

Transparency is False*

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Abstract: According to a thesis often called ‘transparency,’ the deliberative question whether I should believe that p must give way to the factual question whether p , since “the only way to answer the question *whether to believe that p* is to answer the question *whether p* ” (Shah and Velleman 2005: 499). Transparency is widely accepted by philosophers. Indeed, it’s standardly taken as a datum, and it’s so widely accepted that it is hard to find a philosopher who rejects it. But as I show in this note, transparency is false, since it cannot accommodate suspension of judgment.

According to a thesis often called ‘transparency,’ the deliberative question whether I should believe that p must give way to the factual question whether p , since “the only way to answer the question *whether to believe that p* is to answer the question *whether p* ,” as Shah and Velleman put it (2005: 499). Transparency does not say that answering the question whether p is one of *multiple* ways to answer the question whether I should believe that p . Nor does it say that, in order to answer the question whether I should believe that p , I must do *multiple* things, including answering the question whether p . It says that answering the question whether p suffices for answering the question whether I should believe that p , and it says that answering the question whether p is the *only* way to answer the question whether I should believe that p . If I want to know whether I should believe that p , there is only one thing I can do, and only one thing I must do: answer the question whether p . This is what transparency says.

Shah and Velleman are not the only philosophers who accept transparency. Moran (1988), Adler (2002), Steglich-Petersen (2008), Engel (2013), Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2013), Archer (2017), Sullivan-Bissett (2017), Sinhababu (2017), and *many* others also accept it. Indeed, transparency is standardly taken as a datum, and it is difficult to find a single philosopher who *rejects* it.¹ This matters because transparency has interesting implications for philosophy. It has been used to support evidentialism (Shah 2006), reject pragmatism (Adler and Hicks 2013), reject doxastic voluntarism (Archer 2017), reject pragmatic encroachment (Adler 2002), and of course it figures prominently in the debates over self-knowledge and the aim of belief (Paul 2014, Chan 2013).

But transparency has counterexamples. To see why, suppose Jake wants to know whether he should believe that the number of stars is even, and he has the following conversation with his buddy Mac.

Jake: Should I believe that the number of stars is even?

Mac: Well, *is* the number of stars even?

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¹ Archer (2017), for example, takes it as a datum. Paul (2015) is the only philosopher that I know rejects it.

Jake: I have no idea. Presumably, only God can answer that question.

Mac: Well, in that case, there's no telling whether you should believe that the number of stars is even.

Jake: Actually, sorry Mac. I shouldn't have bothered you. Now that I think about it, the answer is obvious. I definitely *shouldn't* believe that the number of stars is even. I should suspend judgment on that proposition.

In this case, Jake cannot answer the factual question whether the number of stars is even, so he cannot answer the deliberative question whether he should believe that the number of stars is even *by* answering the factual question whether the number of stars is even. But Jake *can* answer the deliberative question whether he should believe that the number of stars is even. The answer is *no*, and Jake knows this. So Jake can answer the deliberative question whether he should believe that the number of stars is even without answering the factual question whether the number of stars is even, and transparency is false.

Now, presumably, there is some easy way to fix transparency. After all, many philosophers accept transparency, and it would be very surprising if so many people missed such an obvious counterexample. The core idea behind transparency is really just that, in order to answer the deliberative question whether we should believe that p , we must rely solely on considerations that bear on the *truth* of p . And this idea is obviously correct. So, at most, Jake gives us a counterexample to the letter but not the spirit of transparency. Right?

Jake gives us a counterexample to the letter of transparency because, as it is standardly articulated, transparency cannot handle suspension of judgment. But this problem is not superficial. Suspension of judgment causes problems for both the standard articulation of transparency and the core idea behind the standard articulation of transparency. To see why, consider this conversation.

Mark: Is the Large Hadron Collider going to destroy the world?

Rose: No.

Kurt: It's not? How do you know?

Rose: The probability that it will destroy the world is *vanishingly* small—something like 10^{-100} , if memory serves.

Kurt: Yeah, I know. That's exactly why I'm unsure that it's not going to destroy the world. 10^{-100} isn't *zero*, after all, and the fact that there's a 10^{-100} probability that it will destroy the world means that there's still some chance that it will destroy the world. Mark, you shouldn't believe that it's not going to destroy the world on the basis of just a 10^{-100} probability that it will destroy the world.

Rose: Yes you should, Mark. Don't listen to Kurt. He's being silly.

Mark: [Eight years later, after finishing a dissertation defending non-skeptical fallibilism.] If a 10^{-100} probability isn't good enough evidence that something won't happen, no evidence is good enough to believe *any* proposition. But skepticism is false, so I agree with you Rose. I *should* believe that the Large Hadron Collider isn't going to destroy the world.

Kim: [Addressing Mark later that day.] Is the Large Hadron Collider going to destroy the world?

Mark: No.

In this case, Mark answers the deliberative question whether he should believe that the LHC will destroy the world by doing a lot of epistemology, and he answers the factual question whether the LHC will destroy the world only *after* answering the deliberative question whether he should believe that the LHC will destroy the world. But the epistemological considerations that Mark employs in answering the deliberative question whether he should believe that the LHC will destroy the world have literally no bearing on the factual question whether the LHC *will* destroy the world. The plausibility skepticism, for example, makes no difference to the consequences of using the LHC. The physicists at CERN certainly didn't need to read Pyrrho before they designed it. So it's false that, in order to answer the deliberative question whether we should believe that p , we must rely solely on considerations that bear on the truth of p . And of course, this means the core idea behind transparency is false.

The problem for transparency is simply this. In order to answer the deliberative question whether we should believe that p , we often need to know whether we have sufficient evidence for p . Sometimes, we can't answer the question whether we have sufficient evidence for p by attending solely to our evidence for p —or more generally, by attending solely to considerations that bear on the question whether our belief in p would be true.² Sometimes, we will know exactly how much evidence we have, exactly how reliable our relevant cognitive faculties are, and so on, but it won't be clear how much evidence is *enough* evidence, or how reliable our cognitive faculties must be.³ To answer any of *these* questions, we'll need to do epistemology. But as the above example illustrates, the relevant stretch of epistemology might pay little attention to the question whether p is true, and it might not start with the question whether p is true. Indeed, it typically *won't* start with the question whether p is true. If Mark asks his dissertation advisor how much evidence is required for justified or rational belief and his advisor tells Mark how the LHC works, Mark will need a new advisor.

Perhaps, if it were transparent how much evidence is required for justified or rational belief, we wouldn't need epistemology to answer the question whether we have sufficient evidence, and perhaps, in this case, it would be plausible that we must rely solely on considerations that bear on the truth of p if we want to answer the deliberative question whether we should believe that p . But of course, it isn't transparent how much evidence is required for justified or rational belief. So, in

² Cf. Roeber 2018, §3.

³ Compare: I might know exactly how tall someone is without knowing whether she is tall *enough*. I know that my daughter is exactly 5'2", for example. But is that tall enough to ride Kingda Ka at Six Flags? I don't know.

spite of the fact that many philosophers accept transparency, and in spite of the fact that virtually no philosophers reject it, transparency is false—both in letter and spirit.

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