TRANSPARENCY IN DOXASTIC DELIBERATION

Nathaniel P. Sharadin

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Approved by:
Geoffrey Sayre-McCord
Matthew Kotzen
John Roberts
ABSTRACT

Nathaniel P. Sharadin: Transparency in Doxastic Deliberation
(Under the direction of Geoffrey Sayre-McCord)

Nishi Shah and David Velleman purport to explain transparency, the phenomenon exhibited by doxastic deliberation whereby the first-personal question whether to believe that p gives way to the factual question whether p, by means of positing a constitutive norm of belief to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. I argue that the phenomenon they identify as transparency is not apt for explanation by means of a norm of belief because their explanation fails to respect a familiar feature about norms in general: the existence of a norm does not guarantee compliance with the norm. I articulate a competing interpretation of transparency and argue that this kind of transparency is fully explicable by the existence of a norm of belief.
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1. Introduction

A number of philosophers have claimed, following Bernard Williams, that, in some way or other, ‘beliefs aim at truth’. I put it this way, vaguely, deliberately: the purported meaning of the phrase ‘beliefs aim at truth’ varies widely from case to case, with some philosophers taking it to be a simple truism, and others an important substantive fact about features of the concept of belief. And in these latter cases, the actual content the slogan is supposed to express in its turn varies widely. Now, according to Williams, briefly, beliefs aim at truth because they aim at, so to speak, getting it *right* about the world: an attitude that didn’t have the aim of truth just wouldn’t be a belief – it would be a fantasy, or a hypothesis, or whatever. This thought, and the associated slogan that ‘beliefs aim at truth’, has recently been picked up by Nishi Shah and David Velleman. In a series of articles (Velleman 2000, Shah 2003) culminating in a paper jointly written by the two (Shah & Velleman 2005), Shah and Velleman argue that the slogan ‘beliefs aim at truth’ is best understood as expressing a twofold fact about beliefs: according to Shah and Velleman, beliefs are governed descriptively and also normatively by the standard of truth (2005: 499). As we will see, Shah and Velleman think that belief being governed normatively by the standard of truth is necessary to explain a feature of doxastic deliberation they call ‘transparency’. My aim in this paper is to argue that Shah and Velleman’s purported explanation of transparency fails. It ignores a familiar feature of normativity: the existence of a norm is not sufficient to explain

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compliance on the part of agents with the norm. In other words, there merely being a way that going on *correctly* consists in does not by itself guarantee that agents will not in fact go on *incorrectly*. 
2. Descriptive Features of Belief

Before looking at what Shah and Velleman mean by their claim that belief is governed both descriptively and normatively by the standard of truth, we should first look at how they distinguish belief from other mental attitudes like desire, hope, wish, &c. To say that something is a mental attitude is to say that it is a way an agent can be composed, mentally, toward some propositional contents: it is a way of being mentally related to the contents of a proposition, as when someone desires that she receive a raise, or hopes that her check does not bounce. According to Shah and Velleman, what is partly distinctive about the mental attitude of belief is that it is a cognitive (as opposed to conative) attitude (Shah & Velleman 2005: 409; Velleman 2000: 247-8). That is to say, it is an attitude that regards its propositional contents as true (as opposed to regarding its propositional contents as to be made true). Belief is of course not the only mental attitude that involves regarding its propositional contents as true, for the same holds with respect to imagining, supposing, and hypothesizing. Each of these regard their propositional contents as true for the sake of some purpose or other, such as fantasy, argument, or investigation. According to Shah and Velleman, belief is distinguished from these other cognitive attitudes in being what they call ‘weakly regulated for truth’ (2005: 499-50). I’ll come to the qualifier ‘weakly’ in just a moment; for now, consider only the claim that beliefs are regulated for truth: what does it
mean to say that beliefs are regulated for truth? According to Shah and Velleman, the claim that beliefs are regulated for truth is a claim about the manner in which beliefs – in contrast to other cognitive attitudes like imagining – are ‘formed, revised, and extinguished’ (2005: 498). The cognitive attitudes imagination and supposition are formed for the sake of, say, fantastical play and argument, respectively. And they are extinguished in the former case when the fantasy draws to a close, and in the latter when the supposition is no longer needed in the argument (as when a logician discharges his suppositions in performing a *reductio*).

Beliefs, by contrast, are formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are responsive to evidence and argument. Moreover, the mechanisms that form, revise, and extinguish beliefs are not responsive to evidence in just any manner, they are responsive in a way conducive to the truth (Shah & Velleman, 2005: 498, 500). Thus a belief (as opposed to a fantasy) that, for example, my office mate wants to do me serious physical harm, tends to be formed by mechanisms responsive to evidence of my office mate actually wanting to do me serious physical harm, like his consistently leaving frayed electric wires near my desk; tends to be reinforced by mechanisms sensitive to additional evidence of his wanting to do me harm, like his sharpening a letter-opener while scowling in my direction; and tends to be extinguished by mechanisms sensitive to evidence against it, like my finding out that my own dog chewed the electric wires, and that I am incapable of distinguishing his scowling countenance from his thoughtful one.

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2 This is *not* the question: What does it mean to say that beliefs are governed both normatively and descriptively by the standard of truth? Though, as we will see, the answer to the latter bit of this question will be given by the account of the truth-regulation of belief.

