

# PERMISSIVIST EVIDENTIALISM

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**ABSTRACT:** Many evidentialists are impermissivists. But there's no in-principle reason for this. In this paper, I examine and motivate *permissivist evidentialism*. Not only are permissivism and evidentialism compatible but there are unique benefits that arise for this combination of views. In particular, permissivist evidentialism respects the importance of evidence while capturing its limitations and provides a plausible and attractive explanation of the relationship between the epistemic and non-epistemic. Permissivist evidentialism is thus an attractive option in logical space that hasn't received enough attention.

**KEYWORDS:** Evidentialism; Epistemic Permissivism; Impermissivism; Uniqueness; Epistemic Rationality; Practical Rationality; Evidence

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Richard Feldman & Earl Conee (1985: 15) define evidentialism as the view that “justified attitudes are determined entirely by a person’s evidence.” Following Feldman & Conee, I’ll understand evidentialism as follows:

**Evidentialism:** the doxastic attitude(s) *S* is epistemically permitted to have supervene(s) only on *S*’s evidence.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, when it comes to the question of what to believe, evidence, and only evidence, matters. As Kevin McCain (2020: 1–2) notes, evidentialism is an intuitive and attractive view. It sorts many cases correctly, explaining why my belief that I’m sitting at a desk is rational, and my belief that my child will play professional sports is not rational. Evidence is also a good guide to truth, so evidentialism can capture both that true beliefs are epistemically valuable (they are the goal) and why we should follow our evidence (it’s our best shot at getting to the goal). So evidentialism is plausible. Some go so far as to suggest that it’s the default view of epistemic rationality (Feldman and Conee 1985: 15), and the burden of proof is on those who deny evidentialism (McAlister 2019).

This paper isn’t merely about evidentialism, but about how evidentialism interacts with another view, epistemic permissivism. Epistemic permissivism and impermissivism are about the way that bodies of evidence relate to rational attitudes. More precisely:

**Epistemic Impermissivism:** necessarily, the evidence epistemically permits *at most one* doxastic attitude to a proposition.<sup>2</sup>

**Epistemic Permissivism:** possibly, the evidence epistemically permits *more than one* doxastic attitude to a proposition.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Defenders of evidentialism include Feldman & Conee (1985), Conee & Feldman (2004), and McCain (2014, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Defenders of impermissivism include White (2005), Greco & Hedden (2016), Dogramaci & Horowitz (2016), Horowitz (2019), and Stapleford (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Defenders of permissivism include Kelly (2013), Schoenfield (2016, 2019), and Jackson (2021). For overviews of the (im)permissivism debate, see Kopec & Titelbaum (2016) and Jackson & LaFore (2024).

Suppose we're trying to decide whether Smith committed some crime based on a particular body of evidence. According to impermissivists, if you have that body of evidence, there's at most one rational attitude to take toward Smith's guilt—if two people disagreed on Smith's guilt, they'd either have different evidence or one of them would be irrational. Furthermore, a single person couldn't rationally change their mind about Smith's guilt—moving from one rational attitude to another—without a change in their evidence (they could, of course, change their mind because they realize their previous attitude was irrational). Permissivists, on the other hand, allow for rational disagreement, even when evidence is shared, and some permissivists—intrapersonal permissivists—go so far as to think that a single person could rationally change her mind about something without a change in evidence.<sup>4</sup> Here, I'll focus primarily on permissivism about full belief, but much of this paper may apply to credal permissivism as well (see Jackson 2019). (Impermissivism is also known as “uniqueness”, but I'll use the former label.)

Roger White (2005) is often credited with launching the (im)permissivism debate in epistemology (understandably so; his 2005 paper generated quite a bit of literature) but note that Richard Feldman was aware of and discussing these issues as early as 2000 (and in fact, White credits Feldman with the term “uniqueness”). And arguably, the history of epistemic permissivism goes back even further than that, to at least William James (1896/1979), an early defender of epistemic permissivism (as he argues there are “rationally undecidable” propositions). (One upshot of this paper is that there's a way to read James as an evidentialist, so the debate between Clifford and James might be more about (im)permissivism than it is about evidentialism.<sup>5</sup>)

In contemporary epistemology, many (if not most) evidentialists embrace impermissivism. Feldman, one of the most well-known defenders of evidentialism, firmly places himself in the impermissivist camp (2000: 679–682):

...[my view] rules out the possibility that each of the two attitudes toward a proposition is permitted at a time...there are no [epistemic] ties, in the relevant sense.

