Evidentialism and Transparency: a Critical Approach

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Abstract. With the current paper we will intend i) to elaborate a critical examination of the alleged use of transparency as independent of any epistemological view in favor of evidentialism, ii) to remark the inadequacies of the Absjørn Steglich-Petersen's attempt to replace the concept of belief with that of truth in reflective contexts in response to the claim of some evidentialist who want to use transparency to support their own dialectical purposes, and iii) to suggest a new approach to transparency which allows us to expand the theoretical horizons in which philosophical research on the subject has so far moved.

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Introduction

Concerning the examination of one's own doxastic behavior, a preliminary characterisation of the phenomenon of transparency may be as follows: when a reflexive subject raises the question of whether to believe that p – when he is going to examine his epistemic state with respect to p –, the considerations he selects are the same as if he has to answer the question of whether p is the case. The phenomenon of transparency consists in transferring the question about one's own inner doxastic constitution to the objective consideration of the truth value of p. In this sense, it may be said that the doxastic behavior are transparent to factual aspects of the world.

1   Transparency and conceptual evidentialism

Evidentialism can be understood as the view that the doxastic behavior of a rational subject – or at least the conscious doxastic behavior of a rational subject – is governed by the principle of believing that p only if p. Bernard Williams (1973, p. 136) suggests that a reference to truth is one of the basic features of beliefs without apparently trying to defend evidentialism: "Beliefs aim at truth". Miriam McCormick (2015, p. 15) notes that Williams establishes that the aim at truth which characterizes a person's doxastic behavior is the expression of a conceptual truth about belief. The evidentialist principle can only be accepted once the subject has the concept of belief. Understanding what it means to have a belief involves admitting that it aims at truth.

This form of evidentialism is called "conceptual". The main characteristic of conceptual evidentialism as opposed to "doxastic freedom" evidentialism is that it considers that the norm of believing that p on the basis of sufficient evidence in favor of the truth of p is not a moral imperative. Conceptual evidentialism has different versions which can be distinguished according to their intensity. Jonathan Adler (2002), who presents the most extreme evidentialist conception, argues that it is conceptually impossible to harbor a belief while knowing that there is not enough evidence which supports it. Adler argues that certain assertions inspired by Moore's paradox are unsustainable. Consider the case of the following conjunction inspired in Moore's paradox: "The number of stars is even, but I do not have enough evidence that the number of stars in even". Since both are statements which can be true at the same time, the contradiction which prevents the subject from accepting the conjunction should manifest itself in his thought. By asserting that the number of stars is even, we express our belief that the number of stars is even, but if we do not have sufficient evidence in favor of the truth of the proposition that the number of stars is even, we are not entitled to consider it true while judging whether to adopt it as the object of any of our

beliefs.

Adler's evidentialism has been widely contested. McCormick (2015, pp. 19-21) has described cases of gaps or inconsistencies between a subject's best epistemic judgments and the beliefs he adopts. Jens Dam Ziska (2016, pp. 41-44) Ziska has denied that a conjunction of the form "p, but I do not have sufficient evidence that p is true" entails by itself any contradiction in the subject's thought without the additional premise that when we realize that the evidence we possess is not enough to assure that p is true, we cease to believe that p is true.

This premise seems weak if we consider the examples of people who have certain doxastic behavior while knowing that the evidence they count with is not enough to assure that their beliefs are true. Adler could answer that many of these cases are "esoteric [...] like those which can occur in the thought of a mentally disturbed person" (Adler, 2002, p. 35), so that these objections reinforce his theory. But even if that were true, a philosophical doctrine must measure its success according to its ability to respond to the most peripheral and challenging cases.