3 This view about what’s distinctive of belief is, of course, controversial. One might, for example, hold the view that the cognitive states of an agent that count as beliefs are those that affect or explain the agent’s behavior in a certain way. This strikes me as a plausible competitor to the view on offer, but I will not have any more to say about the merits (or demerits) of this (or other) competitor views as I proceed, since the focus here is not on
We are now in a position to see why Shah and Velleman introduce the qualifier ‘weakly’. Beliefs, they claim, are not ‘strongly’ truth-regulated, but only ‘weakly’ truth-regulated. This follows from the truism that agents’ beliefs are sometimes sensitive to influences that are not solely evidential. That is to say, according to Shah and Velleman, some attitudes regulated by mechanisms that are evidentially insensitive or sensitive in a way not conducive to the truth are in fact beliefs: not all beliefs, or not each belief in every case, is formed, revised, and extinguished by a mechanism that is sensitive exclusively to evidence of truth. Witness, for example, wishful thinking. It is a fact that mechanisms such as wishful thinking sometimes form (revise, extinguish) beliefs (Shah 2003: 461; Shah & Velleman 2005: 500). If one were to claim that no attitude that was regulated by mechanisms such as wishful thinking ever counted as a belief, one sets the bar too high: many of the attitudes we rightly call beliefs are thereby ruled out. (Shah’s prime example of this is the ‘cuckolded husband’ who, though in possession of evidence to the contrary, nevertheless believes that his wife is faithful (2003).)

Weak truth-regulation, then, is a claim about the mechanisms that can and do form beliefs: to say that beliefs are weakly truth-regulated is to say that bona fide beliefs are sometimes formed (revised, extinguished) by mechanisms that are subject to non-evidential influences, or, if not subject to non-evidential influences, then sensitive to evidence in a way not conducive to truth (e.g., wishful thinking). I am inclined to agree with Shah and Velleman on this point. It seems uncontroversial that, at least in some cases, mechanisms like wishful thinking, which is a mechanism paradigmatically insensitive to evidence of truth, can form, revise, and extinguish attitudes we rightly call beliefs. After all, requiring that all beliefs, in

making trouble for Shah and Velleman’s account of what’s distinctive of belief, but on showing why, given that account, they cannot explain what they take themselves to have explained, i.e., they cannot explain transparency. Thanks to Matt Kotzen for encouraging me to be clear about this point.
order to count as beliefs, be *strongly* truth-regulated comes dangerously close to ruling out as *impossible* unjustified beliefs. It looks as if if *strong* truth-regulation were true, then there just wouldn’t be room for any unjustified belief since all beliefs would be formed in (what I take to be) a justification-conferring way, i.e., by mechanisms that are solely response to evidence in a truth-conducive way. This thought is obviously sympathetic to externalist intuitions: whether or not it expresses a truth about justification will not here concern me. In any case, I follow Shah and Velleman in thinking that the correct way to characterize the truth-regulation of belief is in terms of weak truth-regulation.

Shah and Velleman think the fact that beliefs are regulated for truth in being formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms sensitive evidence in a truth-conducive way is a fact about the concept of belief. This fact is a *descriptive*, not a *normative*, fact about belief. It is intended to capture the intuition that beliefs (as opposed to other cognitive attitudes, like imagining and hypothesizing) are, as a matter of descriptive fact, tied to truth in an important way. The introduction of the qualifier ‘weakly’ is intended to capture the intuition that the tie beliefs have to truth is not so strong as to make us refuse to countenance as beliefs attitudes that are in some cases regulated by evidentially insensitive processes such as wishful thinking.\(^4\) To be clear, it is not a contingent matter that any belief is in fact weakly regulated for truth. For weak truth regulation is included in the concept of belief, and thus ‘to conceive of an attitude as a belief is to conceive of it as a cognition [weakly] regulated for truth’ (ibid.). This fact partly constitutes Shah and Velleman’s understanding of the slogan drawn from Williams that ‘beliefs aim at the truth’. Beliefs ‘aim at the truth’ because it is a fact about the concept of belief that for a cognition to count as a belief, it must in fact be the case

\(^4\) Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord for help with this way of putting the point.
that the cognition is the sort of thing (weakly) formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are responsive to evidence in a truth-conducive way. And this fact about belief, that they are weakly regulated for truth, wholly constitutes Shah and Velleman’s claim that beliefs are governed *descriptively* by the standard of truth. To say that the governance is in this case descriptive is partly to reiterate what we have already noted, namely, that a mental attitude that was not *in fact* (weakly) responsive to evidence in a truth-conducive way would *thereby* fail to count as a belief. Weak truth-regulation (partly) describes the contours of the concept of belief.
3. Doxastic Deliberation & Transparency

Recall that Shah and Velleman think that beliefs are governed not only descriptively by the standard of truth, but are also governed *normatively* by the standard of truth. We have just seen how they cash out the first claim: it is, they argue, a descriptive fact about beliefs that they are weakly truth-regulated cognitive attitudes. Shah and Velleman argue for the second claim – that beliefs are governed *normatively* by the standard of truth – by an inference to the best explanation of a phenomenon exhibited by doxastic deliberation that they call ‘transparency’. Let me explain how this argument works.

Doxastic deliberation is deliberation about what to believe. With respect to some proposition, \( p \), doxastic deliberation about \( p \) is deliberation that poses the first-person deliberative question *whether to believe that* \( p \) (Shah and Velleman 2005). Importantly, doxastic deliberation (of this kind) is therefore not concerned with the questions *whether to have a belief about* \( p \) or *whether I now believe that* \( p \) or any other questions that may be interestingly related or similar to, but are not precisely the question *whether to believe that* \( p \). To be clear: the question *whether to have a belief about* \( p \) is obviously not the same as (and so we should not expect to be answered by the same deliberative process as) the question *whether to believe that* \( p \). We are concerned here only with deliberation that asks the first-person deliberative question *whether to believe that* \( p \). Now, we might be tempted to balk at this restricted notion of doxastic deliberation since deliberation about *whether to have a belief about* \( p \) seems as apt for the label ‘doxastic deliberation’ as the sort of deliberation Shah and Velleman identify with doxastic deliberation. But giving in to that temptation
would, I think, be a mistake. The deliberative question Shah and Velleman identify, namely ‘whether to believe that \( p \)’, is intelligible independently of other related questions like ‘whether to have a belief that \( p \)’. If we think that the term ‘doxastic deliberation’ casts a wider net than Shah and Velleman allow and thereby includes questions that are not the question ‘whether to believe that \( p \)’, we should understand Shah and Velleman as here introducing ‘doxastic deliberation’ as a term of art. Shah and Velleman mean to be identifying a genuine kind of deliberation about the doxastic attitudes appropriate with respect to \( p \) and stipulatively labeling that kind of deliberation \textit{doxastic deliberation}. In any case, I will understand doxastic deliberation as such going forward, and so will not concern myself with differences between deliberation about the question we have in mind, namely ‘whether to believe that \( p \)’, and other related, but fundamentally different, questions, such as ‘whether to have a belief about \( p \)’.

