**Permissiveness in Morality and Epistemology**

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**Abstract**: Morality is intrapersonally permissive: cases abound in which an agent has more than one morally permitted option. In contrast, epistemic rationality is not—at least within a wide class of familiar cases—intrapersonally permissive: there is a dearth of cases in which an agent has more than one epistemically permitted response to her evidence. Given the structural parallels between morality and epistemology, why do sources of moral permissiveness fail to have parallel permissive effects in the epistemic domain? This asymmetry between morality and epistemology cries out for explanation. The paper's task is to answer that call. We explain the asymmetry by tracing moral permissiveness to two factors to which rationality is morally but not epistemically sensitive.

**Keywords**: permissivism, uniqueness, supererogation, incommensurability, ethics and epistemology, rationality

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# 1. Introduction

Consider the following cases:

**Case A:** Siri the Psychiatrist has two patients, X and Y, whose prescriptions are causing negative (though not severe) side-effects. As a result, Siri needs to meet with them to adjust their prescriptions. Unfortunately, it is only possible for Siri to meet with one patient today. Morally speaking, Siri’s two best options—of meeting with X today or instead meeting with Y today—are equally good.

**Case B:** Talented Tal has a choice between teaching poetry and piano next semester. However, Tal’s schedule precludes teaching both. Each option would benefit students, and thereby have morally good consequences. Neither of Tal’s options is better than the other. But neither do they enjoy precisely the same degree of moral goodness.

**Case C:** Kind Kelly just received her month’s paycheck. Although Kelly makes enough money to live somewhat comfortably, she lacks savings and therefore needs the paycheck to maintain her lifestyle this coming month. As she walks down the street, she passes what she knows to be a charity that effectively helps persons in need. Kelly contemplates whether to deposit her paycheck or donate it.

These are intuitive examples of intrapersonally moral permissive cases, i.e. cases in which an agent has more than one morally permitted option. Morally permissive cases are both pervasive and familiar. In contrast, there seems to be a dearth of familiar intrapersonally epistemically permissive cases, i.e. cases in which an agent has more than one epistemically permitted option regarding which doxastic state to take toward a single proposition. Those of us who countenance this asymmetry face the question: why does whatever generates moral permissiveness in such cases fail to generate epistemic permissiveness? This asymmetry cries out for explanation because morality and epistemology share deep structural affinities, as both are in the business of determining which values and norms should guide agents.[[1]](#footnote-0) The task of this paper is to answer that cry.[[2]](#footnote-1)

The explanation we propose distinguishes three sorts of permissive case. The three sorts are respectively exemplified by Cases A, B, and C. Case A is a paradigmatic morally permissive case involving *tied* options, i.e. options that are equally good. Case B is a paradigmatic morally permissive case involving *incommensurable* options, i.e. options that are neither equally good nor such that one is better than the other. Case C is a paradigmatic morally permissive case involving a *supererogatory* option, i.e. an option that is permitted and better than some other option that is permitted. Any two permitted options will either be equally good (and hence tied), such that one is better than the other (in which case one is supererogatory), or such that they are not equally good and neither is better than the other (in which case they are incommensurable). And at most one of these relations holds between any pair of options. So, the distinction between tied, incommensurable, and supererogatory options partitions the logical space of permitted option pairs.

According to our proposed explanation, moral permissiveness arises in each sort of case because moral rationality is sensitive to a certain factor in that sort of case. In contrast, epistemic rationality is insensitive to these factors, which is why they do not lead to epistemic permissiveness.

Before developing the explanation, we start by clarifying the target explanandum and forestalling potential concerns about it. First, the target explandum concerns intrapersonal permissiveness, not interpersonal permissiveness. Intrapersonal permissiveness does not automatically lead to intrapersonal permissiveness.[[3]](#footnote-2) Hereafter, unqualified uses of ‘permissive’ should be read intrapersonally.

Second, the recent epistemology literature features some recherché cases that are arguably intrapersonally permissive. We set these cases aside because the moral-epistemic asymmetry we seek to explain arises in a wide class of core cases that we will delineate in §3. Once cases outside that class are bracketed, the asymmetry clearly arises and cries out for explanation.

The target explanandum can be stated more precisely using the following.

**(Intrapersonal) Moral Permissivism:** There exist cases in which an agent has more than one morally permitted option.

**(Intrapersonal) Epistemic Permissivism:** There exist cases in which an agent has more than one epistemically permitted option toward a single proposition.

The target explanandum, then, is,

**Source Asymmetry:** What makes Moral Permissivism true in core cases does not make Epistemic Permissivism true in core cases.

Source Asymmetry needs to be distinguished from another thesis in the vicinity, namely,

**Existential Asymmetry**: When restricted to core cases, Moral Permissivism is true while Epistemic Permissivism is false.