A softer version of conceptual evidentialism is put forward by Nishi Shah. In an article written in collaboration with David Velleman (see Shah and Velleman 2005), Shah argues that transparency occurs only when a belief is adopted in a deliberative context, that is to say, in a context in which the subject makes use of the concept of belief. According to Shah, transparency implies that in deliberative circumstances the subject only takes into account those reasons which can be seen as relevant to determine the truth or falsehood of the proposition under consideration. The concept of belief imposes a condition which must be accepted by the subject if he wants to conceive his personal deliberation as aimed at adopting a belief. This condition is that deliberating about whether to believe p implies accepting that the belief that p is only correct if p is true: "When one deliberates about whether to have an attitude conceived as the belief that p is true, one deliberates about an attitude to which the standard of being correct only if p is true already applies" (Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 501). This explanation of transparency as exclusively linked to those contexts in which the subject makes use of the concept of belief is compatible with the existence of elements perceived as irrelevant with respect to the truth or falsehood of the proposition under consideration, which can influence on whether it is adopted as doxastic content. When the subject does not make use of the concept of belief, there is not any conceptual imperative which implies a selection based on the truth or falsity of the proposition.

Shah and Velleman's argument is based on transparency understood as an epistemologically neutral phenomenon. In another article which was published a little earlier (Shah 2003, p. 466), Shah refers to the need for an epistemological framework capable of integrating the fact that the subject who reflectively

adopts a belief only takes into account the considerations he sees as relevant to determine whether the proposition in question is true or false. The solution suggests the existence of different contexts of belief formation in relation to whether or not the subject makes use of the concept of belief. As long as the subject conceives his deliberation as directed to the adoption of a belief, he must accept that the resulting propositional attitude would be correct only if it is true, so that he is obliged to base either his belief or his non-belief on the rational considerations he is able to gather about the truth or falsehood of the proposition he is reflecting about. These are the main lines of Shah and Velleman's strategy: this particular version of conceptual evidentialism provides a plausible explanation for transparency.

2   Objections against Shah and Velleman's approach

Shah and Velleman represent the use of transparency as case for evidentialism. We will now raise some objections against their approach and examine an attempt to correct some of its fundamental points. Shah and Velleman seem to suppose a conception of doxastic correction which can be described as externalist, since it seems to follow from it that the subject does not have access to the truth or falsehood of his beliefs, but only to the sum of what he perceives as evidence in favor of one or the other. The subject cannot be fully certain that his belief is true. However, the standard of correction for belief affects the doxastic behavior of the subject and allows it to be framed in a scheme of assessment. That is to say, if the belief that p is correct when it is true and incorrect when it is false, then there is an imperative which affects the behavior of the subject who has been asked the question whether he believes p and is trying to answer it. The subject must base his attitude with respect to whether p is the case on the considerations that he sees as relevant to determine the truth value of p. The problem with Shah and Velleman's approach here is that it seems to assume that the subject can stop basing his doxastic attitudes on evidence about what is the case. The fact that any given behavior is correct in any sense does not make it mandatory, but seems to involve the possibility of violating the norm.

If there is the possibility of acting both correctly and incorrectly in the reflexive formation of a belief, the subject who reflects on that matter should be able to make the decision of not taking into account the evidence at his disposal. The subject should be able to evade the alleged gravitational force of evidence at the cost of wrongdoing. This seems incompatible with understanding transparency in Shah's manner as conceptually inseparable from the reflective formation of beliefs: it would be the subject who identifies the question of whether to believe that p with the question of whether p, so that transparency could not be epistemologically neutral. Transparency should be the requirement for compli-

ance with an epistemic obligation analogous to the ordinary moral duty. The introduction a norm of correction specifically linked to belief seems to imply an ethical consideration: the subject must be free not to act in accordance with the norm. In the reflective formation of a belief, the subject may disregard the evidence and accept a proposition on the basis of some kind of spiritual peace.

Until now we have tried to illustrate the apparent inconsistencies which can be found in Shah and Velleman's approach. If one speaks of correct doxastic behavior, it seems that one must admit that the subject can evade transparency even in reflective contexts only by refraining from following the relevant norm. Transparency would no longer have a factual character, which is precisely the starting point of Shah's argument, but would be presented as the consequence of a previous choice of the subject. This would make it possible to introduce multiple criteria on the basis of which to judge beliefs (see Zalabardo 2010). Cannot a belief be correct or incorrect in different ways? Cannot the subject who does not take into account the evidence be wrong according to one criterion, but right from the point of view of other criterion? A belief would not be right or wrong in an absolute sense.

