

# EVIDENTIALISTS' INTERNALIST ARGUMENT FOR PRAGMATISM

Tsung-Hsing HO

**ABSTRACT:** A popular evidentialist argument against pragmatism is based on reason internalism: the view that a normative reason for one to  $\varphi$  must be able to guide one in normative deliberation whether to  $\varphi$ . In the case of belief, this argument maintains that, when deliberating whether to believe  $p$ , one must deliberate whether  $p$  is true. Since pragmatic considerations cannot weigh in our deliberation whether  $p$ , the argument concludes that pragmatism is false. I argue that evidentialists fail to recognize that the question whether to  $\varphi$  is essentially the question whether one should  $\varphi$ . Furthermore, the question of whether one should believe  $p$  can be answered on pragmatic grounds. The internalist argument turns out to favor pragmatism.

**KEYWORDS:** evidentialism, pragmatism, reason for belief, transparency, reason internalism

## I. Shah's Internalist Argument for Evidentialism

Nishi Shah puts forward an influential argument for evidentialism, the view that only evidence can be normative reason for beliefs. In contrast, pragmatism maintains that pragmatic considerations can also be normative reasons for beliefs. Shah's argument is based on two theses:

*Internalism.* R is a (normative) reason for S to  $\varphi$  only if R is capable of disposing S to  $\varphi$  in the way characteristic of R's functioning as a premise in deliberation whether to  $\varphi$ ;<sup>1</sup>

*Transparency.* The question whether to believe that  $p$  inevitably gives way to the question whether  $p$  is true. Differently put, the only way for us to answer the former question is by answering the latter.<sup>2</sup>

Internalism expresses the idea of reason internalism: normative reasons should be able to guide us. Notice that Internalism doesn't require that R actually

---

**Acknowledgements:** The paper is funded by Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (107-2410-H-194-091-MY3). I would like to thank Hsi-Heng Cheng, Chi-Chun Chiu, and Fei-Ting Chen for their feedbacks on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Nishi Shah, "A New Argument for Evidentialism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 56, 225 (2006): 485.

<sup>2</sup> Shah, "A New Argument," 481-82.

enter into the agent's deliberation whether to  $\phi$ . It requires only that R *could* enter into her reasoning. Internalism looks plausible.

Transparency is a putative, psychological phenomenon that, when deliberating whether to believe p, we feel compelled to deliberate whether p is true. Only an answer to the latter question can settle the former.

Shah then argues that Internalism and Transparency together refute pragmatism. Transparency shows that the question whether to believe p can be settled only by answering the question whether p. Then, according to Internalism, only considerations that function as premises in deliberation whether p can be reasons for believing p. Since pragmatic considerations are irrelevant to the truth of p, they cannot be reasons for believing p. Pragmatism is false.

Shah's internalist argument has received considerable attention and objections. In general, the objections either argue that pragmatism is compatible with Internalism and Transparency,<sup>3</sup> or argue that Transparency is false.<sup>4</sup> I also argue that Transparency is false, but—unlike the latter whose arguments are mainly by way of counterexamples—I will offer a simple, theoretical argument for its falsity because the question whether to believe p does not entail the question whether p. Instead, what it entails is the *question whether one should believe p*. This in turn sheds a better light on Internalism. Once Internalism is properly understood, we can easily see that pragmatic considerations can satisfy Internalism because pragmatic considerations can weigh in our deliberation of whether we should believe p. Finally, I will extend my criticism to another version of the internalist argument more commonly found in the literature, so my thesis should interest a broader audience.

## II. A Simple Mistake in Shah's Internalist Argument

Internalism says that reasons for believing p must be able to function as premises in deliberation whether to believe p, and Transparency says that the question whether to believe p entails the question whether p is true. Let's first examine how Transparency works. Shah offers the following explanation:

In the sense [of Transparency] I have in mind, deliberating whether to believe that

---

<sup>3</sup> See Anthony Robert Booth, "A New Argument for Pragmatism?" *Philosophia* 36, 2 (2008): 227-231; Conor McHugh, "Normativism and Doxastic Deliberation," *Analytic Philosophy* 54, 4 (2013): 447-465; Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, "Does Doxastic Transparency Support Evidentialism?" *Dialectica* 62, 4 (2008): 541-547.