Feldman goes on to suggest that in cases that are intuitively permissive (e.g. where the evidence is complicated, balanced, or ambiguous), rather than multiple responses being rationally permitted, one ought to withhold belief (2000: 680–2).<sup>6</sup> In a later paper (2007), Feldman argues that, if people share evidence, they cannot reasonably disagree about a claim, and different conclusions cannot reasonably be drawn from the same body of evidence. Again, he argues that normally, in cases of complex or ambiguous evidence (2007: 205):

The only reasonable option is to suspend judgment. These considerations lend support to an idea that I will call “The Uniqueness Thesis.” This is the idea that a body of evidence justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition.

Another prominent evidentialist, Scott Stapleford, also defends impermissivism (2019: 340):

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<sup>4</sup> See Podgorski (2016), Callahan (2021), and Jackson (2021, 2023) for defenses of intrapersonal permissivism.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Noam Oren for this point.

<sup>6</sup> Although Conee, Feldman's evidentialist co-author, may be a permissivist; see Conee (2010). Another potential permissive evidentialist is Chisholm (1977)—or at least Chisholm's view makes space for a kind of moderate permissivism to be true. Thanks to Kevin McCain for this point.

Epistemic permissivists think that evidence is slack in a certain way. I favour the snug, impermissivist alternative.<sup>7</sup>

A final example of an evidentialist impermissivist is Jonathan Matheson (2011), who argues that evidentialism is closely related to (but does not entail) impermissivism; Matheson goes on to defend impermissivism against several objections. In some ways, this paper is a foil to Matheson's; while I agree with Matheson that evidentialism and impermissivism are often associated, I'll argue that evidentialist permissivism is a plausible and noteworthy view, deserving of more attention.

In addition, most defenses of impermissivism presuppose evidentialism. Roger White (2005: 445) explicitly assumes evidentialism in his defense of impermissivism. While it's debatable whether impermissivism entails evidentialism (Matheson 2011 thinks it does not), at the very least, accepting impermissivism naturally lends itself to accepting evidentialism. Many impermissivists, such as Sinan Dogramaci, Sophie Horowitz, Brian Hedden, and Daniel Greco, either explicitly endorse evidentialism or appear to be broadly sympathetic.<sup>8</sup>

Along similar lines, many permissivists either explicitly deny evidentialism, or commit to things that suggest that evidentialism—understood as the supervenience claim stated above—is false. Take, for example, an extremely common argument for permissivism from differing epistemic standards, or *standards-permissivism*. Epistemic standards pick out ways of understanding or interpreting evidence, and they “guide philosophers from their evidence to particular conclusions and help explain those conclusions” (Callahan and Titelbaum forthcoming: sec. 1) This might include how we tradeoff getting the truth and avoiding error (see James 1896/1979 and Kelly 2013) or simplicity and explanatory power. Standards can also represent which Kuhnian paradigm one is a part of, or differences in ur-priors (see Meacham 2016). Laura Callahan (2019) suggests that we can sometimes choose or shape our epistemic standards.<sup>9</sup>

One of the first proponents of standards-permissivism was Miriam Schoenfield (2014, 2019), but it has subsequently been endorsed by many permissivists, including Christopher Meacham (2016), Abelard Podogorski (2016), Michael Titelbaum & Matthew Kopec (2019), Laura Callahan (2021), and Laura Callahan & Michael Titelbaum (forthcoming). In fact, some have called standards-permissivism the best, or at least most popular, version of permissivism (see Li 2019). However, note that standards-permissivism claims the following: epistemically rational belief is (at least sometimes) determined by two things: evidence and epistemic standards. So on standards-permissivism, it's false that evidence, and only evidence, determines rational belief. Standards-permissivism may nonetheless be a *purist* view, i.e. a view on which only truth-relevant factors matter for epistemic rationality. Nonetheless, affirming standards-permissivism is a way of denying evidentialism; it entails that things besides evidence matter for epistemic rationality.