Other objections which can be raised against Shah's approach relate to the nature of the considerations involved in the reflective formation of beliefs. Shah seems to characterize the reflective adoption of beliefs as a deductive argument whose premises are constituted by considerations that the subject understands as relevant to determine the truth value of the proposition in question, that is to say, its conclusion. This is the basic criteria. Starting from this way of understanding the logical structure of the reflexive adoption of beliefs, it is possible to explore two strategies against Shah's approach: the first takes into account that the conclusion of personal deliberation about what to believe as Shah understands it is nothing more than a factual proposition: when the subject raises the question of whether to believe that p, his logical activities lead, according to Shah's model, to the utterance that something is the case. However, it is not clear that a factual statement arrived at as the conclusion of an argument will be enough to make it an object of belief. If its logical structure is that of a deductive argument which seeks to determine whether the proposition being examined is true or false, the deliberation on what to believe will end just with a fact, that is, the conclusion of the argument is not a belief, but the statement that something is the case. In any case, an additional premise would be needed to link what is known as true with the corresponding belief. But the problem with taking that step is that it seems to introduce a certain discordance which goes against Shah's requirement of immediacy. It would seem that in this way the subject of personal deliberation about what to believe does not do anything more than a logical calculation based on premises with which he maintains a purely intellectual relationship. With that additional premise it seems that Shah would incur in

circularity: considerations unrelated to the truth or falsity of the proposition do not intervene in the reflective formation of beliefs, since there is a premise in the personal deliberation about what to believe which prevents it. But it is the relevance of introducing such a premise that is under discussion. The evidentialist characterization is based on the deliberation about what to believe as part of the concept of belief, and at the same time the concept of belief characterized in the evidentialist way is used to explain a truth about the reflective formation of beliefs. It would be said that there is something problematic in approaching the logic of the reflective formation of beliefs from the understanding of the concept of belief that is obtained from the analysis of deliberation about what to believe.

The second argumentative strategy that we will explore against Shah's approach has to do with the kind of reasons on the basis of which the subject adopts a belief. Is it not possible to find examples of beliefs which are conscious and contradict the evidence? It seems that a person may sincerely declare a belief while knowing that the evidence does not support the proposition. The believer can do without the evidence. However, this does not occur under whichever condition, but when the belief fulfils certain characteristics. Let us think of the case of a religious person who believes in the metempsychosis of souls or the transubstantiation. The religious believer perseveres in his doxastic behavior without seeming to care that the evidence does not support it. Is it enough to accuse the religious believer of epistemological negligence? The same should be said of much of humankind. Would not our position be arrogant? In relation to Shah's approach, religion offers examples of conscious doxastic behavior which cannot be adopted at the end of a process of personal deliberation about what to believe which concludes with the affirmation of a factual proposition as true. Why does the religious believer maintain, even in reflective conditions, doxastic behavior whose content he cannot consider true? Here, there is something similar to an asymmetry between purely factual and critical-religious contexts. Shah's conception may be valid when it is about proposition corresponding to truth conditions which can be specified. But the reasons which the religious believer may invoke in favour of his doxastic conduct will not be such that they can be seen as relevant to determine whether processes such as the metempsychosis or the transubstantiation are taking place, that is, they cannot function as premises in the personal deliberation about what to believe in order to determine whether the proposition is true or false. The evidence does not seem to be taken into account in the reflective examination of one's doxastic behavior when the content of the belief is within the bounds of religion.