We target Source Asymmetry rather than Existential Asymmetry for two reasons. First, Existential Asymmetry is a more tendentious explanandum. It implies not only that sources of moral permissiveness in core cases fail to generate epistemically permissive cases, but also that nothing does. One may well accept Source Asymmetry while spurning this stronger explanandum. Second, those who accept our explanation of Source Asymmetry and wish to extend it to explain Existential Asymmetry face choice points that court controversy. Navigating those choice points is a task that exceeds the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, along the way we will offer some suggestions about how such an extension might go.

Regardless of whether Existential Asymmetry holds, Source Asymmetry points to a breakdown in the parallels between ethics and epistemology. But the exact shape of the breakdown will depend on whether Existential Asymmetry holds. If it does, then Source Asymmetry underlies the fact that moral rationality is permissive in core cases while epistemic rationality is not. On the other hand, if Existential Asymmetry does not hold, then Source Asymmetry underlies the fact that, in core cases, moral and epistemic permissiveness have disparate sources. That would itself be a striking fact. Thus, in proposing an explanation of Source Asymmetry, we do not claim to explain everything in the vicinity that may demand explanation. That said, an explanation of Source Asymmetry may shed light on nearby theses. For instance, a number of authors have appealed to moral or practical permissiveness in order to analogically support forms of epistemic permissiveness.[[4]](#footnote-3) However, this sort of analogical reasoning would be cast in doubt by an account that traces permissiveness in one of these non-epistemic domains to sources that do not yield epistemic permissiveness.

Here’s the plan. §2 undertakes terminological preliminaries. §3 precisifies the explanandum by delineating the class of core cases. §4, §5, and §6 respectively account for morally permissive ties, morally permissive cases involving incommensurable options, and morally permissive cases involving supererogatory options, and explain why these sources of moral permissiveness do not lead to epistemic permissiveness. §7 takes stock.

# 2. Preliminaries

In the epistemic domain, doxastic states are the candidates for permitted options. For simplicity, we focus on full beliefs. Specifically, we will focus on cases that are putatively permissive between belief and disbelief in a proposition,[[5]](#footnote-4) noting complications that might arise in generalizing to other doxastic attitudes where relevant. In the moral domain, actions are the candidates for permitted options.

To avoid triviality, in assessing whether an agent is in a permissive case we need to determine whether rationality affords her *incompatible* options. An agent has two incompatible options when she cannot permissibly take both. Thus, the availability of cases in which an agent is morally permitted and required both to raise her arm *and* to push a button that prevents moral calamity does not establish Moral Permissivism. Similarly, cases in which an agent is epistemically permitted and required to believe that there is an external world and to disbelieve that the end is nigh does not show Epistemic Permissivism is true—nor is Epistemic Permissivism established by cases in which an agent is permitted to both believe P and have a credence in P. In contrast, since agents are forbidden from both believing and disbelieving the same proposition, a case in which an agent is permitted to believe (say) that there is a hand and permitted to disbelieve that there is a hand would render Epistemic Permissivism true.

On the intended reading, then, Moral Permissivism claims that in some case an agent has a total body of evidence that affords her a set of at least two incompatible actions, each of which is morally permitted. And Epistemic Permissivism claims that in some case an agent has a total body of evidence that affords her a set of incompatible doxastic states towards a proposition, each of which is epistemically permitted. For brevity, we often leave the just stated incompatibility constraints implicit.

A normative theory confers *deontic* status to options just when it *permits, requires,* or *forbids*. These notions are binary: an agent can only be (say) permitted to take an option full-stop; she cannot merely be permitted to take an option to a certain degree. In contrast, axiological notions concern the existence and (absolute or comparative) quantity of values. Paradigmatic axiological notions include *good*, *better*, and *best*. We will not use deontic and axiological notions interchangeably―claims relating these notions are substantive.[[6]](#footnote-5)

We will often put epistemic axiological notions in terms of justification, though we have no objection to thinking about them in terms of support. ‘Justification’ has deontic and axiological readings. We exclusively use it in the axiological sense. As such, it is a graded notion. So, we talk about a belief having *as much* justification as (or *more than*, or *less than*) some other belief, instead of talking about whether a belief is justified or unjustified in a binary, deontic way.

Since the axiological and deontic notions we use may be primitive, we do not try to analyze them in more basic terms. Instead, we assume that (a) we have a good enough grip on some deontic notions and on the varieties of rationality that govern different normative domains to make sense of domain-specific deontic notions (e.g. moral requirement), and (b) that we can get a good enough grip on axiological notions via intuitions about cases. Finally, we are concerned with the status of the options themselves, not the basis on which agents take them. In the epistemic case, this means that propositional (rather than doxastic) justification is at issue.

# 3. Core Cases

Our target explanandum—Source Asymmetry—is couched in terms of core cases. What is a core case? We will answer this question using paradigms of permissive core cases in the moral domain, noting what form their epistemic counterparts would have to take, and identifying features that are distinctive of non-core cases. While the resulting characterization will not be maximally precise, it will be precise enough for our purposes.