Now, according to Shah and Velleman, doxastic deliberation of this kind, i.e., deliberation concerned with answering the question \textit{whether to believe that \( p \)}, always exhibits a phenomenon whereby the question \textit{whether to believe that \( p \)} “gives way” to the question \textit{whether \( p \)} (Shah 2003: 447; Shah & Velleman 2005: 499). They call this phenomenon exhibited in doxastic deliberation ‘transparency’. It is this phenomenon the best explanation of which is, according to Shah and Velleman, that belief is governed normatively by the standard of truth. More on that in just a moment; first, we should be clear what, precisely, the phenomenon of transparency is supposed to be. For after all, if belief being governed normatively by the standard of truth is supposed to be the best \textit{explanation} of the phenomenon of transparency, we had better have a firm grip on what transparency is supposed to be. As I have said, transparency is the phenomena exhibited in doxastic
deliberation whereby the question whether to believe that p always “gives way” to the question whether p – in other words, doxastic deliberation always “gives way” to factual inquiry. To say that the deliberative question always gives way to the factual is to say that an answer to the latter always determines an answer to the former (Shah & Velleman 2005: 499). Moreover, the transition from the deliberative question to the factual is wholly non-inferential: it is not mediated in any way by any kind of reasons. For the mediating activity of such reasons supposes that there is an inferential gap between answers to the question whether to believe that p and answers to the question whether p that reasons may be used to bridge. But that is precisely what the claim that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency is meant to deny: there is no gap between whether to believe that p and whether p (Shah 2003: 453). To avoid confusion, we should also note that transparency is in this sense a ‘descriptive’ rather than a ‘prescriptive’ or ‘normative’ claim about doxastic deliberation. It is not that Shah and Velleman think that in order to doxastically deliberate well one’s deliberation should exhibit transparency (that would be to make the normative or prescriptive claim). Rather, Shah and Velleman think that it is a truth about doxastic deliberation that it always in fact exhibits transparency. As they put it, ‘deliberating whether to believe that p entails intending to arrive at a belief as to whether p’ and if ‘my answering a question is going to count as deliberating whether to believe that p, then I must intend to arrive at a belief as to whether p just by answering that question’ (Shah & Velleman 2005: 530, fn.13; emphasis changed from original).⁵

⁵ Shah and Velleman explicitly adopt this characterization of transparency from Moran (1988, 2001) who also characterizes transparency as a descriptive (as opposed to a prescriptive) truth about doxastic deliberation. For more on transparency’s descriptive (as opposed to prescriptive character), see Shah (2006), p. 482.
Since it is so crucial to the argument going forward, at the risk of insulting or boring the reader, I will reiterate this last point about transparency. The claim that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency is meant by Shah and Velleman as a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation. Here is an analogy to drive home the point: it is a descriptive truth about all members of the United States House of Representatives that they are elected to their offices. It is true that if one is a member of the House then one is always also elected to stand for some district or other. This descriptive truth about members of the House is not true of, for example, members of the United States Senate. Members of the Senate can be appointed by governors to, inter alia, fill vacancies left by retiring or deceased senators. So it’s not true that if one is a member of the Senate one is always elected to stand for some district or other, because one can be appointed to fill the office. There might perhaps be a prescriptive truth about the Senate corresponding to the descriptive one about the House to the effect that all members of the Senate ought to be elected to their offices (as opposed to being appointed). What is important here is that the claim that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency is like the descriptive truth about the House, and not the prescriptive claim about the Senate. The claim that transparency is true of doxastic deliberation is not the claim that doxastically deliberating in good faith, well, responsibly, or whatever, requires that one’s deliberation about whether to believe that $p$ must give way to deliberation about whether $p$ (that would be like the prescriptive claim that Senators ought to be elected). The claim that transparency is true of doxastic deliberation is instead the claim that always in fact in doxastically deliberating (full stop) one’s deliberation about whether to believe that $p$ gives way to

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6 Again, see Shah & Velleman (2005), Moran (1988), and Shah (2006).
deliberation about whether $p$ (that’s like the descriptive claim that House members must be elected).

Let me make a brief digression here to avoid (or at least forestall) possible confusion. Here is one way – an incorrect way – to understand the dialectic so far. Shah and Velleman claim that transparency is always exhibited by doxastic deliberation and that (as I have put it) it is a descriptive truth that all doxastic deliberations exhibit transparency. This might seem to make the question of explaining transparency otiose, for it might appear to make the connection between doxastic deliberation and transparency so tight as to obviate the need for explanation entirely. If the kind of doxastic deliberation we are considering is, as I have said it is, stipulatively defined, then the claim that this kind of doxastic deliberation always exhibits transparency might be understood as a further stipulative condition on something’s counting as an instance of doxastic deliberation. The phenomenon of transparency understood in this way, as a constitutive truth, stipulatively defined, about doxastic deliberation, makes unintelligible Shah and Velleman’s attempt at explaining transparency. For, after all, if it is stipulatively constitutive of doxastic deliberation that such deliberation always exhibits transparency, this makes it completely unsurprising and immediately explicable why each doxastic deliberation in fact exhibits transparency: we have stipulated – defined it such – that it does! As I said, I think this must be a misunderstanding of the dialectic. In order to make sense of Shah and Velleman’s attempt at an explanation of the transparency of doxastic deliberation (an attempt that, as I said, would be unintelligible if they meant merely to stipulatively define transparency as a part of doxastic deliberation) we should understand the dialectic as follows. Shah and Velleman identify a kind of doxastic deliberation, namely deliberation concerned with the question \textit{whether to believe that} $p$. They
then notice a surprising feature of all deliberations of this kind: all deliberations of this kind, deliberations that pose the first-personal question *whether to believe that p*, in fact exhibit a phenomenon whereby the doxastic question gives way to the factual question *whether p*. This fact, the fact that all doxastic deliberations exhibit transparency, then cries out for explanation since it was not explicitly included in the precisification of the kind of doxastic deliberation we were considering. This is the correct way, I take it, to understand the progress of Shah and Velleman’s argument. Transparency should not be understood as definitively true – true by stipulation – of doxastic deliberation (though it is true in fact that all doxastic deliberations exhibit transparency) since understanding it as such would do violence to Shah and Velleman’s felt need to explain the phenomenon: it would make this felt need unintelligible. Rather, we should understand transparency as (surprisingly) exhibited by a kind of deliberation defined independently of transparency, i.e., independent of including transparency within the stipulative definition of doxastic deliberation.7