Thus, in general, many permissivists are not evidentialists, and many evidentialists are not permissivists. Permissivist evidentialism doesn't get much love. In **Section 2**, we'll explore the compatibility of permissivism and evidentialism; what does embracing both of these views look like? We'll also reply to worries from arbitrariness and accuracy, that suggest such a combination of views is a non-starter. In **Section 3**, we'll go beyond compatibility and see some reasons that permissivist evidentialism is uniquely attractive. **Section 4** will summarize and conclude.

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<sup>7</sup> For his defense of evidentialism see his contribution in Stapleford and Jackson (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> See Greco and Hedden (2016), Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016), Horowitz (2019).

<sup>9</sup> See Callahan and Titelbaum (forthcoming) for a helpful overview of the function and roles of epistemic standards; see Li (2019) for an objection to standards-permissivism.

## 2. INTRODUCING PERMISSIVIST EVIDENTIALISM

We've seen that many evidentialists embrace impermissivism, and a popular motivation for permissivism (i.e. standards-permissivism) entails that evidentialism is false; thus, many permissivists deny evidentialism. However, there's no in-principle reason that one couldn't endorse both that evidence alone determines justified belief (as the evidentialist does) and also that that same evidence can, at times, permit *more than one* epistemically rational attitude to a proposition (as the permissivist does).

Say hello to the permissivist evidentialist. She's a bit shy, as many people have been wary of her in the past. Yet she has a lot to offer if you just give her a chance. She cares about evidence—a lot. In fact, it's all that she considers in her attempts to secure epistemically rational beliefs. Nonetheless, she recognizes the limitations of her evidence—sometimes, evidence doesn't spit out a single epistemically rational attitude.

To see what the permissivist evidentialist is committed to, let's recall a distinction, made by Jackson and LaFore (2024), between two kinds of permissivism. First, here's a way of stating permissivism in terms of underdetermination:

**Evidence-Underdetermination Permissivism:** in some cases, a body of evidence underdetermines a particular rational doxastic attitude toward *p*.

This leaves open whether other factors, such as epistemic standards, are also part of the equation. Some permissivists argue that when all relevant facts about one's epistemic situation are considered, the underdetermination disappears. Input the evidence *and* the epistemic standards, say, and then you get a uniquely rational doxastic attitude. Permissivist *evidentialism*, in contrast, entails a stronger kind of underdetermination:

**Full-Underdetermination Permissivism:** in some cases, all potentially relevant facts about a particular epistemic situation underdetermine a particular rational doxastic attitude toward *p*.

In other words, given evidentialism, in permissive situations, epistemically rational belief is *fully* underdetermined, since it's underdetermined by the evidence, and evidence is all that matters for epistemically rational belief. Put another way: the permissivist evidentialist thinks that, at least on the level of epistemic rationality, there are epistemic ties and no epistemic tiebreakers.

Philosophers will likely react to this implication in different ways. My reaction is that this is fun and interesting—could this leave us space to choose our beliefs, while respecting the evidence? What could break these epistemic ties? I'll explore some neat implications of full-underdetermination permissivism in the next section.

I suspect, though, that not everyone will consider this a welcome implication. Some might worry that this evidentialist, full-underdetermination permissivism leads to a problematic arbitrariness.<sup>10</sup> If the rational attitude is fully underdetermined by all epistemically relevant facts about my epistemic situation, so that two attitudes (e.g. belief, withholding) or even three attitudes (belief, withholding, disbelief) are all rationally available to me, doesn't it look *arbitrary* if I've picked one over the other? Epistemic rationality doesn't seem arbitrary in this way. And arbitrariness seems

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<sup>10</sup> For more on permissivism and arbitrariness, see White (2005), Simpson (2017), Stapleford (2019), Callahan (2019), and Ye (2021).

to especially infect evidentialist permissivism because it's committed to a robust full-underdetermination claim.