<sup>4</sup> See Conor McHugh, "The Illusion of Exclusivity," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23, 4 (2015): 1117-1136; Nathaniel P. Sharadin, "Nothing but the Evidential Considerations?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, 2 (2015): 343-361.

p entails intending to arrive at belief as to whether p. If my answering a question is going to count as deliberating whether to believe that p, then I must intend to arrive at belief as to whether p just by answering that question. I can arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether p; however, I cannot arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether it is in my interest to hold it.<sup>5</sup>

According to Shah, the procedure of Transparency is like this: (1) my deliberation of whether to believe p entails my intention to arrive at beliefs as to whether p; and (2) I can arrive at the belief as to whether p only by answering whether p. (2) seems correct, but (1) is false. The reason is that I may intend *not* to arrive at beliefs as to whether p at all. To see this, let's first see how Shah argues for (1).

Shah maintains that it is a conceptual truth that the question whether to believe p entails the question whether p.<sup>6</sup> This is false, however. The question "whether to believe p?" is an infinitival embedded question. As Rajesh Bhatt argues, "all infinitival questions involve modality."<sup>7</sup> To use an example from Bhatt, "Hafdis knows where to fly" can be paraphrased into "Hafdis knows where she can/may fly." The modality involved can be deontic, in the sense that Hafdis knows where she is permitted to fly; or circumstantial, in the sense that Hafdis knows where it is possible to fly. More importantly for this context, the question "whether to  $\phi$ " typically involves *deontic modality*. It is normally paraphrased into "whether S ought to  $\phi$ " or "whether S should  $\phi$ ."<sup>8</sup> As a conceptual truth, therefore, the question whether to believe p *is equivalent to* the question whether S should believe p.

Some may object that, in some contexts, the question whether to  $\phi$  may involve other kinds of modality. This could be true, but bear in mind that the issue here is about the *normative reason* for belief. The question we are trying to answer when deliberating about normative reasons is, without a doubt, normative. Moreover, philosophers working on normative reason often debate whether reason is *explanation of a normative fact* or *evidence for a normative judgment*.<sup>9</sup> In either way, we deliberate about normative reasons in order to answer normative questions.

---

<sup>5</sup> Shah, "A New Argument," 482.

<sup>6</sup> Shah, "A New Argument," 490.

<sup>7</sup> Rajesh Bhatt, *Covert Modality in Non-Finite Contexts* (London: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 117.

<sup>8</sup> Bhatt, *Covert Modality*, 122-23

<sup>9</sup> For the explanation view, see Maria Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons: An Essay in the Philosophy of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and John Broome, *Rationality through Reasoning* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). For the evidence view, see Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star, "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?" *Ethics* 119, 1 (2008): 31-56 and Daniel Whiting, "Right in Some Respects: Reasons as Evidence," *Philosophical Studies* 175, 9 (2017): 2191-2208.

In the context of the ethics of belief, therefore, the modality involved in the question “whether to believe *p*” must be interpreted as deontic.

Contrary to Shah, therefore, Transparency is false. One reason why Shah thinks transparency is true is that the question whether to believe *p* is settled only by answering whether *p*. Now, we know that the question whether to believe *p* is equivalent to whether I should believe *p*, but an answer to whether *p* does not uniquely settle the question whether I should believe *p*. For there are three possible answers to this question: I should believe *p*, I should believe not-*p*, and I should believe neither *p* nor not-*p* (I should suspend believing whether *p*). If I decide that I should suspend believing whether *p*, then there is no need to deliberate whether *p*. Only when I decide that I should believe whether *p* should I answer the question whether *p*. So, Transparency is false.

More importantly, pragmatic considerations—such as “is *p* worth consideration?” “is *p* interesting or significant?” or “is believing *p* beneficial?”—can also feature in deliberating whether one should believe *p*. Recall that Internalism requires only that reasons for beliefs be able to function as premises in deliberating whether to believe. So, pragmatic considerations can satisfy the internalist requirement on reason for belief.

Let me explain how pragmatic considerations can function as premises in doxastic deliberation. There are at least two ways: first, by suspending doxastic deliberation and thereby suspending any consideration of relevant evidence; second, by counteracting evidence.

Consider the first way. We don’t have to consider relevant evidence when deliberating whether to believe *p*, because we may suspend deliberation and we can do so on pragmatic grounds. For example, suppose on a stormy night Jane happens to think of the question, “Should I believe that the airport is closed?” This question can be answered by evidence. But it can also be settled by pragmatic considerations, for example, the fact that the closure of the airport does not matter to her. She can then decide that she should stop considering that question and should not seek evidence about that. Pragmatic considerations can thus answer the question whether to believe *p*, even in total disregard of any evidential consideration.