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7 It is possible to remain suspicious at this point: it might well seem like in fact, despite their best efforts, Shah and Velleman are actually packing transparency into their definition of doxastic deliberation. This thought is, I think, close to the truth: I will return to this thought later in the paper. For now, we should (charitably) understand Shah and Velleman as attempting an explanation of transparency as distinct from simply defining doxastic deliberation as a process that necessarily always exhibits transparency (which would make any explanation of transparency seem silly). Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord, Matt Kotzen, and Rob Van Someren Greve for each bringing this possible confusion to my attention.
4. Explaining Transparency

We can now ask what explains transparency: What explains the fact that doxastic deliberation about whether to believe that \( p \) inevitably gives way to deliberation about whether \( p \)? Here is one possible explanation, available if belief is strongly, and not just weakly, truth-regulated: doxastic deliberation is transparent to factual inquiry because beliefs are regulated, that is, they are formed, revised, and extinguished, by mechanisms that are sensitive \textit{exclusively} to evidence of truth. This would explain transparency because, necessarily, anything that counted as a belief that \( p \) would be sensitive to (and only to) evidence of whether \( p \). So the question \textit{whether to believe that} \( p \) would inevitably give way to the question \textit{whether} \( p \) because belief is the sort of attitude that is, by its very nature, in fact only sensitive to considerations having to do with whether \( p \). In other words, wondering \textit{whether to believe} \( p \) is wondering \textit{whether} \( p \) because a belief that \( p \) as such cannot be formed except in response to the truth of \( p \). (The mechanisms that form beliefs are simply incapable of forming beliefs that \( p \) except in response to \( p \).) To put it in language we are already familiar with, this explanation of transparency appeals to the strong truth-regulation of belief. This is not, for obvious reasons, the route that Shah and Velleman take to explaining transparency: as we have seen, Shah and Velleman deny that beliefs are strongly truth-regulated. Rather, according to their account (with which I agree), beliefs are sometimes formed by mechanisms that are not sensitive exclusively to evidence of truth, as in, paradigmatically, the case of wishful thinking. So an appeal to the strong truth-regulation of beliefs cannot explain transparency, because beliefs are not in fact strongly truth-regulated.
What about weak truth-regulation: Can weak truth-regulation explain the transparency of doxastic deliberation to factual inquiry? No, it cannot. For, weak truth-regulation allows that at least in some cases beliefs are formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are evidentially insensitive. And so weak truth-regulation cannot explain why transparency holds as a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation, since weak truth-regulation can explain (at best) only why transparency is true in some cases of doxastic deliberation. And that is not the phenomenon of transparency: the phenomenon of transparency is (putatively) the phenomenon exhibited by all cases of doxastic deliberation whereby the question whether to believe that p gives way to the question whether p. (Again: that is the point of emphasizing Shah and Velleman’s claim that transparency is a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation.)

Notice that there is a general strategy that these two failed explanations of transparency share: each appeals to some feature or other of the concept of belief in order to explain the transparency of doxastic deliberation. The thought here is a plausible one: features of the concept of belief can explain the transparency of doxastic deliberation because the concept of belief is one that is itself used in doxastic deliberation. (Of course it would not do to say that doxastic deliberation is transparent to factual inquiry because of some features of our concept of ‘imaginings’.) And it is precisely this strategy that Shah and Velleman use in explaining transparency. Given the failure of descriptive features of the concept of belief (like truth-regulation) to explain transparency, Shah and Velleman claim that we should look to the normative feature of the concept belief.

According to Shah and Velleman, the transparency of doxastic deliberation is best explained by the concept of belief including within it a ‘standard of correctness to the effect
that a belief is correct if and only if it is true’ (2005: 499-500). What it means to say that the concept belief includes within it a standard of correctness is that the norm of belief that a belief is correct if and only if it is true is a constitutive norm of the concept belief.

Constitutive norms are best understood contrastively with non-constitutive norms. The fact that a norm is constitutive of some concept or other means that a thing’s falling under that concept means it necessarily falls under the standard set by the constitutive norm: being of the relevant kind means being subject to the norm. Thus, when an agent competent with the relevant concept conceives of a thing as falling under that concept, she is thereby committed to thinking of the thing as subject to the relevant norm. If a concept has a non-constitutive norm, by contrast, it does not follow immediately from a thing’s falling under that concept that it necessarily falls under the standard set by the non-constitutive norm: being of the relevant kind does not mean being under the norm. Thus, when an agent competent with the relevant concept conceives of a thing as falling under that concept, she is not thereby committed to thinking of the thing as subject to the relevant norm. In general, for all A and for any N, if N is a constitutive norm of A, then something’s being A is sufficient to make it subject to norm N. So, for example, suppose it is a constitutive norm of the game ‘Red-Rover’ that players ought, when their names are called, run toward the opposing team and try to break through the linked arms of their opponents. Then to say that some particular game is a game of Red-Rover (as opposed, say, to a game of King-Of-The-Hill), is to apply to it a standard according to which any particular player is acting appropriately (well) if and only if,