In response, I deny that arbitrariness—at least in the sense of adopting one attitude when others are just as epistemically good—leads to epistemic irrationality. In other words, an attitude doesn't have to be immodest, i.e., the best from your perspective, for it to be rational. Suppose I wake up in the morning and, as I'm rushing out the door, I see both an orange and a banana in my fruit bowl. Both are good—tasty, nutritious, filling—but perhaps good in different ways: the banana has potassium and is less messy; the orange has vitamin C and is tangy and sweet. Grabbing one fruit rather than the other is perfectly reasonable for me to do, even if the choice is, in some sense, arbitrary.<sup>11</sup> Many times a day, most of us encounter similar cases of permissive action—moral or practical options—where multiple actions are all rational. We might respond to these options in various ways: choose randomly, flip a coin, ask a kid to choose for us, or use voluntarist reasons (see Chang 2009 and Callahan 2019). The epistemic case isn't any different. Sometimes, our evidence presents us with multiple doxastic options, all of which are epistemically on a par. Picking a particular attitude in such cases is no different—or less arbitrary—than eating an orange instead of a banana, playing a game instead of watching a move, or doing squats on leg day instead of lunges. Nonetheless, this doesn't infect the chosen action (or attitude) with irrationality. The general inference from arbitrary to irrational is not a good one.

One might push back, borrowing from what's known as the *accuracy* objection to permissivism: but the epistemic case is different; beliefs aim at the truth! Actions aim at the good, and sometimes, there are multiple equally *good* actions available to us. But there can't be multiple attitudes toward the same proposition that are *true* at the same time. So there's a disanalogy between belief and action (see Singh 2021). In this, the arbitrariness objection and the accuracy objection to permissivism often go hand in hand. In response, recall one of the valuable lessons we learn from the evidentialist. The evidentialist teaches us that, while yes, we care about evidence because we want the truth, the evidence isn't a perfect guide. Following the evidence, even perfectly, can lead us to false beliefs; evidence can mislead us. And in some cases, the evidence is extremely complicated (we'll see some concrete cases shortly). So yes, truth is the goal, and multiple attitudes to a proposition *cannot* be equally true. Nonetheless, in cases where the evidence is complex and ambiguous, multiple responses to that evidence are equally *truth-conducive*: equally supported by the evidence and thus equally justified. We aren't giving up on the goal of truth; it's just that getting at the truth is hard sometimes. Evidence is a great, but fallible, escort. Then, although perhaps for slightly different reasons, the epistemic and the practical are both domains of permissions.

One final thought on arbitrariness. I don't think arbitrariness is a special problem for the evidentialist permissivist. The standards-permissivist response to arbitrariness is that a unique rational attitude is picked out by my evidence and my epistemic standards (e.g. Schoenfield 2014). Then, the rational attitude is recommended from my perspective (i.e. the perspective of my standards), and thus it's not arbitrary. However, arbitrariness then arises again at the level of standards. Why those standards? Schoenfield maintains that the permissivist has “no reason independent of her standards of reasoning for thinking that her standards are more likely to lead to the truth than some alternative” (2014: 202). But as Simpson (2017) points out, it seems arbitrary—at least to a degree—if one cannot provide a standards-independent justification of her

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<sup>11</sup> See Jackson (2021: fn. 48). Thanks to Blake Roeber and Chris Tucker. For more on how the balance of reasons presents us with moral (and practical) options when acting, see Tucker (2025).

standards.<sup>12</sup> It's better to be upfront about the potential arbitrariness, but argue that the arbitrariness isn't problematic, i.e. it doesn't lead to irrationality.

### 3. MOTIVING PERMISSIVIST EVIDENTIALISM

The permissivist evidentialist not only has a consistent view of the relationship between evidence and rational attitudes and a responsible reply to the arbitrariness worry. She also teaches us how to set reasonable expectations and how to avoid unnecessary conflicts. Because of these valuable lessons on offer, I hope that more evidentialists will be permissivists and that more permissivists will be evidentialists.

#### 3.1 How to Set Reasonable Expectations: The Nature of Evidence

Recall that evidentialists maintain that evidence, and only evidence, matters for rational belief. Evidentialism, however, leaves open questions regarding the *nature* of evidence: What is evidence? How straightforward is it to determine what the evidence supports?