Cases A-C (from §1) are paradigms of morally permissive core cases. Intuitively, the options with which these agents are confronted are morally permitted. Each agent has more than one option. So, given that these options are in fact morally permitted, these are morally permissive cases. To construct cases like A-C, one need not rummage through arcane corners of the philosopher’s toolkit. In particular, the permissiveness of these cases is *not* the product of any of the following sorts of features:

* vagueness (the options between which agents are permitted to choose in these cases are not permitted in virtue of being on any sort of borderline)
* ignorance about the normatively significant features of one’s case (we can add to each case that the agent in it is fully apprised of the originally stipulated features without compromising the case’s permissiveness)
* agents acquiring or potentially altering their normative standards
* infinitary arrays of options, or
* options to bring about states of affairs whose deontic status itself depends on which option an agent takes.

Cases that are permissive in virtue of any of the just noted features are excluded from the class of core cases. There is an abundance of everyday cases that lack these features and afford agents morally permitted options that are tied, incommensurable, or supererogatory; they are morally permissive core cases.

Epistemically permissive core cases would lack the noted features and afford agents epistemically permitted options that are either (epistemically) tied, incommensurable, or supererogatory.

The possibilities excluded from consideration are ones in which the existence of permitted options turns on whether certain substantive philosophical views are correct. To illustrate, suppose Agatha promised to give her friend a heap of grain. Further, suppose that Agatha has two collections of grain, one of which is uncontroversially a heap of grain and the other of which is on the borderline of being a heap of grain and not being a heap of grain, if anything is. Now, one might think that Agatha is permitted to give her friend either collection of grain, due to the vagueness of ‘heap’ and the nature of vagueness being such that it is a matter of semantic decision whether the second collection qualifies as a heap. If this thought is correct, then vagueness helps explain the moral permissiveness of this case. However, whether this explanation is correct depends on a tendentious issue about the nature of vagueness. For example, if an epistemicist view of vagueness is correct, then vagueness involves ignorance rather than semantic indecision and the proposed explanation fails. Indeed, there is evidently no way to determine why this case is morally (im)permissive without resolving theoretical disputes about the nature of vagueness. Because of this sort of complication, we lack clear intuitions about whether this sort of case is permissive.

Analogous complications arise for each type of non-core case. Thus, to explain an *unrestricted* version of the Source Asymmetry (or an unrestricted version of Existential Asymmetry) would require examining many different views across a wide variety of philosophical disputes—something that is impossible to do in a single paper. Restricting the discussion to core cases allows us to sidestep these disputes and focus on cases that elicit clear intuitions. Of course, this is not to say that permissiveness in non-core cases is unworthy of investigation—on the contrary, we hold that both core and non-core cases merit investigation.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Having clarified the notion of a core case, we are now in a position to understand Source Asymmetry. We turn now to explain it.

# 4. Why Rationality Is Morally Permissive in Core Cases Involving Ties

We will explain Source Asymmetry in stages. This section explains it as it arises for cases featuring morally permitted tied options.[[8]](#footnote-7)

Not all core cases featuring moral ties are permissive: given a three-way choice between harming either of two strangers and helping a third, you are morally required to help. But some such cases are: given a three-way choice between helping either of two strangers and harming a third, you are morally permitted to help either of the first two strangers. In skeletal form, the account on offer holds that, in core cases, morality permits agents to choose an option that is tied with another (when it does) because each of those options is the best available, and morality always permits agents to choose an option if it is one of the best available.

To flesh out the account, let’s examine the structure underlying core cases in which an agent has options that are morally tied for best. In such cases, agents lack an option that aggregates morally good features of the options tied for best (lest those options not be tied for best after all). One might try to explain the unavailability of such options by denying that morally good features can be aggregated. That explanation may succeed in some instances. For example, suppose a leader chooses between two options morally tied for best, one just and one merciful, while lacking a third option, superior to the first to, that is both just and merciful. There may be no such option because being just requires giving what is owed while being merciful requires withholding what is owed. However, that sort of candidate explanation is inapplicable to some core cases involving options that are morally permitted and tied. For example, it does not explain why, in the above case, you lack an option to help both strangers. After all, there is nothing about the nature of helping strangers that precludes one from having that option—indeed, one has that option in easily imaginable variants of the case.

We favor a more widely applicable account that appeals to causal factors. The account exploits the fact that causal factors constrain which morally evaluable options agents have. On it, causal factors sometimes (help) configure agents’ options in a manner such that they have options that are morally tied for best, and hence permitted—this is the source of moral permissiveness between tied options.

To appreciate the plausibility of the account, consider deities and superheroes: they can be morally permitted and obligated to take options that are not available to mere mortals. Why? Intuitive answer: because we are subject to causal constraints from which they are free. Of course, exactly how causal constraints help determine agents’ available options is a difficult question. However, what is important for our purposes is that, in cases that are morally permissive between tied options, causal factors afford agents options that are morally tied for best while failing to afford them would-be superior alternatives.[[9]](#footnote-8) On this account, you lack the option of helping both strangers because causal factors do not make that option available. Similarly, because causal factors do not afford the leader an option to (say) create a utopian society, he lacks an option that is morally better than both the just option and the merciful option.