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8 Notice that although the claim that belief includes within it a standard of correctness is in some sense a descriptive claim about the concept belief, it is a claim about the normative features of the concept, and not about the descriptive features of it. It is the failure of the descriptive features of the concept of belief to explain transparency (and not the failure of descriptive claims in general to explain, which would be absurd) that lead Shah and Velleman to think that we should posit some normative features of the concept.
when her name is called, she runs toward the opposing team and tries to break through the linked arms of her opponents. So if I observe a game I conceive of as Red-Rover wherein a player, when her name is called, refuses to run due to shyness, or tries to duck under the arms of her opponents, I’m committed to thinking in virtue of my thinking she is playing Red-Rover (rather than King-Of-The-Hill or Kick-The-Can) that, ceteris paribus, what she has done is incorrect. And this is because (as we have supposed) merely deploying the concept of the game ‘Red-Rover’ involves deploying the concept of a game that is necessarily subject to a certain standard, namely the standard according to which players must, when their name is called, run toward the opposing team and try to break through the linked arms of their opponents. Notice too that the fact that there is this constitutive norm of Red-Rover is part of what distinguishes Red-Rover from mere manic running and flailing about. The same is true, say Shah and Velleman, of the concept of belief. Deploying the concept of belief is deploying the concept of a cognitive attitude to which the standard of being correct if and only if it is true necessarily applies. And this is what distinguishes beliefs from other cognitive attitudes like imagining, supposing, and hypothesizing: these cognitive attitudes are not subject to the constitutive norm of being correct if and only if true. And, just as with Red-Rover, there might be non-constitutive norms of belief, such as: a belief is better, ceteris paribus, if it is suitable for serving as the input to practical reasoning. The important point is that the norm of belief to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true is not like these non-constitutive norms, whatever they may be. The norm of belief that says a belief is correct if and only if it is true is a norm to which one is subject simply in virtue of having beliefs (and not also, as in our example, in virtue of being a practical reasoner of a certain

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9 Thanks to Geoff Sayre-McCord for encouraging me to be clearer about these points.
sort). This claim, that beliefs are subject to a standard to the effect that they are correct if and only if true, constitutes the other half of Shah and Velleman’s take on Williams’ slogan that ‘beliefs aim at truth’. Beliefs ‘aim at truth’ in this sense because they go wrong when they miss the mark of truth: they are still beliefs, but they are incorrect qua beliefs. And this claim constitutes the second half of Shah and Velleman’s claim that beliefs are governed both descriptively and normatively by the standard of truth.

We are now in a position to see how Shah and Velleman hope to explain the transparency of doxastic deliberation by appeal to the constitutive norm of belief that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. Doxastic deliberation, recall, is deliberation about whether to believe that \( p \). It should be obvious, then, that in doxastic deliberation epistemic agents are deploying the concept of ‘belief’. But if the constitutive norm of belief is that a belief is correct if and only if it is true, and conceiving of an attitude as a belief is conceiving of it as an attitude subject to the norm correct if and only if true, then in doxastic deliberation epistemic agents are deploying the concept of an attitude conceived of by them as being correct if and only if true. In asking whether to believe that \( p \), epistemic agents are asking whether to have an attitude conceived of as being subject to a standard of correctness to the effect that the attitude is correct if and only if true. And this, say Shah and Velleman, makes the transparency of doxastic deliberation to factual inquiry utterly unsurprising – that is, it explains why doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency. For in virtue of being concerned with the question whether to believe \( p \) (as opposed to whether to imagine that \( p \)), doxastic deliberation is subject to the standard of truth implicit in the concept of belief and made explicit by an articulation of the constitutive norm of belief. The point is that in deliberating about whether to believe that \( p \), an epistemic agent is thereby subject to a norm to the effect
that her believing that \( p \) will be correct if and only if \( p \) is true. According to Shah and Velleman, if this is right, then an epistemic agent, by deliberating about \emph{whether to believe that} \( p \) (as opposed to whether to \emph{imagine}, \emph{hypothesize}, or \emph{suppose} that \( p \)), thereby commits herself to answering the question whether to believe that \( p \), as Shah and Velleman put it, ‘with an eye exclusively to whether \( p \’ (2005: 501). If it is true that in wondering \emph{whether to believe that} \( p \) an epistemic agent is wondering whether to have an attitude conceived of as correct if and only if \( p \), it is, say Shah and Velleman, completely unsurprising that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency: after all, agents are deliberating about whether to have beliefs, and beliefs are correct if and only if true, so agents’ doxastic deliberations about \emph{whether to believe that} \( p \) naturally give way to factual inquiry over \emph{whether} \( p \). Another way to put the same point is to say that the doxastic question \emph{whether to believe that} \( p \) gives way to the factual question \emph{whether} \( p \) because the standards implicit in the doxastic question make it such that only an answer to the factual question counts as providing grounds for a correct answer to the doxastic question. And this, say Shah and Velleman, explains the transparency of doxastic deliberation to factual inquiry.

This explanation of transparency, in terms of the constitutive norm of belief, is quite elegant. Notice that it shares with our two failed explanations the general strategy of appealing to some feature or other of the concept of belief and then pointing out that the concept of belief is necessarily deployed in doxastic deliberation concerned with the question whether to believe that \( p \). Notice too that the norm of belief that is used to explain transparency is plausible in its own right: it strikes me as completely intuitive that, whatever else may make a belief correct or incorrect (i.e., whatever other norms may govern belief), a belief’s being \emph{true} speaks in favor of it, and a belief’s being \emph{false} speaks against it. Further,
this norm is plausibly a *constitutive* norm of belief: *all* beliefs, simply in virtue of *being* beliefs, are subject to evaluation in terms of their truth. That’s why, after all, Williams’ figure of the willful believer who goes about believing without any regard to truth strikes us not just as mad, but as going *epistemically wrong* in some way. (Compare, for example, the appropriate reaction to someone with false hypotheses, false suppositions, or false imaginings to the appropriate reaction to someone with false beliefs.) Despite the elegance of this explanation, I think this explanation rests on a failure to appreciate a fundamental feature of constitutive norms (and, indeed, norms more generally). Let me try and explain where I think Shah and Velleman go wrong.
5. Why You Cannot Explain Descriptive Transparency with a Norm