The second way indicates that, even when one judges that one should believe whether *p*, that deliberation is not settled only by answering whether *p*. Sometimes, even when the evidence for *p* is sufficient, people could still maintain that they should not believe *p*. To take a common example in favor of pragmatism, David’s doctor tells him that he has a deadly brain tumor and is likely to die in three months without any treatment. An operation to remove the tumor would cure him, but its success rate is merely twenty percent. The failure of the operation will cost his life.

Understanding that the odds are against him, David may judge that he should believe that the operation will be successful, on the pragmatic grounds that his belief can make him less distressed and braver to face the operation.

Surely, evidentialists would want to reject my claim that David's pragmatic considerations can support the judgment that he should hold that belief. But where is their argument? To be clear, my goal here is not to refute all sorts of arguments in favor of evidentialism. My target is only the internalist argument against pragmatism. Shah argues against pragmatism by the thesis that pragmatic considerations cannot function as premises in deliberation *whether p*. This crucial thesis is based on Transparency. Transparency, however, is false. Internalism requires only that reasons for beliefs function as premises in deliberation *whether S should believe p*. Without Transparency, Shah offers no argument why pragmatic considerations cannot satisfy Internalism. Shah's internalist argument, therefore, fails to reject pragmatism.

### III. The Mistake Generalized

To be clear, I am not claiming that people could *actually form beliefs* simply on pragmatic grounds. Instead, my claim is merely that people can answer on pragmatic considerations the question whether they should take any doxastic attitudes. In David's case, he probably cannot believe that the operation will be successful simply for pragmatic considerations, but he can judge that he should believe that.

Nevertheless, the inability to believe on pragmatic grounds leads to another version of the internalist argument for evidentialism, which is more commonly found in the literature.<sup>10</sup> It replaces Shah's internalist constraint with the following:

*Internalism\** R is a reason for S to  $\phi$  only if R is a consideration from which S could deliberate to  $\phi$ .

Similarly, Internalism\* does not require R to be actually the consideration from which S  $\phi$ s, but only that S *could* deliberate from R alone to  $\phi$ . The difference between Internalism and Internalism\* is this: pragmatic considerations can satisfy Internalism because they can function as premises in deliberation whether one should believe, whereas they do not satisfy Internalism\* because, intuitively, we cannot form beliefs from pragmatic considerations alone. In other words, if we can

---

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas Kelly, "The Rationality of Belief and Some Other Propositional Attitudes," *Philosophical Studies* 110, 2 (2002): 163-196; Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Joseph Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jonathan Way, "Two Arguments for Evidentialism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 66, 265 (2016): 805-818.

deliberate from a consideration to judge that we should believe  $p$  without being able to believe  $p$ , the consideration can satisfy Internalism but not Internalism\*. If Internalism\* is correct, pragmatism is in trouble.

Recently, Internalism\* has been subject to several pragmatist objections by Stephanie Leary and Susanna Rinard, which I deem successful.<sup>11</sup> They try to meet Internalism\* head-on, namely, by arguing how pragmatic considerations can be motivating reasons for belief. For example, Leary shows how pragmatic considerations can satisfy Internalism\* by proposing the following account of motivating reason:

*Motivating.* R is a motivating reason for which S  $\phi$ -ed if and only if (i) S conceives of R as a normative reason to  $\phi$  in some way; (ii) (i) disposes S to  $\phi$ ; and (iii) (ii) causes S to  $\phi$  (in the right way).<sup>12</sup>

Pragmatic considerations for beliefs can satisfy Motivating because, as Leary points out, they can cause people to be more responsive to evidential considerations, which then cause people to believe. Using Leary's example for illustration, suppose Mary comes to believe that she would be much happier if she believes in God. This pragmatic consideration causes her to read famous arguments for the existence of God and befriend believers who share their religious testimonies to her. It also causes her to find evidential considerations of those kinds more persuasive than she did. Mary ends up believing in God. This is how people can deliberate from pragmatic consideration to believe, so pragmatic consideration can satisfy Internalism\*.

Leary's argument is convincing. By giving an account of how pragmatic considerations can lead us to believe, however, I think she concedes Internalism\* too much. For it's wrong to accept an internalist constraint that demands an account of how normative reason for  $\phi$ -ing moves us to  $\phi$ . In other words, Internalism\* should be rejected. Internalism is a better account of the internalist constraint on normative reason. For Internalism, however, (2) and (3) are unnecessary, because it requires only that pragmatic considerations can function *as premises in reasoning that leads to the judgment whether S should believe*. It doesn't matter how someone deliberates from her judgment that she should believe  $p$  *to actually believe p*.