The impermissivist maintains that always, in every situation, no matter the evidence, there's at most one rational attitude to adopt to a proposition. This is a strong claim. The permissivist evidentialist thinks we should be more realistic about the nature of evidence. Of course, sometimes the evidence is clear and straightforward: we should believe  $1+1=2$  and that Paris is the capital of France, given our evidence. However, things aren't always so clear-cut. Evidence can be limited, complicated, ambiguous, balanced, and misleading. By requiring the evidence to give us a single rational attitude in every case, the impermissivists are asking evidence to do more work than it's capable of doing. The permissivist strives to be more of a realist regarding the work that evidence can do. Consider some examples.<sup>13</sup>

**Juror:** You're a part of a jury for a murder trial and you're trying to decide if Steven is guilty. You think there's a decent case to be made that Steven did it, based on eyewitness testimony. However, there's some evidence that this eyewitness was manipulated, and the local police also have a clear motive to frame Steven for the crime. But framing Steven would have required very careful work, as human bone fragments were found in Steven's backyard and his DNA was found in the victim's car. There's another serial killer who is also a prime suspect; the victim fits his profile and he was in the area at the time. It's rational for you to believe Steven is guilty, to withhold belief about who did it, or to disbelieve Steven is guilty and believe that the other serial killer is guilty (see Rosen 2001).

**Eye Chart:** You're getting your eyes tested at the doctor's office. You can easily read the top couple of lines, beginning with the big E at the top. The bottom few lines are a complete blur. As you read down the chart, at a certain point, you can mostly make out the letters, but for some letters, you have doubts about whether you're seeing them correctly (is that a D or a P?). At some point in the middle of the chart, you're permitted to either believe that the letters are what they appear to be or to withhold belief (see Roeber 2019, 2020).

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<sup>12</sup> And as Ye (2021) points out, if one *does* provide a standards-independent justification of her standards, this seems to be in tension with permissivism, as it suggests that one set of standards is objectively epistemically better than another.

<sup>13</sup> These cases are drawn from Stapleford and Jackson (forthcoming: chapter 4).

**God:** You're re-examining your beliefs about God and feeling torn about what to believe. On the one hand, you can see the world as independent and uncreated; on the other, you can also see the world as something that is dependent on, and sustained by, a Being outside of the world. You know of some interesting arguments for God's existence, from Anselm and Aquinas, but you also don't understand why God would allow so much evil, if God is good and powerful. You know you'll decide eventually, but for now, you move in between these two ways of seeing the world; both seem equally plausible to you (see van Inwagen 1994).

These cases contrast starkly with cases where the evidence is straightforward, e.g.  $1+1=2$ . In the **Juror** case and the **God** case, the evidence is complicated and ambiguous, there are multiple good explanations of the evidence, such that one explanation is not uniquely the best overall. In the **Eye Chart** case, the evidence is balanced between belief and withholding: it's good enough that believing could be rational, but indecisive enough that withholding could be rational. Cases where evidence doesn't rationalize a single attitude aren't limited to these; they often occur regarding complex, controversial issues in religion, ethics, politics, and philosophy.

The impermissivist will likely respond that, in cases where the evidence is complex or ambiguous, we should withhold belief (see Feldman 2000: 680, 2007: 205). Perhaps this is another sense in which belief and action are different: sometimes we must act to achieve our ends, but when there isn't a clear epistemic obligation to (dis)believe, we should play it safe and withhold judgment.<sup>14</sup>

I have four responses. First, the permissivist can maintain that withholding is required in cases of evidential ties, such as a coin flip case, where the evidence for  $p$  and for  $\text{not-}p$  is perfectly balanced. Permissive cases—especially cases like the **Juror** or **God** cases—will occur *not* when the evidence for  $p$  and  $\text{not-}p$  is perfectly equal, but when the evidence is complex and qualitatively diverse so that there's evidential *parity*, not evidential ties (parity is something like imprecise equality). Then, there's a principled distinction between permissive cases and tie cases. The latter impermissively require withholding belief.<sup>15</sup>

Second, if I'm right that cases of complicated/ambiguous/balanced evidence are relatively common, then withholding would be required in a relatively large set of cases, including about topics such as God's existence, contentious ethical issues such as abortion, factory farming, euthanasia, animal rights, and many (most?) philosophical topics as well. However, it seems to me perfectly reasonable to have views in religion, morality, politics, and philosophy (see Jackson forthcoming). This response then leads to too much skepticism and commands skepticism where skepticism isn't required.