It might be complained that this account is insufficiently informative. Doesn’t saying that agents find themselves with options that are morally tied for best because causal factors make it so amount to little more than saying that agents find themselves with such options because they do? No. As we will see, no epistemic analog of the account will work. This indicates both that the account is informative and that it points to a significant disanalogy between morality and epistemology.

A parallel account of epistemic permissiveness between ties would have to assume that causal factors constrain agents’ epistemically evaluable options. But this assumption is false. For example, suppose a mother has conclusive evidence that her son has committed a serious crime. However, because of contingent psychological factors about the mother, she simply cannot form this belief. Perhaps her love for her son makes it so that even contemplating it is impossible for her. Instead, she ignores her evidence and believes her son to be innocent. In this situation, her belief is plainly epistemically defective, even if causal factors render it unavoidable.[[10]](#footnote-9) The space of epistemically evaluable options seems just to consist in the space of conceptually possible doxastic states.[[11]](#footnote-10) This space is insensitive to causal factors. *A fortiori*, it is insensitive to causal factors that block the availability of superior alternatives to ties. So, the above account of moral permissiveness between tied options lacks an epistemic analog. Thus, we have explained Source Asymmetry as it arises for ties.[[12]](#footnote-11)

The explanation assumes that if two options are morally tied for best, then they are morally permitted. Some may challenge this assumption on the ground that it conflicts with moral dilemmas, cases in which each option is morally forbidden.[[13]](#footnote-12) According to the challenge, an agent whose two morally best options are morally atrocious is condemned to choose some morally forbidden option.

The explanation can be refined to accommodate moral dilemmas and meet this challenge. To do so, the noted assumption need only be replaced with: agents are morally permitted to choose among options that are morally tied for best, provided that they lack wrong-making features.[[14]](#footnote-13)

# 5. Why Rationality Is Morally Permissive in Core Cases Involving Incommensurable Options

Two options are incommensurable just when neither is better than the other and they are not equally good.[[15]](#footnote-14) The just given explanation of Source Asymmetry as it arises for ties can be extended to explain Source Asymmetry as it arises for cases that are morally permissive with respect to morally incommensurable options. The unrefined version of that explanation assumed that morality always permits an agent to take any of her best options. To extend the explanation, we need only adopt the slightly stronger assumption that morality always permits an agent to adopt any option that is not worse than any of her other options. For many cases, these assumptions yield the same verdicts. But whereas the first assumption is silent about the deontic status of an agent's incommensurable options that are no worse than any available alternative, the second entails that such options are permitted.

To see that the stronger assumption is intuitively correct, recall Talented Tal and her choice between teaching poetry and piano next semester. While both of her options would have morally good consequences, they are morally incommensurable, i.e. neither is better than the other and they do not have precisely the same degree of moral goodness. Given that Tal has no morally better option, it’s intuitive that Tal is morally permitted to take either option. And that’s just what the noted assumption predicts.

Given that assumption, the explanation extends to cases of incommensurability as follows: in core cases, causal factors (help) configure agents’ options in a manner such that they have morally incommensurable options that are no morally worse than any other available options. Since morality permits agents to take options that are no worse than any other available option, such options are permitted. In this fashion, moral permissiveness between incommensurable options in core cases finds its source in causal factors. For instance, in Talented Tal’s case, causal factors configure her options in a manner such that her morally best options—those of teaching poetry and teaching piano—are no worse than one another, and hence morally permitted.

As before, the account can be refined to accommodate moral dilemmas. Once refined, the account claims: in core cases, causal factors afford agents options that are morally incommensurable, devoid of wrong-making features, and no morally worse than any available options; and morality permits agents to take such options.  
 The account of how causal factors generate moral permissiveness between tied options in core cases lacked an epistemic analog because it relied on the sensitivity of agents’ morally evaluable options to causal factors and agents’ epistemically evaluable options do not display such sensitivity. For the same reason, the just given account of why causal factors lead to moral permissiveness between incommensurable options lacks an epistemic analog. Thus, we have explained Source Asymmetry as it arises for moral permissiveness between tied and incommensurable options. What remains is to explain Source Asymmetry in morally permissive cases involving supererogatory options.

# 6. Why Rationality Is Morally Permissive in Core Cases Involving Supererogatory Options

An agent has a morally supererogatory option when one of her morally permitted options is morally better than her other morally permitted options. To complete our explanation of Source Asymmetry, we need to say both why there are core cases featuring morally supererogatory options and why the source of such cases does not generate core cases featuring epistemically supererogatoryoptions, i.e. options that are epistemically permitted and epistemically superior to some other epistemically permitted option.[[16]](#footnote-15) That is the task of this section.

To start, recall Kind Kelly, who is choosing between depositing her paycheck in her bank account or donating it to an effective charity. Intuitively, donating is a morally supererogatory option for Kelly: it is permitted and better than another permitted option.