3   Steglich-Petersen and his attempt to set out a new model of transparency

We have raised until now three objections against Shah's evidentialism: we have seen that the imposition of a standard of correction over conscious doxastic behavior seems to imply the possibility of believing something against the evidentialist requirement; we have examined the problems which arise from personal deliberation understood as a deductive argument; and we have considered the difficulties of Shah's approach to the doxastic behavior of certain agents who adopt beliefs in reflective contexts while knowing that they cannot invoke reasons to determine the truth or falsity of the given content. But if we accept these objections, we will not only have to abandon Shah's approach. What is the state of transparency once objections have been raised to the point of rejecting any preference for this way of understanding the reflective examination of one's doxastic behavior? In so far as it is understood in the manner of Shah, transparency does not seem to occur in the reflective formation of beliefs aimed at the question of whether to adopt a religious content as object of doxastic endorsement. But according to the other objections, it would also be said that it does not fulfil some of the characteristics which Shah attributes to it while exposing the phenomenon. If the subject may not fulfil evidentialist requirements and it is possible to speak of doxastic inadequacy as a possibility against doxastic adequacy, should we not consider that transparency is not a genuine phenomenon, that is, that it occurs as a consequence of a choice of the subject? And if the considerations not relevant to determine the truth or falsity of the given proposition are excluded from the deliberation about what to believe understood according to the logical form of a deductive argument whose conclusion is the affirmation of a fact, is it not also because the subject has preferred an evidentialist standard rather than other?

Absjørn Steglich-Petersen (2013) has tried to offer a formulation of transparency designed to avoid having to consider it as a feature of the subject's deliberation about what to believe by making use of the concept of belief. Steglich-Petersen's strategy is based on an interpretation of what we often mean when we think of the question of whether to believe that p. Starting from the description of a phenomenon analogous to transparency, transparency*, Steglich-Petersen seeks a common explanation for both. Transparency* consists in the fact that, when we consider the question of whether p is the case, we base our response on those considerations which we take as relevant to determine the truth or falsity of p. In contrast to transparency, transparency* invokes a type of deliberation in which the concept of belief does not appear. Apart from that, transparency and transparency* are identical phenomena, including the possibility that both the question of whether to believe that p and the question of whether p have an

unconscious or thoughtless answer without need for the subject to engage in a deliberative process.

Steglich-Petersen argues that, given similarities between transparency and transparency*, they should be cases of the same general principle. This implies that transparency is not to be explained by using the concept of belief, i.e. as a feature of deliberation in which the subject makes use of the concept of belief, but in a different and more general way which also explains transparency*. In Steglich-Petersen's view, this common explanation comes from considering that both transparency and transparency* are instances of a principle which states that it is not possible to do something for a certain purpose while being aware that what is being done is not conducive to the achievement of that purpose. According to this, deliberation about whether p is the case, in which transparency* is given, is an activity aimed at correctly answering the question of whether p is the case. Considerations which are not relevant to determining the truth or falsity of p will also fail to answer correctly the question of whether p is the case. Thus a person cannot attempt to answer the question of whether p on the basis of considerations which are known to be irrelevant to determine the truth or falsity of p.

How could transparency be considered as an instance of the principle that it is not possible to do something aiming at a particular purpose while knowing that the purpose in question will not be achieved by that means? Transparency is characterised by the fact that it links two apparently different questions: transparency consists in that the question of whether to believe that p is treated from the point of view of the subject in the same way as the question of whether p. With respect to transparency*, however, there is only one question involved: the subject asks whether p is the case and bases his answer on those considerations which can be selected as relevant to determine whether p is the case. The solution proposed by Steglich-Petersen is to assume that the question of whether to believe that p can be addressed in different contexts. Transparency only occurs when what the subject means in posing the question whether to believe that p is just whether p. Then the subject expresses with the verb "believe" a question about a fact. The differences between transparency and transparency* are merely linguistic. Transparency and transparency* are identical in fundamental aspects, so that the explanation for both must be the same. Transparency must be explained in the same way as transparency*: it must receive an explanation in terms of the principle that it is not possible to do something for a particular purpose while being aware that what is being done does not fulfil that purpose. Both phenomena are instances of this more general principle.

4   Steglich Petersen's criticism of Shah's approach

It seems that Steglich-Petersen's conception is free of the apparent weaknesses on the basis of which we have formulated some of our objections against Shah's approach. In turning personal deliberation about what to believe into personal deliberation about what is the case, Steglich-Petersen does not need the concept of belief. That is to say, it is no longer possible to speak of a standard of correction which is given by the concept of belief and from which the subject can deviate by denying that transparency is conceptually inseparable from the reflective formation of beliefs, so that the objection formulated above is deactivated here. Likewise, Steglich-Petersen renounces the evidentialist model of doxastic legitimacy extracted from the concept of belief, so his approach eludes the logical accusation of circularity. If deliberation about what to believe is dispensed with when the concept of belief is used, the considerations as to whether p is the case in the relevant deliberation cannot be a consequence of the application of the concept of belief.