Consider for a moment the fact (suppose with me that it is a fact) that the game of Red-Rover exhibits a phenomenon whereby players always, when their names are called, run toward the opposing team in an attempt to break through the linked arms of their opponents. That is to say, every game of Red-Rover (as opposed to some other game, say King-Of-The-Hill), is always such that each player, when her name is called, runs toward the opposing team attempting to break through the linked arms of her opponents. Note that this fact about Red-Rover is a descriptive truth; it’s like the fact that all House members are elected: it’s true that every member of the House is elected, and it’s true that in every game of Red-Rover each player runs when their name is called. Call this phenomenon exhibited by Red-Rover ‘name-running’. Note too that I do not mean to define Red-Rover as the game that exhibits name-running. We might well define Red-Rover in terms of other features of the game: the number of players (always even), the team-structure (no more than two), or whatever. Name-running is simply a phenomenon we notice that is exhibited by every game of Red-Rover. We might be surprised by this feature of Red-Rover: after all, why should it be that every game of Red-Rover exhibits name-running? Suppose that we want to explain the name-running exhibited by Red-Rover: How might we explain it? Here is one possible explanation (it’s not a very good one, as we will see). Red-Rover exhibits name-running, i.e., the phenomenon whereby in all games of Red-Rover, each player runs toward the opposing team when her name is called, because there is a constitutive norm of the game of Red-Rover to
the effect that a game of Red-Rover is correct if and only if each player runs when her name is called. It is a fact, we say, that the game of Red-Rover is a game that has implicitly the standard of being correct if and only if each player runs when her name is called. So, our explanation continues, of course all instances of Red-Rover exhibit the phenomenon of name-running, for in virtue of being instances of the game Red-Rover (as opposed to Capture-The-Flag or King-Of-The-Hill), they are subject to the standard implicit in the game Red-Rover and made explicit by an articulation of the constitutive norm of Red-Rover. Or, to put the point another way, Red-Rover exhibits name-running because the standards implicit in the game Red-Rover make it such that only a game wherein each player runs when her name is called counts as an admirable instance of Red-Rover. Call this the normative explanation of name-running.

What should be immediately obvious is that this normative explanation is dead on arrival. For suppose it is a fact that there is a constitutive norm of Red-Rover to the effect that a game of Red-Rover is correct if and only if each player runs when her name is called. What follows from this? It follows that a game of Red-Rover will be incorrect (bad, shabbily done) if some player fails to run when her name is called (out of shyness, fright, laziness, or whatever). It does not follow that there are in fact no games of Red-Rover wherein at least one player fails to run when her name is called. And it was this latter fact that was in need of explanation: we wanted an explanation of why in all cases, without exception, games of Red-Rover exhibit name-running. A norm to the effect that a game where players do not run when
their name is called is incorrect *qua* game of Red-Rover cannot explain why in all games of Red-Rover all players in fact run when their names are called

Recall the explanation of transparency offered by Shah and Velleman. It is structurally identical to the explanation of eight-playeredness given above. What we have in both cases is an argument of the following form:

1. It is descriptively true of activity C that it always exhibits phenomenon P.

2. There is a norm constitutive of activity C to the effect that something is a correct instance of C if and only if X.

3. (2) explains (1).

The problem with this argument is not obviously in (1-2): for all we know, these may be true. It may be true that Red-Rover exhibits name-running, and that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency. It may also be true that there is a norm of belief to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true and that games of Red-Rover are not shoddy if and only if players run when their name is called. I have said that the former, at least, strikes me as completely intuitive. The problem with this argument lies in (3). It cannot be that (2) explains (1) because (2) leaves it open that (1) *is not and never will be* the case. After all, ex hypothesi, no game of Red-Rover ever has a player that fails to run when her name is called. But for all the constitutive norm to the effect that a game of Red-Rover is shabby if players do not run when their name is called tells us, some group of competent users of the concept

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10 At least, the norm cannot explain eight-playeredness all on its own: it would have to be combined with some claim about the necessary, overriding nature of a motivation to comply with the norm possessed by all agents that participate in the relevant activity. And of course, no such claim is in the offing either in the case of King-Of-The-Hill or in the case of belief. More on this in a moment.
Red-Rover might very well opt to play a game of Red-Rover wherein some players do not run when their name is called, out of fear, or exhaustion, or whatever. The point is that the norm leaves open the possibility that they are still playing Red-Rover while having players that fail to run when their name is called. But the phenomenon we wanted to explain – the phenomenon of name-running – was the phenomenon whereby no game of Red-Rover in fact had any players that failed to run when their name was called. The fact that these players think their game is governed by a certain standard doesn’t guarantee they will live up to the standard. Similarly, the fact that an epistemic agent is a competent user of the concept of belief and is wondering whether to believe that \( p \) guarantees only that she will think that her belief is governed by the standard of being correct if and only if true: it does not guarantee that she will meet that standard. And meeting the standard in question is precisely what an explanation of the phenomena of, respectively, name-running and transparency would require. Something has gone wrong.