To show why Internalism\* should be rejected, we must see why philosophers accept the internalist constraint (Internalism or Internalism\*). The rationale behind it is a plausible idea that normative reasons must be able to *guide us*. But guiding us

---

<sup>11</sup> See Stephanie Leary, "In Defense of Practical Reasons for Belief," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95, 3 (2016), 529-542; Susanna Rinard, "Against the New Evidentialists," *Philosophical Issues* 25, 1 (2015): 208-223; Susanna Rinard, "Believing for Practical Reasons," *Noûs* 53, 4 (2019): 763-784.

<sup>12</sup> Leary, "In Defense," 535.

to what? Internalism requires only that reasons guide us to judge that we should  $\phi$ . Certainly, our judgment that we should  $\phi$  will guide us further to deliberate how we can  $\phi$ . But the deliberation of how we can  $\phi$  is not part of the normative deliberation of whether we should  $\phi$ , because the former question is a factual question about how to make  $\phi$ -ing happen. Why should we accept a more demanding requirement on guidance, such as Internalism\*?

To support Internalism\*, Jonathan Way explains the idea of guidance as follows:

Reasons are supposed to guide us and the way in which reasons guide us is through reasoning. ... The basic thought is normative: reasons are what should guide us, and so there must be a good route from our reasons to the responses they support. Reasons must be *premises of good reasoning*.<sup>13</sup>

On the face of it, Way's account of guidance is similar to Shah's: reason must function as premises in our reasoning. Besides, Way says: "reasoning is directed at a question."<sup>14</sup> To understand their difference, therefore, I suggest looking into the questions that Internalism and Internalism\* are directed at respectively.

For Internalism, the question is *whether to  $\phi$* , or equivalently, *whether S should  $\phi$* . Hence, doxastic deliberation, for Internalism, looks like this: "P1, P2, P3..., so S should believe p." On the other hand, according to Way (in another paper on guidance coauthored with Daniel Whiting), doxastic deliberation for Internalism\* proceeds like this: "when you  $\phi$  for the reason that p, we can think of you as engaging in a piece of reasoning: 'p, so I'll  $\phi$ '."<sup>15</sup> To get myself  $\phi$ -ing, then, doxastic deliberation should be able to lead me to believe. Thus, Way says: "It is good reasoning to move from believing p, q, r. . . to believing c only if 'p, q, r. . . , so, c' is a good argument."<sup>16</sup> Since pragmatic considerations cannot bridge the gap between my judgment that I will believe p to my believing that p, Way concludes that pragmatism is false.

Now, it's clear that Way's argument is flawed. In his picture of reasoning to believe, there are two steps of deliberation:

First, the deliberation of *whether I will believe p*,

Second, the deliberation of *how I can believe p* (if I decide that I will believe p).

---

<sup>13</sup> Way, "Two Arguments," 814; my italics.

<sup>14</sup> Way, "Two Arguments," 816.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Way and Daniel Whiting, "Reasons and Guidance (Or, Surprise Parties and Ice Cream)," *Analytic Philosophy* 57, 3 (2016): 220.

<sup>16</sup> Way, "Two Arguments," 815.

The above quotation from Way focuses on the second step. However, the second step is inessential in our normative deliberation of whether to  $\varphi$ . So, even if only evidence can be featured in the second step, we cannot conclude that reason for belief can only be evidence.

I have two reasons for the inessentiality of the second step. First, the issue here is about normative reason so that the question at issue must be normative, but the question at the second step is not normative. Second, how the deliberation at the second step proceeds is predominantly determined by the first step, and pragmatic considerations bulk large at the first step.

First, the debate between evidentialism and pragmatism here is about whether non-evidential considerations are normative reasons for beliefs. As I've discussed, normative reason is usually considered explanation of normative fact or evidence for normative truth. Hence, when we deliberate normative reason, we are aiming at answering a normative question. This is the first step in Way's picture.<sup>17</sup> Once I make the normative judgment as to what I should or will  $\varphi$ , naturally I deliberate the second step concerning how I can achieve  $\varphi$ -ing. The second step, however, is not normative. It's merely a factual question about how I can make  $\varphi$ -ing happen. Therefore, the reasons function as premises at the second step are not normative because they are not functioning as explanation or evidence for normative truths. Therefore, even if only evidence can feature in the deliberation of how I come to believe  $p$ , this does not demonstrate that only evidence is normative reason for belief because that deliberation is not normative.

