

How Truth doesn't Govern Belief

One page-summary of the talk

Nishi Shah, in *How Truth governs Belief* (2003), argues that belief is a normative concept. His argument in favour of the normativity of belief is directly related to an argument against teleological accounts of belief. In his view, those accounts are unable to fully explain our belief-formation both in deliberative and in non-deliberative contexts. In deliberative contexts, as the phenomenon of transparency shows, truth and evidence seem to be the only criteria for deciding to hold or reject a belief; on the contrary, in non-deliberative contexts sometimes it happens that evidence loses its primacy and other non-evidential factors influence our belief-formation. Shah argues that a full explanation of this asymmetry between deliberative and non-deliberative belief-formation can be settled only by his specific normativist account of belief.

In my talk, I will give two criticisms against Shah's doxastic normativism. In the first criticism, I will argue that the prescriptive force required by the norm of belief to explain transparency and, consequently, the different behaviour of belief-formation in different contexts, conflicts with two other assumptions of his account: that such normativity is essentially tied to the concept of belief (a mental state is not a belief if it is not under the norm), and that its actual application is limited to deliberative contexts.

In the second criticism, I'll argue that the way in which the norm is characterized — in terms of a standard of correctness according to which a belief is correct if and only if the believed proposition is true — doesn't allow a prescriptive reading of it. In fact, the standard attributes correctness or incorrectness to every belief, independently by the fact that it is, or can be, the result of a deliberative process or not, simply on the ground that the believed proposition is true or false. But the truth or falsity of a proposition, if its content doesn't concern the intentional state of a subject, exclusively depends by some given circumstance, regardless of the intentions of a possible agent. The result would be that sometimes the norm of belief cannot be addressed to an agent. However, it's a very plausible assumption that prescriptions require agents to which they are prescribed. The conclusion would be that the norm of belief would not be prescriptive in some circumstances, but that's impossible, given that the norm, as it has been characterized by Shah, is essentially prescriptive.

In the last part of the talk, I'll give an alternative explanation of the phenomenon of transparency and, consequently, of the distinction between deliberative and non-deliberative contexts. This explanation doesn't require the norm of belief to be prescriptive. If, as I suggest, different explanations of the above distinction are available, then there are no further reasons for not to abandon Shah's account of belief.