some matter.

One respect in which belief differs from the other cognitive attitudes is the way in which it is formed, revised, and extinguished-or, as we shall say for short, the way in which it is regulated. One adopts an assumption for the sake of its utility in inquiry or argument, and one retains it just so long as it continues to serve that heuristic or polemical purpose. One's adoption and retention of an assumption are not responsive to whether it is true. In forming and retaining a belief, however, one responds to evidence and reasoning in ways that are designed to be truth-conducive. Hence belief is regulated for truth, whereas other, non-belief-involving cognitive attitudes are not. In our view, being regulated for truth is part of the very concept of belief: to conceive of an attitude as a belief is to conceive of it as a cognition regulated for truth, at least in some sense and to some extent.

4. The Second Half of the Intellectualist View: Conceiving of someone's frame of mind as a belief requires some preparedness to hold that person to the norm of truth: crucially, being prepared to criticize her if you deem her belief false or approve of her if you deem her belief true.

we think that the concept of belief must include more than the manner in which the attitude is actually regulated. Also part of the concept is a standard of correctness. Classifying an attitude as a belief entails applying to it the standard of being correct if and only if it is true.

Velleman used to think being regulated for truth entailed being criticizable for being false, but Shah has convinced him that this is false. Shah gives the argument elsewhere. Here he just says that it's pretty clear that wishful thinking produces beliefs so that some beliefs are not successfully regulated by a concern for truth. But once we say this, Shah thinks we need the second, normative, half of the intellectualist view to account for why we "must" decide whether to believe p by evaluating the evidence for and against its truth.

if this interpretation of truth-regulation is correct (as we believe), then the manner in which belief is regulated for truth can't be cited to explain the role of truth in doxastic deliberation. For when one deliberates whether to believe that p , this question not only gives way to the question whether p but does so to the exclusion of any other, competing question, such as whether p would be in one's interest. Yet if belief were required only to be weakly regulated for truth, then the potential outcome of deliberation could be envisioned as a belief that p so long as truth were treated as relevant to that outcome, without necessarily being treated as having absolute priority over opposing considerations. The question whether p would not have to crowd out competing, epistemic questions.

Task: Evaluate this argument for adding the second component and making it analytic (i.e. building it into the concept "we" supposedly associate with "belief")? Doesn't this just dismiss James et al by defining belief so that it excludes the cases on which they focus?

Constituent Task: Evaluate the claim they're calling "transparency." If you think about

whether it would be good to believe something P, you're confused. You can't be using "our" concept unless you immediately turn to whether P is true.

Response: Really? What if P is a counterfactual? What if P is an aesthetic claim? A moral claim? A mathematical one? A political slogan? A bit of metaphysics? What if you're a pragmatist? S&V are going pretty hard in saying that the pragmatic analysis isn't even a candidate meaning.

5. A Weird Definition of Deliberation

Deliberation is reasoning that aimed at issuing in some result in accordance with norms for results of that kind. Deliberating about whether to PHI is reasoning aimed at issuing or not issuing in a PHI-ing, in accordance with norms for PHling.

This seems vulnerable to a lot of counterexamples. Put in "fighting" for PHling. What do the norms have to do with this decision?

6. A Cartesian Definition of Judgment

Ordinarily, the reasoning that is meant to issue or not issue in a belief is meant to do so by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment. A judgment is a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition (although, as we shall explain, not all affirmations are judgments). It is an act because it involves occurrently presenting a proposition, or putting it forward in the mind; and it is cognitive because it involves presenting the proposition as true--or, as we have said, affirming it. A belief, by contrast, is a mental state of representing a proposition as true, a cognitive attitude rather than a cognitive act. In our view, the same standard of correctness is implicit in both concepts: a judgment, like a belief, is correct if and only if its content is true. Reasoning aims to issue or not issue in a belief that p in accordance with the relevant norm by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment that p in accordance with the corresponding norm. Strictly speaking, then, the question whether to believe that p is transparent, in the first instance, to the question whether to judge that p, which in turn is transparent to the question whether it would be correct to judge that p, and thence to whether p is true and, finally, to whether p.

Question: Is this a phenomenological analysis? Is it possible that the phenomenology enjoyed by Shah and Velleman is not enjoyed by everyone? Mightn't some people care less about truth or accuracy than they do? Might some people conceptualize belief so that it allows in religious belief. Or belief in country? Etc?

The argument from the phenomenology of withholding assent: it's like deciding not to conceptualize the state as a belief because one hasn't subjected it to sufficient regulation for truth.

one can sometimes decide to stop checking an hypothesis and rest content for now with the checks that it has survived thus far. In suspending tests of the hypothesis, one will forfeit one's entitlement to the permission of which one availed oneself in conceiving of it as an hypothesis, and one will then be obliged to apply the more stringent norm, thereby conceiving of the cognition as a belief. In this sense, at least, one can decide to believe--which is, strictly speaking, a matter of deciding to accord a cognition that status. Of course, one cannot just decide to believe that a column of numbers adds up to 3 because one likes the number 3. But having added the column and arrived at a particular result, one can decide whether or not to believe that result, in the sense that one can decide whether or not to accord the status of belief to one's acceptance....

The possibility of doubting a subject's classification of his own cognitions can take on a normative aspect in conversation with the subject himself. One sometimes responds to an assertion with, 'You don't really believe that!' - a remark that is intended less as a statement of fact than as an unsubtle suggestion. One might equally have said, 'You suspect that, or imagine it, but you haven't tested it sufficiently to believe it - and so you won't think of it as a belief any more now, will you?'

Question: Do your intuitions match Shah and Velleman's? (This little speech seems unnatural to me.)