Second, how the first question is answered will shape how the second step is taken. As I've argued, I can decide whether I will believe whether  $p$  purely on pragmatic grounds. If I am interested in whether  $p$  and decide that I will believe whether  $p$ , naturally I will weigh evidence for and against  $p$ . On the other hand, if I am not interested in whether  $p$  and decide to suspend believing whether  $p$ , then the second step is skipped and I don't need to seek any evidence about  $p$ . Therefore, whether the second step will be undertaken can be determined entirely by pragmatic considerations. This demonstrates that the second step is not essential to the deliberation of whether to believe, so the fact that only evidence can feature in the second step does not show that pragmatism is wrong.

To illustrate my idea more concretely, let's consider an example of reason for action (note that Internalism\* is not confined to belief). Imagine a spacecraft is deviating from the track of returning to Earth. The chief engineer at NASA tries to calculate the right path and speed to bring it back to the track. She reasons: "I must

---

<sup>17</sup> For the same reason, "I will  $\varphi$ " should be understood as expressing a demand, like "You will pay back the money you owe me," rather than predicting the future.



get the correct answer, or otherwise the astronauts die and the mission fails.” She then gathers all the required data and gets the correct answer through repeated calculations. Note that there are also two steps in her deliberation to get the correct answer: first, she deliberates what the task she must undertake is; and second, how she can accomplish it. To get the correct answer, similarly, she must exclude pragmatic considerations and consider only evidence. But it would be absurd to conclude that pragmatic considerations are not reasons for getting the correct answer. For it is because the moral and pragmatic stakes are high that she judges that she must get the correct answer at the first step, which guides her to judge at the second step that she must examine evidence and only evidence to make sure the answer is correct.

Hence, the second step in Way's picture is not part of our normative deliberation, but a step demanded by the judgment of our normative deliberation. It is purely instrumental to achieve the goal of the normative judgment set at the first step.<sup>18</sup> That's why I think that Leary concedes to Internalism\* too much. To play the role of guidance, it is sufficient for reasons to function as premises in one's deliberation of whether one should  $\varphi$ . An account of how normative reasons cause one to  $\varphi$  is rather unnecessary.

Some might object that an account of the causal relation between judging that S should  $\varphi$  and S's  $\varphi$ -ing is not superfluous because it could be the case that S cannot  $\varphi$ . However, if one accepts an internalist constraint, one should also accept the principle that reason (ought) implies can.<sup>19</sup> So, if it is true that S cannot  $\varphi$ , then there is no reason to  $\varphi$  for S. Therefore, an account of how a consideration in favor of  $\varphi$ -ing disposes one to  $\varphi$  is not essential to the question whether it is a reason to  $\varphi$ .

To generalize, when articulating the internalist argument, evidentialists share the same mistake: they all forget that the first step when deliberating about normative reasons is to deliver the normative judgment concerning whether one should  $\varphi$ . Somehow, they all skip that normative judgment and jump from deliberating reasons to  $\varphi$  to  $\varphi$ -ing. Why is that the case? I could only venture to speculate that they seem to be misled by the phrase “reason to  $\varphi$ ” or “whether to  $\varphi$ ” into thinking that the endpoint of deliberating reasons is  $\varphi$ -ing *per se*. But it is wrong. As Shah and Way both maintain, reasoning is directed at a question and reasons function as premises in the reasoning to arrive at an answer. And the answer given by normative reason is a normative judgment that one should  $\varphi$ .

---

<sup>18</sup> In her “Believing for Practical Reasons,” Rinard also argues that evidence is merely a means to believing, so how one comes to believe is not essential to an account of why pragmatic considerations are normative as well as motivating reasons for beliefs.

<sup>19</sup> See Way and Whiting, “Reasons and Guidance.”

Tsung-Hsing Ho

In conclusion, the internalist constraint on reason does not support evidentialism. Reason internalism plausibly requires that reasons should guide us. And reasons guide us through functioning as premises in our deliberation of normative questions. Unfortunately, evidentialists jump from deliberating whether one should  $\varphi$  to  $\varphi$ -ing, ignoring the task of normative deliberation is to answer the question of whether one should  $\varphi$ . Moreover, one can decide whether one should  $\varphi$  solely on pragmatic grounds. True, if one decides that one should believe whether  $p$ , one should answer whether  $p$  presumably by seeking evidence. But this is irrelevant. The internalist constraint correctly maintains that the function of normative reason is first and foremost to answer the normative question whether one should  $\varphi$ . Pragmatic considerations can satisfy the internalist constraint.