Why is Kelly’s option to donate morally supererogatory, rather than morally required? How can one be morally permitted to take a morally worse option? A natural thought is that, despite donating being morally better than not, morality permits Kelly not to donate because donating is extremely burdensomeon Kelly. If this thought is correct, then we’d expect the deontic status of Kelly’s options to vary in some way with their degree of demandingness.[[17]](#footnote-16)

Our verdicts about variants of Kelly’s case confirm this prediction. For suppose Kelly is instead given the choice: merely keep her paycheck or keep her paycheck and have a wealthy donor (consensually) give the charity an equivalent amount. Intuitively, morality requires Kelly to choose the latter option. The above proposal explains this: morality requires Kelly to take the morally superior option in this case because doing so is not demanding (either intrinsically or in comparison to the alternative). After all, choosing the second option over the first places no additional burden upon Kelly. Thus, in at least some core cases, the demandingness of a morally superior option renders it morally supererogatory.

In cases like Kelly’s, the demandingness of an option can make an option *switch* deontic categories, from morally required to morally permitted. However, the demandingness of the supererogatory action does not make that option *morally worse*. The fact that donating her paycheck would make Kelly’s life harder only makes that option *practically worse*. Or, at the very least, the hardships on Kelly only generate very weak moral justification for not donating that is completely swamped by the moral justification to donate. But if the demandingness of the action makes it supererogatory, then clearly this is a case where *practical* justification can make an action switch *moral* deontic categories: while holding (non-negligible) moral justification fixed, variations in practical justification can lead to variations in whether an option is morally permitted or required. In these cases, moral and practical justification jointly determine what an agent is morally permitted to do.[[18]](#footnote-17), [[19]](#footnote-18)

Herein lies a disanalogy between the moral and epistemic realms. However strange it might be to think that practical justification influences the moral deontic status of options, it is downright implausible to think that such justification influences the epistemic deontic status of options. For example, suppose that Unlucky Ulysses believes a certain coin to be fair, and that this is the maximally epistemically justified belief about the coin given Ulysses evidence. The bias of the coin is of no practical import to Ulysses’s life. In this case, Ulysses is epistemically obligated to believe that the coin is fair.

Next, suppose that Ulysses is kidnapped by an eccentric supervillain who demands that Ulysses change his doxastic state to disbelieving that the coin is fair and instead believe that the coin has a slight bias toward heads (say, .51 chance of landing heads). The supervillain issues this demand without giving Ulysses any additional evidence about the coin and reveals that failure to comply with that demand will result in grave harm to Ulysses’s interests. So, Ulysses has strong practical justification to change his belief. However, there is no intuition to the effect that, given the burden incurred by holding onto his belief, Ulysses is *epistemically* permitted to change it. Indeed, there is a powerful intuition to the contrary: as before, Ulysses is epistemically obligated to believe that the coin is fair―the practical reasons not to have that belief are simply beside the (epistemic) point.[[20]](#footnote-19)

Ulysses’s case indicates that, in contrast to Kelly’s case in the moral domain, practical reasons play no role in determining whether options are epistemically permitted or required.[[21]](#footnote-20) (Indeed, we can make the villain’s threat as dastardly as we want without affecting our epistemic judgments.) *A fortiori*, practical reasons do not render epistemic supererogation possible by making it epistemically permissible to take an epistemically inferior option. We thus have an explanation of Source Asymmetry in the special case of supererogation: in core cases, practical considerations exempt an agent from a duty to maximize morally, but they never exempt agents from a duty to maximize epistemically.[[22]](#footnote-21)

# 7. Conclusion

Our task has been to explain Source Asymmetry. We have done so in several stages. §4 accounted for moral permissiveness involving ties by appealing to causal factors that afford agents options that are tied for best and devoid of wrong-making features. §5 extended that account to encompass morally permissive core cases in which an agent has a choice between options that are morally incommensurable and permitted. The account did not, however, extend to the epistemic domain. That extension failed because the space of epistemically evaluable options turned out to be insensitive to causal factors. Finally, §6 showed how morally permissive cases involving morally supererogatory options result from practical considerations that make morally sub-optimal options morally permitted. Because the epistemic status of options is insensitive to practical considerations, this source of moral permissiveness turned out not to be a source of epistemic permissiveness.

We will conclude by describing some avenues for further research. One avenue seeks to extend our explanation of Source Asymmetry to encompass other theses in the vicinity. This is a natural avenue to pursue for those who accept Existential Asymmetry. Their view is subject to an explanatory challenge: given the structural parallels between morality and epistemology and that there are morally permissive core cases, why aren’t there epistemically permissive core cases? Such theorists can use our explanation of Source Asymmetry to partially defuse that challenge. By explaining why natural candidate sources of epistemic permissiveness in core cases—namely the sources of moral permissiveness in core cases—do not in fact lead to it, our explanation renders that challenge less pressing.