But Steglich-Petersen's model does not seem so effective when integrating the case of religious beliefs. We have seen that issues such as the metempsychosis or the transubstantiation seem immune to the evidence. Steglich-Petersen seeks to solve the problem by distinguishing a special deliberative context in which the question of whether to believe p is not identified with the question of whether p is the case. Steglich-Petersen uses the example of the belief in life beyond death. Aware of the dizzy transience of life and paralysed by the perspective of an absolute annihilation, a person may wonder whether, although the evidence does not allow to reach any conclusion on the truth or falsity of the matter, the belief in life beyond death should be adopted. A person in such a situation is not merely concerned with life beyond death, but rather with whether the question about a belief should be approached on the basis of nothing more than the truth value of a proposition. In cases like that, deliberation is genuinely about whether to believe something and should not be identified with the determination of the truth value of a proposition. Steglich-Petersen suggests that transparency does not occur in deliberative contexts where the concept of belief is important by itself rather than merely expressing the subject's interest in determining whether something is the case. As a result, religious beliefs are excluded from transparency.

Should we resign ourselves to this conclusion? Transparency would then be a property of certain beliefs. Deliberation about whether to believe in life beyond death is not a mere consideration of the truth or falsity of the proposition. The problem is not that the question of whether or not there is life beyond death cannot be asked, but that it would be asked as a consequence of the subject's willingness to approach the question from a certain point of view. The fact that

Steglich-Petersen is forced to deny that transparency manifests itself in relation to certain beliefs can be seen as a sign of the weakness of his approach. If the Steglich-Petersen's conception is taken for granted, transparency cannot be a conceptual property of beliefs. The foreseeable recourse to deny that religious beliefs are beliefs would contradict the non-problematic everyday practice of considering them as beliefs.

We encounter a dilemma. We could take a view such as Steglich-Petersen's and admit that transparency has exceptions in certain beliefs whose truth or falsity cannot be determined on the basis of the evidence, so that transparency would not be a genuine phenomenon. The other option is to develop a new formulation of the concept of transparency which is capable of explaining those cases which are problematic. Success in this purpose would ensure that transparency is a genuine phenomenon. If we look at the second term of the dilemma, we can try to find out whether transparency can in any sense be attributed to religious beliefs. This means acting on the concept of transparency both by purging it of Shah's evidentialist servitudes and by avoiding converting it to the trivial consequence of the subject's interest in facts, masked by the use of the verb of propositional attitude.

Remember the feature we have remark on religious beliefs. They are immune to the evidence. But being immune to the evidence in the case of religious beliefs does not mean that they are immune to the truth of their content. The religious believer can behave independently of evidence without avoiding truth, that is to say, without abandoning the aspiration that his belief is true. According to these considerations, we could perhaps develop the second term of the dilemma. Could not transparency be defined as the phenomenon consisting of that the subject would answer the same to the question whether to believe that p than to the question whether p? That would involve not taking into account which considerations are used as the basis for the answer. The approach we are suggesting here probably implies not to imposing any qualification on the reasons on the basis of which the subject adheres to a belief. Thus, for transparency to be attributed to beliefs such as the metempsychosis or the transubstantiation, it might be enough for the person who has them to answer affirmatively to the question about the truth of those doxastic contents.

These considerations, the inclusion of which is intended to establish a contrast with our previous destructive work, suggest what might be the essential lines of a concept of transparency purged of evidentialist servitudes. Emancipating the transparency from evidentialism is the same as denying a basic assumption on which some of the most widespread approaches to the subject's relationship with his own doxastic behavior are based — hat there is an epistemic rule of law which the concept of belief imposes on deliberative contexts— and implies opting for a weak interpretation of the principle that beliefs aim

at truth. Steglich-Petersen adopts a similar starting point, but his transparency without doxastic deliberation suffers from explanatory deficiencies with regard to religious beliefs which are also found in the evidentialist version. Developing a concept of transparency free of the failures due to an evidentialist affiliation is a task that we hope to tackle at another time.

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