On this second point, one could accept these skeptical consequences but argue that there's sometimes a practical reason to accept or act on these things, even if belief is epistemically irrational (see Matheson 2016 and Fleisher 2018). This response is subject to the spinelessness worry: it implies, counterintuitively, that we cannot take a doxastic stance on serious, important issues, including our moral and religious convictions. To the contrary, it seems perfectly reasonable to have beliefs about controversial issues, and not just for practical reasons, but reasonable from an epistemic point of view.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Kevin McCain.

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Chris Tucker for helpful discussion. See Tucker (forthcoming) for an explanation of why withholding is required in tie cases, and Tucker & Jackson (MS) for more on how parity can be used to distinguish tie cases from permissive cases.

<sup>16</sup> I argue against these pragmatic / acceptance views at greater length elsewhere; see Jackson (forthcoming: sec. 3.2). Thanks to Kevin McCain for helpful discussion.

Third, we learn from William James (1896/1979) that we have two epistemic goals: believe truth and avoid error. This impermissivist response seems to put a strong emphasis on the latter, and then presume that this unique way to balance those goals is epistemically required for all rational thinkers. For the epistemically risk averse, of course, it's permissible to withhold belief. However, if someone instead wanted to try to get a true belief, there's nothing wrong with forming a belief in the face of ambiguous evidence. Thus, requiring withholding in all such cases implausibly suggests that rationality requires extreme epistemic risk aversion.

Fourth and finally, there's no reason to treat withholding as required in cases where the evidence is balanced between belief and withholding or between disbelief and withholding (such as the **Eye Chart** case; cf. Roeber 2019, 2020). The evidence is balanced between, and thus equally supports, both attitudes, so withholding isn't the uniquely rational response.

On this final point, an impermissivist might insist that the unique response in such cases is not believing, withholding, or disbelieving  $p$ , but perhaps no attitude to  $p$  is rational in such cases (Magnus 2020), or one should be in a state of not having any first-order doxastic attitude toward  $p$ , perhaps in virtue of engaging in higher-order withholding (see McGrath 2021).<sup>17</sup> In response, this view has the odd consequence that at particular, precise points of evidential balance, no attitude to  $p$  is rational (and/or higher order withholding is required), but if one simply gains or loses a tiny bit of evidence, suddenly a first-order attitude toward  $p$  is perfectly rational. This is odd. This view begins to look like an ad hoc move to save impermissivism, rather than a plausible general view about how evidence determines rational belief. Furthermore, it's also highly controversial that at  $t$ , you've considered  $p$ , fully grasping and understanding  $p$ , yet you both do not and cannot take a first-order doxastic attitude to  $p$ . This move is then controversial and perhaps ad hoc.

In sum, evidence is great, and we should follow our evidence. But evidence is limited. Evidence won't solve all our epistemic problems, at least in virtue of always pointing us in a single direction when it comes to belief formation. The permissivist evidentialist, then, presents us with a reasonable and balanced view that respects the importance of evidence while also capturing its limitations. She encourages us to set reasonable expectations about what the evidence can—and cannot—do for us.

### 3.2 How to Avoid Conflicts: The Epistemic, the Practical, and the Moral

Recall that evidentialism is a theory of what we should believe in the *epistemic* domain, a domain that is concerned with getting at the truth and avoiding error. Feldman & Conee (1985: 22–23) argue that, although evidentialism is fully constitutive of what we should believe epistemically, we may have obligations (even doxastic obligations) in other domains, such as the practical or the moral domains.

And these domains can conflict. First, consider the epistemic and the moral. Attitudes that perfectly match the evidence can bring about “disastrous personal and social consequences” and “vicious beliefs that lead to vicious acts” may nonetheless be the epistemically obligatory ones (Feldman & Conee 1985: 22). A concrete example of possible epistemic/moral conflict that's received attention from the moral encroachment literature recently is sexist or racist beliefs (Basu 2018). According to Conee and Feldman, while morally impermissible, if a sexist or racist belief is supported by our evidence, it would then be *epistemically* obligatory, even if morally wrong.