Here is one diagnosis of the problem: in our normative explanation of name-running, and Shah and Velleman’s normative explanation of transparency, we have left out the crucial fact that all agents are in possession of an overriding (in the sense of being determinative of action) motivation to comply with the norm in question. If this were right, if it was right to say that all agents are overridingly motivated to comply with the relevant norm, then the existence of the norm of Red-Rover and the existence of the norm of belief would explain their respective associated phenomena. For then it would be entirely unsurprising why all instances of doxastic deliberation exhibit transparency and all games of Red-Rover exhibit name-running. That there is a norm to the effect that a game of Red-Rover is correct (not shoddily done) if and only if all players run when their name is called combined with the fact
that all agents have an overriding motivation to comply with this norm makes the fact that we never see games of Red-Rover where players fail to run when their name is called utterly unsurprising: it’s just what we would expect since, after all, agents are overriding motivated to have games of Red-Rover wherein they run when their name is called. This is not a promising line of thought for three related reasons. First, it would involve attributing to agents (players of Red-Rover in the one case, and believers in the other) a motivation we have no ulterior reason to suppose they have: the only reason to suppose that agents are in possession of an overriding motivation to comply with the relevant norm is to enable the norm to explain its associated phenomenon. Such a maneuver is paradigmatically ad-hoc. Second, the existence of motivations like the ones in question is questionable in its own right: what reason do we have to think there are motivations of the kind needed to enable the relevant norm to explain its associated phenomenon? Overridingness of the sort that is needed is famously problematic to establish. Third, and most damning, is the observation that positing the overriding motivation necessary for the relevant norm to explain its associated phenomenon simply pushes the explanatory question back: Why is it the case that all agents are in possession of a motivation to comply with the relevant norm? In particular: Why is it the case that all epistemic agents are overriding motivated to comply with the norm of belief? These points seem to me sufficient to recommend abandoning this line of thought. I think the correct diagnosis of the problem lies elsewhere.

Recall that according to Shah and Velleman, doxastic deliberation always exhibits transparency: ‘if my answering a question is going to count as deliberating whether to believe that $p$, then I must intend to arrive at a belief as to whether $p$ just by answering […] the question whether $p$’ (2005: 530, fn. 13; emphasis changed from original). I have been
insisting that this fact about doxastic deliberation, that it always exhibits transparency, cannot be explained by appeal to the constitutive norm of a concept necessarily employed in doxastic deliberation, namely belief, because governance by a norm does not entail action in accordance with it. We might put the point by saying that Shah and Velleman fail in an attempt to derive an ‘is’ from an ‘ought’: they attempt to derive the ‘is’ of transparency from the ‘ought’ of the norm of belief. There is a familiar feature of normative thought that explains why it is a mistake to attempt a normative explanation of a descriptive phenomenon like transparency: the existence of a norm to the effect that ϕ’ing is correct does not guarantee that agents will in fact ϕ. Being subject to a norm, being appropriately evaluable in light of a norm requires that we at least understand what it means for an agent’s behavior to be, so to speak, all in the dark. And being subject to a norm in no way guarantees, all on its own, that an agent’s behavior will not in fact be all in the dark. (Ought implies can not as much as it implies can – what an absurdity to say that agents are subject to the norm of ‘gravity’!) This fact about normativity is so uncontroversial as to make a discussion of it seem a bit superfluous, but it is instructive I think to see precisely how Shah and Velleman run afoul of it. Shah and Velleman’s trouble begins right off the bat, starting with their description of the phenomenon of transparency as being the phenomenon exhibited by doxastic deliberation whereby the question whether to believe p automatically gives way to the question whether p. As we have seen, this account of transparency as a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation leaves no room for normativity to play a role: the possibility of a normative explanation is already dead in the water, though we might not (and Shah and Velleman do not) notice it. In general, if there is no logical space between the fact that a
thing is one way and the fact that it ought to be that way, then there is no space for the operation of normativity.
6. Transparency: Normative not Descriptive

The failure of Shah and Velleman’s explanation of transparency in terms of the constitutive norm of belief not only reminds us of a fundamental and already familiar feature of normative thought, it also illustrates a broader point about the phenomenon of transparency and its relation to the concept of belief *per se*. It will help first to be reminded of the dialectical arrangement of the relevant pieces so far. Recall that in this discussion the relevant descriptive features of beliefs are that they are cognitive, weakly truth-regulated attitudes. To say that beliefs are weakly truth-regulated is to say that they are formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are not only responsive to evidence in a truth conducive way: our (and Shah and Velleman’s) paradigmatic example of a mechanism capable of forming a belief (and not, for example, just a fantasy) that was only weakly truth-regulated was the mechanism of *wishful thinking*. Strong truth-regulation was thought not to be a feature of belief because the fact of strong truth-regulation would rule out countenancing as beliefs many attitudes we do in fact so countenance. For strong truth-regulation being true of belief would require that any attitude that counts as a belief must be formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are always only sensitive to evidence in a truth conducive way. Again, strong truth-regulation is clearly false of belief because, at least in some cases, we countenance as a belief an attitude formed, revised, and extinguished, by a mechanism like, for example, wishful thinking. But notice: *were* strong truth-regulation true of belief, it *would* explain the phenomenon of transparency exhibited by doxastic deliberation. I
explained why this was so above, but it bears repeating: strong truth-regulation explains the transparency of doxastic deliberation because if strong truth-regulation is true of belief, something’s being a belief guarantees that the question whether to believe p will give way to the question whether p. After all, if strong (as opposed to weak) truth-regulation is true of belief it is not just that an answer to this latter question is the only thing that can correctly provide an answer to the former. Rather, an answer to the latter, factual, question is the only thing that can (full stop) provide an answer to the former, doxastic question. Of course, because Shah and Velleman do not think strong truth-regulation is true of belief (and I agree), they look for an alternate, normative explanation of transparency – one that we just saw was fundamentally flawed because it failed to respect a familiar feature of normative thought.

Here is where we can notice the broader point about the relationship between the phenomenon of transparency and our concept of belief. The point is this: once we give-up on strong truth-regulation and move to (the much more plausible) weak truth-regulation, we cannot explain the phenomenon of transparency. Of course, it was weak truth-regulation’s inability to explain transparency that led Shah and Velleman to look for an alternate explanation, which they thought they found in the constitutive norm of belief. As they put it,

Interpreting the concept of belief as requiring evidence-responsiveness strong enough to account for transparency would […] entail denying that it leaves room for other influences, whereas acknowledging that belief’s responsiveness to evidence leaves room for other influences entails accepting that it is not strong enough to account for transparency. We
choose the latter option, because transparency can be explained instead by the hypothesis that the concept of belief includes a standard of correctness. (Shah & Velleman, 2005: 501)

As we have seen, Shah and Velleman’s purported explanation of transparency fails – it simply cannot explain what it is intended to explain. And this failure to find a normative explanation of transparency given the weak truth-regulation of belief should give us pause. For, after all, it is not as if Shah and Velleman merely incorrectly identify the norm of belief that explains transparency: as I have been urging, there is no possibility of giving an explanation of the general kind that they purport to give. Yet the transparency of doxastic deliberation does seem to be a genuine phenomenon. Are we stuck, then, either with an inexplicable phenomenon in transparency or with the implausible claim that beliefs are strongly truth-regulated? I do not think so.