However, our explanation does not fully meet the challenge. To do that, proponents of Existential Asymmetry would need to explain why no epistemically permissive core cases exist. By itself, our explanation does not explain that—it targets Source Asymmetry, not Existential Asymmetry. Nonetheless, it is open to proponents of Existential Asymmetry to fully meet the challenge by extending our explanation, using it to explain why morally permissive core cases exist without incurring a commitment to epistemically permissive core cases and then appealing to further considerations to explain why no epistemically permissive core cases exist. Exploring and evaluating different implementations of this strategy would be an ambitious project that exceeds the scope of this paper. Here, we will instead merely sketch a possible way forward for proponents of Existential Asymmetry.

We can begin with the familiar observation that there seems to be a connection between rationality and truth.[[23]](#footnote-22) While this connection can be spelled out in various ways, one way to think about it is as follows. For a total body of evidence to permit an agent to believe a proposition, the body of evidence must render that proposition likely to be true (i.e. more probably true than false) from the agent’s perspective.[[24]](#footnote-23) Now, it is plausible that no body of evidence can render both a proposition and its negation likely to be true from the perspective of any single agent (at least in core cases).[[25]](#footnote-24) If both these claims are right, then we can begin to see why epistemic rationality is impermissive in core cases: in them, no agent has a body of evidence that both permits belief in P and permits belief in ~P, since no body of evidence will render both likely true.

Even if an explanation of this sort is ultimately correct, a satisfying explanation of Existence Asymmetry would also need to explain why an analogous phenomenon does not render moral rationality impermissive in core cases. And here one faces some choice points. One could deny that anything in the moral realm parallels the rationality-truth connection in epistemology. After all, the rationality-truth connection is a broadly *teleological* way of thinking about epistemology, where there are some broadly epistemic goals—truth or likely truth—and rationally permitted beliefs are those beliefs that promote or are conducive toward these goals. If one wanted to show that there is nothing analogous to the rationality-truth connection in the moral realm, one should thus argue against teleological theories about moral rationality—theories such as consequentialism. And one who wanted to take this route could avail themselves of one of the many arguments against teleological theories that populate the history of moral theorizing.

Alternatively, proponents of Existence Asymmetry could grant that there is an analog of the rationality-truth connection in the moral realm but maintain that is an imperfect analog, one that is compatible with moral permissiveness in core cases. There are two grounds for optimism about this strategy.

First, teleological theories such as consequentialism clearly allow for moral permissiveness in core cases—this is readily illustrated by cases like that of Siri the Psychiatrist which feature morally permissive choices between tied options. This suggests that insofar as such theories provide a moral analog of the rationality-truth connection, they provide an imperfect one of the noted sort.

Second, granting that the rationality-truth connection has a moral analog, it is hard to see how the analog might lead to moral impermissiveness in a parallel manner. To illustrate, suppose we posit a connection between moral rationality and pleasure as the moral analog of the rationality-truth connection. And suppose we then take morally permitted actions to be those that would bring about more pleasure than pain. While this is a coherent way of drawing the analogy, the resulting moral analog lacks impermissive import: in contrast to being likely from an agent’s perspective, the property of bringing about more pleasure than pain can be had by incompatible options—so, this way of drawing the analogy clearly allows for morally permissive core cases. This contrast holds for various ways of drawing the analogy corresponding to different teleological moral theories.[[26]](#footnote-25) That in turn provides reason to think that moral impermissiveness in core cases does not result from a moral analog of the rationality-truth connection, even supposing that the rationality-truth connection leads to epistemic impermissiveness in core cases.

It remains to be seen whether proponents of Existential Asymmetry can ultimately use something like this account to meet the noted explanatory challenge. A generalization of this challenge arises for Epistemic Impermissivism (the negation of Epistemic Permissivism). For epistemic impermissivists, the challenge is to explain why morally permissive cases exist while epistemically permissive cases do not. In contrast to the original challenge, this one is not restricted to core cases. Thus, a satisfactory response to it will need to explain why the sources of moral permissiveness in both core and non-core cases do not engender epistemic permissiveness and why nothing else does. Given the diversity of non-core cases, this seems to be a tall order that would be difficult to fill with a unified explanation. Without at least a sketch of a unified explanation, Epistemic Impermissivism is subject to the worry that this challenge can be met, if at all, only with an implausibly ad hoc explanation.

A final avenue for further research: one could go beyond our explanation of Source Asymmetry by seeking a more fundamental explanation of it. Throughout this paper, we have seen glimpses of differences between epistemology and morality in the form of epistemic rationality’s insensitivity to causal features and the sensitivity of moral deontic status to practical considerations. While we used these differences to explain Source Asymmetry, we did not try to explain them. Yet they do not seem like the kinds of features that are apt to be brute facts. Thus, there is reason to expect a more fundamental explanation of Source Asymmetry and reason to hope that it will reveal deep structural differences between morality and epistemology.