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<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Kevin McCain.



Feldman & Conee also acknowledge the possibility of conflict in the epistemic and the practical domains (1985: 22–23). They consider an example of a woman, Sally, who has “fairly good evidence” that her husband is cheating on her. Suppose it would be practically best for Sally to preserve her marriage; yet, it would be impossible for Sally to preserve her marriage if she believed her spouse was cheating on her. Then, Sally epistemically ought to believe her spouse cheated on her, but pragmatically should not believe this (1985: 23). Generally, Conee and Feldman conclude that “it can be morally or prudentially best not to have the attitudes justified according to [evidentialism]” (ibid).

Some resolve these (apparent) conflicts by arguing for *encroachment*, that epistemic rationality can be affected by practical or moral considerations (Basu 2018, 2021; Schroeder 2018). However, the evidentialist—who adamantly denies encroachment—needs another story. Feldman (2000: 691–694) suggests these conflicts are brute and irresolvable. One cannot meaningfully even *ask* “What should I believe?” in the face of a conflict, because, on Feldman’s view, for that question to be meaningful, the “should” in question must be indexed to a particular ought (e.g. epistemic, practical, moral).

There’s something unsatisfactory about Feldman’s position; it’s useless if want any kind of guidance or advice for our doxastic lives. Positing an all-things-considered ought could help, but this raises the difficult question of how to weigh epistemic and non-epistemic values against each other. (These problems of weighing are part of the reason, I take it, that Feldman resists comparing epistemic and non-epistemic values in the first place.)

Enter permissivism. The permissivist evidentialist has a plausible way to avoid (or at least minimize) these conflicts. Furthermore, for those who like myself, tend to think there’s an all-things-considered ought, she offers a plausible way to weigh epistemic and non-epistemic considerations against each other to determine what to believe, full stop.

Consider the following principle:

**Permissive conflict avoidance:** If two (or more) doxastic attitudes D1-Dn to a proposition p are equally well-supported by the evidence (i.e. equally epistemically rational), but one of those attitudes D1 is required according to some non-epistemic norm (practical, moral, etc.), adopt D1 to p.

*Permissive conflict avoidance* is plausible. The idea is that, in epistemically permissive cases, multiple attitudes are supported by the evidence and thus epistemically rational. Here, non-epistemic factors (i.e. practical, moral) act as tie-breakers—since multiple attitudes are epistemically justified, pick the one that’s better along a non-epistemic dimension.<sup>18</sup>

Let’s make *permissive conflict avoidance* more concrete by returning to our examples. First, we mentioned cases where the epistemic conflicts with the moral, e.g. one has evidence for a sexist or racist belief. Interestingly enough, as Gardiner (2018) points out, many such cases of sexist/racist beliefs actually involve people jumping to conclusions based on inconclusive evidence; for example, believing a Black man is a server simply because he’s Black (Basu 2021: 102) or believing someone is an administrative assistant simply because she is a woman (Schroeder 2018: 123).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For discussions of similar/related principles, see Jackson (2023: 2335), Quanbeck and Worsnip (forthcoming), and Jackson (MS).

<sup>19</sup> While examples such as the John Hope Franklin case (where a Black club member is mistaken as a server) are widely used in the moral encroachment literature, they also arguably rely on classist assumptions (e.g. there is something

These are not cases of strong or decisive evidence for the proposition in question—and note that if you’re given strong, impermissive evidence that a person is, say, a server, believing that doesn’t seem morally problematic. Perhaps, however, you have evidence that’s sufficient for believing *p* but doesn’t require believing *p*, and believing *p* is sexist/racist/morally harmful. You should withhold. This result is consistent with evidentialism, and embracing *permissive conflict avoidance* is a happy way for evidentialists to avoid the charge of licensing sexist or racist beliefs.

Second, consider cases where the epistemic conflicts with the practical. Take Sally, who has evidence that her husband is cheating on her; however, believing this would be practically bad for her since it would ruin her marriage. Again, supposing Sally’s evidence is permissive, we get the result that Sally can withhold belief (or even disbelieve, if permitted by her evidence) that her husband is cheating without having to go against her evidence. Finally, *permissive conflict avoidance* suggests an interesting way that evidentialists can give downstream epistemic consequences of a belief some weight: in permissive cases, pick the attitude with better epistemic consequences (cf. Feldman & Conee 1985: 23, Jackson 2024).