Strong truth-regulation and transparency stand or fall together. Once we give up on strong truth-regulation, and opt instead for the much more plausible view that beliefs are only weakly truth-regulated (a view Shah and Velleman in fact hold) we should also give up on the idea that doxastic deliberation exhibits the sort of transparency we have been considering.

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One might think that even strong truth-regulation cannot explain transparency. After all, it seems possible for there to be an agent whose beliefs are strongly truth-regulated but who engages in a kind of doxastic deliberation that does not exhibit transparency. If we imagine the eponymous heroine in Jane Austen’s *Emma* as having strongly truth-regulated beliefs (i.e., beliefs regulated only by mechanisms that are sensitive exclusively to evidence in a truth conducive way), then Harriet is an agent like that. In Harriet’s doxastic deliberation, the first-personal question *whether to believe that* *p* gives way not to the factual question *whether* *p* but to the question *whether Emma believes that* *p*. Cases like this are interesting, and if they can be made to work, they would show that strong truth-regulation and transparency do not stand or fall together: they would be independent phenomenon. But I doubt whether fully spelled out versions of radical epistemic agents like Harriet can be made coherent. In any case, these issues are somewhat orthogonal, and I leave them aside for the remainder of this paper: the important point is that we should give up on a conception of transparency as a descriptive phenomenon, and this point holds whether or not one thinks strong truth-regulation can in fact explain descriptive transparency.
Thus we shouldn’t be in the market for an explanation of the seemingly inexplicable phenomenon of transparency, since we ought to deny that doxastic deliberation exhibits transparency in the first place. That is, we should deny that the question *whether to believe that* \( p \) always gives way (is transparent) to the question *whether* \( p \). This is not as radical as it might sound, for there is a phenomenon closely related to, but fundamentally different from, transparency that *is* true of doxastic deliberation and *is* apt for explanation in terms of the constitutive norm of belief. It is the phenomenon whereby in *epistemically correct* doxastic deliberation, the question *whether to believe that* \( p \) gives way (is transparent) to the question *whether* \( p \). We might call this the *normative* phenomenon of transparency and contrast it with the *descriptive* phenomenon of transparency that we have been considering so far. Unlike descriptive transparency, which Shah and Velleman claim is a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation (one doesn’t get to *count* as doxastically deliberating unless one’s deliberation exhibits transparency), *normative transparency* is a *normative* or *prescriptive* truth about doxastic deliberation (one doesn’t get to count as doxastically deliberating well unless one’s deliberation exhibits transparency).

This fact, the fact that transparency is a *normative* as opposed to a *descriptive* truth about doxastic deliberation strikes me as correct. Notice first that the normative truth of transparency, while compatible with weak truth-regulation, is not explained by it. The normative truth of transparency, i.e., the fact that a doxastic deliberation is incorrect *qua* doxastic deliberation if it does not exhibit transparency is not *explained* by the fact that beliefs are formed, revised, and extinguished by mechanisms that are only weakly responsive to evidence in a truth conducive way. Further, the normative phenomenon of transparency is *not* compatible with strong truth-regulation, for strong truth-regulation fails to leave open the
possibility of a belief’s being formed in a way that is not in fact responsive to evidence in a truth conducive way: that is, strong truth-regulation cannot explain the normative phenomenon of transparency for the exactly the reason (though put contrapositively) that the constitutive norm of belief could not explain the descriptive truth of transparency. And this is not an accident: as I have said, the descriptive truth of transparency stands or falls with strong truth-regulation. Notice next that the normative phenomenon of transparency is fully explicable by there being a constitutive norm of belief to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. For there is in general no problem in deriving an ‘ought’ from another ‘ought’: it is because beliefs ought to be true that the business of deciding whether to have attitudes conceived of as beliefs, i.e., doxastic deliberation, ought to give way to factual inquiry.

If this is right, then the claim that the phenomenon of transparency is actually a normative (and not a descriptive) phenomenon allows us to put together the various pieces of Shah and Velleman’s initial puzzle in a way that makes good sense and is not subject to the distortions that make Shah and Velleman’s picture fundamentally untenable. Recall that Shah and Velleman begin by trying to capture Williams’ intuition that beliefs ‘aim at truth’. Shah and Velleman cash out this slogan in terms of the twofold claim that belief is governed both descriptively and normatively by the standard of truth. Belief is governed descriptively by the standard of truth because it is weakly truth-regulated. So far so good. But, we ask: What explains the transparency of doxastic deliberation? Now, Shah and Velleman take this to be a question asking for an explanation of a descriptive truth about doxastic deliberation: all doxastic deliberation, in order to count as such, exhibits transparency. We saw how they attempted to explain this in terms of the constitutive norm of belief to the effect that a belief
is correct if and only if it is true. And we saw how this attempt failed because it failed to respect a familiar and fundamental feature of normative thought that the possibility of guidance by a norm requires the possibility of failure to be in conformance with it. But what if we instead take this explanatory question to be asking for an explanation of a normative truth about doxastic deliberation: Why is it the case that we evaluate as shabby, or shoddily done, doxastic deliberations that do not exhibit transparency? That question, the explanation of that phenomenon, is, it seems to me, precisely the fact that there is a constitutive norm of belief to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. Because doxastic deliberation is the business of generating beliefs (as opposed to imaginings, or hypotheses, or whatever), and because beliefs are correct if and only if they are true, doxastic deliberation is correct if and only if it gives way to factual inquiry, that is to say if it is transparent.
References