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1. For discussion of this analogy, see, for instance, Berker (2013*a*; 2013*b*), Cuneo (2007), and Hedberg (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Epistemic rationality also exhibits such affinities with prudential and all things considered rationality. Like moral rationality, the latter sorts of rationality are plausibly permissive in a way that epistemic rationality is not. These (apparent) discrepancies also cry out for explanation. Whether something like our explanation of the noted moral-epistemic asymmetry accounts for those asymmetries is an interesting question, but one whose investigation lies outside the scope of this paper. One reason that the moral-epistemic asymmetry is of distinctive interest is that moral rationality is the form of practical rationality which most plausibly renders cases permissive by affording agents supererogatory options. (Thanks to a reviewer for pressing us to address this issue.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. In fact, prominent interpersonally permissive theories in epistemology entail that no intrapersonally epistemically permissive cases exist (e.g., see Jeffrey (1965) and Schoenfield (2013)). Van Fraassen (1989: 174-5), Jackson (2019), and Callahan (forthcoming) are among the few theorists who hold that there are intrapersonally, epistemically permissive cases. Douven (2009: 351-2), and Meacham (2013: 6) can be interpreted as expressing sympathy for some form of intrapersonal Epistemic Permissivism, though neither author ultimately commits himself to the thesis. See fn7 for references regarding candidate intrapersonally epistemically permissive cases. See Kelly (2013) for discussion of how epistemic rationality’s intra- and interpersonal permissiveness relate. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. For instance, Sharadin (2017: 59), claims that practical rationality being obviously permissive is:

   a happy result for epistemic permissivists since, all other things being equal, an account of reasons according to which the requirements of epistemic and practical rationality are on a par with each other is preferable to one that introduces asymmetries between them.