Since evidentialists are very set on keeping the epistemic ought “pure” from any practical or moral considerations, the sense in which you “should” adopt D1 in *permissive conflict avoidance* is most naturally interpreted as a kind of all-things-considered or “just plain” ought, i.e. an ought that encompasses both epistemic and non-epistemic values (although I’m also open to interpretations of *permissive conflict avoidance* that don’t require positing an all-things-considered ought). Because of the plausible way *permissive conflict avoidance* combines the epistemic and the non-epistemic, it makes the existence of an all-things-considered ought more plausible.

An impermissivist could endorse a related principle: that if one attitude is only slightly worse from the perspective of the evidence, but morally or practically required, the morally or practically required attitude “wins.”<sup>20</sup> However, this principle goes against the recommendations of the evidence and thus conflicts with evidentialism. The evidentialist will want a principle that fully respects the evidence, giving it the first say, as *permissive conflict avoidance* does. The impermissivist principle also still technically gives us conflicts between the epistemic and the non-epistemic, and one of the main draws of *permissive conflict avoidance* is that it helps us avoid such conflicts.

A caveat: some conflicts may remain. Suppose Sally has overwhelming evidence of her husband’s infidelity (perhaps she sees a video of him with another woman). While, to my mind, this makes it less plausible that it’s pragmatically better for her to stay married to him, if we stipulate as much, perhaps this is a genuine conflict. Or consider an even more extreme case: the evidence-hating mafia tells you that they will kill your family unless you believe  $1+1=3$ .<sup>21</sup>

We can respond to these remaining conflicts in two ways. First, we could endorse a universal strand of permissivism, on which (almost) all bodies of evidence permit multiple attitudes toward (almost) all propositions. This view is radical but does have its defenders, notably in philosophy of science in discussions of the underdetermination of theory by evidence (cf. Kitcher 2001, Bird 2007, Biddle 2013: 125) and a similar view is defended by Nelson (2010), who argues that, because we don’t have positive epistemic duties, “there is nothing that we ought to believe” (2010: 83) so withholding is always a permitted response to our evidence. If permissive cases are widespread

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inferior about being a server as opposed to a club member). I mention these examples here primarily because they are widely used. However, I do not endorse these classist assumptions; ultimately, we should come up with better examples. Thanks to Kevin McCain and Georgi Gardiner for helpful discussion.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Kevin McCain for this suggestion.

<sup>21</sup> This principle also doesn’t help us adjudicate practical/moral conflicts—an important issue, but unfortunately not one I have space to address here. Thanks to Chris Tucker.

enough, *permissive conflict avoidance* should allow us to avoid most, if not all, epistemic and non-epistemic conflicts. However, many will (reasonably) worry that this “universal permissivism” is too strong.

We might instead admit that, while some conflicts may remain, these conflicts will be minimized by *permissive conflict avoidance*, and the more widespread permissive cases are, the fewer conflicts we’ll have. Given that conflicts are difficult and inconvenient, this is a welcome result. Furthermore, *permissive conflict avoidance* provides a plausible way to combine epistemic and non-epistemic considerations regarding belief while respecting the evidence—even giving the evidence first say regarding what we should believe. It should be attractive to many evidentialists.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Permissivist evidentialism is the view that evidence solely determines rational belief but does not always require a single unique response to a proposition. I’ve argued that this is an overlooked but plausible view. After discussing the general compatibility of permissivism and evidentialism, I motivated the view in three ways: one negative and two positive. I argued the permissivist evidentialist has a plausible response to worries about arbitrariness and accuracy, and that arbitrariness is not a unique problem for permissivist evidentialism. Then, I argued that there are two unique benefits of permissivist evidentialism: it provides a plausible view of the importance yet limitations of evidence, and it creates space for a natural story about how epistemic and non-epistemic factors interact regarding the question of what we should believe. I hope this will motivate permissivists to be evidentialists, that evidentialists will think twice before embracing impermissivism.

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