   See also Ye (forthcoming); cf. Greco & Hedden (2016: §3). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. We assume that one is permitted to believe that ~P just when one is permitted to disbelieve that P. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Some discussions of permissivism don’t emphasize this distinction. For example, White (2005) and Christensen (2016) seem to use ‘permitted’ interchangeably with ‘fully rational’ and ‘maximally rational’ respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Indeed, various sorts of non-core cases that are arguably permissive can be gleaned from interesting discussions in the literature. See Roeber (forthcoming) and Wright (1992: Ch. 4) for a discussions of how vagueness can motivate permissiveness; Conee & Feldman (2004: 102) and Rosa (2012) for cases where the epistemic facts are vague; Cohen (2013), Titelbaum & Kopec (2019), Ballantyne & Coffman (2012), White (2005: 450), Douven (2009) and Li (2019) for cases where an agent’s epistemic situation is opaque to herself; Schoenfield (forthcoming) and Meacham (2013)) for cases where agents change or newly acquire their epistemic standards (cf. Callahan (forthcoming), James (1896), and Pettigrew (2016)); and Velleman (2000: Ch. 14), Drake (2017) and Kopec (2015) for cases where evidence renders the epistemic options self-supporting. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. *Modulo* cases that also feature a morally supererogatory option. We explain Source Asymmetry as it arises for cases featuring morally supererogatory options lie in §6. We leave this qualification implicit in what follows. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Objection: a (moral) ought implies can principle would provide a more elegant account. (Thanks to a referee for an objection to this effect.) In reply, the task at hand is to explain moral permissiveness between ties. Ought implies can principles are not up to this task: such principles at best explain why *unavailable* options are not required (agents can’t take them); unlike causal factors, they fall silent when it comes to explaining why agents have certain tied options that are both permitted and *available*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. This is a variation of a well-known case from Nozick (1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Cf. Horowitz (2018: 278-9). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. While this explanation is consistent with Existential Asymmetry, it would need to be enriched considerably in order to explain Existential Asymmetry as it arises for ties. To explain that, proponents of Existential Asymmetry would need to explain why no core cases feature options that are epistemically tied for best and such that no conceptually possible doxastic state qualifies as an epistemically superior option. For core cases in which the tied options are believing a proposition and disbelieving it, proponents of Existential Asymmetry can plausibly contend that those options are inferior to suspension of judgment (see §7). But what about cases in which the tied options are believing a proposition and suspending judgment in it—why aren’t there core cases of that sort in which those options are permitted because they are epistemically the best? Here are some answers that are available to proponents of Existential Asymmetry at this choice point. First, perhaps whenever believing a proposition and suspending judgment in it are tied, that is because evidential support for that proposition lies on a vague borderline of the evidential thresholds for mandatory belief and mandatory judgment suspension. In that event, if any such cases are permissive, they are permissive in virtue of vagueness, and hence not core cases. Second, perhaps one can suspend judgment between believing a proposition and suspending judgment in it. If so, taking that higher-orderattitude will plausibly qualify as an epistemically superior alternative to its first-order rivals, in which case there will not be cases in which those attitudes are tied for epistemically best. Third, perhaps belief and suspension of judgment reduce to credences—e.g. see Dorst (2019). If so, the permissiveness of the proposed sort of cases will be subject to arguments for the ‘immodest’ impermissivist view on which ‘The credences recommended by your own epistemic rule, given a body of evidence, should uniquely maximize expected accuracy for you’ (Horowitz, 2014: 43-4); see *ibid* and Schultheis (2018). Fourth, perhaps cases in which believing a proposition and suspending judgment are tied are epistemic dilemmas in which each option is epistemically forbidden; cf. Christensen (2016) and Lasonen-Aarnio (2014: V). Finally, perhaps such cases of the proposed sort exist after all and falsify Existential Asymmetry. Plausibly, such cases would not falsify Source Asymmetry but would instead point to a different sort of source asymmetry: one that traces epistemic but not moral permissiveness to a source involving suspension of judgment. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. See McConnell (2014) for an overview of the literature on moral dilemmas. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. That is, features that suffice to make options that have them wrong, regardless of what other options an agent has. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Some authors (e.g. Chang (2014)) use ‘incommensurability’ to mean (roughly) not measurable by a ‘covering value’ and ‘incomparability’ to mean (roughly) not precisely comparable by a covering value. Our use of ‘incommensurability’ is closer to these authors’ use of ‘incomparable’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Epistemic supererogation is a relatively unexplored topic. The only discussions of it we know of can be found in Hedberg (2014), Jackson (2019), Li (2018; 2019), and McElwee (2016). We have construed epistemic supererogation as a category that applies only to doxastic states. In contrast, Hedberg and McElwee are primarily concerned with epistemic supererogation as a category that applies to actions while Jackson offers a case in which reflection is supposed to be supererogatory. Li argues for the existence of epistemically supererogatory doxastic states, but only in cases where agents do not know some normatively relevant features of their evidence (and therefore, only in non-core cases). Jackson also offers some such (non-core) cases, as well as ones that are supposed to be permissive in virtue of pragmatic encroachment, an issue we address in fn21. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Of course, one can take a hard line here and deny that morality is sensitive to demandingness in this way—e.g. see Kagan (1989). However, since this line undercuts what we take to be the most powerful intuitions in favor of morally supererogatory cases, we think it is best seen as a way of challenging Source Asymmetry as it arises for supererogation, rather than our explanation of it. In any case, even those who take this line should (as Kagan (1989: Ch. 1) does) acknowledge the intuitions it rejects. Given that they acknowledge such intuitions, they may construe our explanation to target those intuitions rather than Source Asymmetry as it arises for supererogation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. See Portmore (2008) for an argument that moral supererogation arises in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. The following sort of example suggests that this account of moral supererogation will not apply to some non-core cases involving infinitary arrays of options, some of which are morally supererogatory. Suppose that Powerful Polly has a choice: she must select a natural number; whatever number *n* Polly picks, *n* already well-worth living lives will each be improved by a certain finite quantity. Clearly, options associated with higher numbers are morally better. But for each number, there is a higher number. So, for each option, there is a morally better one. Plausibly, Powerful Polly has more than one permitted option. If so, she has a supererogatory option. However, the existence of a supererogatory option in this case cannot be explained in terms of variations in practical justification leading to variations in the moral deontic status of options: there is no relevant variation in practical justification among options in this case. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. For discussion of this issue, see Foley (1994) and Conee in (Conee & Feldman, 2004: 255) and Feldman in (*ibid*: 235-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. Proponents of ‘pragmatic encroachment’ may disagree here. Such theorists (e.g. see Fantl & McGrath (2002)) hold that the practical stakes of forming certain beliefs bear on whether those beliefs are rational (or knowledge). Our response to this disagreement is twofold. First, the noted intuitions about Ulysses are quite strong, and therefore, a problem for any theory that conflicts with them. Second, pragmatic encroachment would arguably result in permissive core cases. If so, then proponents of pragmatic encroachment should reject Source Asymmetry, in which case they do not belong to our target audience. (My goal is not to defend Source Asymmetry but to show how those of us who accept it might explain it.) On the other hand, if pragmatic encroachment would not lead to permissive core cases, its proponents owe an alternative explanation of Source Asymmetry—it is unobvious how they might shoulder this burden. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. Notice that Moorean paradox would threaten in core cases featuring epistemically supererogatory options. In such cases, agents would be in a position to recognize that their evidence both permits a doxastic state and permits a particular epistemically inferior doxastic state in the same proposition. But, intuitively, there is something epistemically defective about holding a doxastic state of the latter sort while recognizing the availability of an option of the former sort. In contrast, no moral analog of this Moorean absurdity exists: there is nothing inherently defective about performing an action while recognizing the availability of morally superior alternatives. An account of this Moorean absurdity in the epistemic case might supplement our explanation of why the source of moral supererogatory options does not lead to epistemically supererogatory options by explaining why core cases do not contain epistemically supererogatory options. For discussion of what is epistemically problematic about believing Moorean conjunctions, see Smithies (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. For discussion of this connection, see Cohen (1984), Conee in (Conee & Feldman, 2004: Ch. 10). For discussion of it in the context of permissivism, see Horowitz (2014; 2019) and Schoenfield (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. But see Steinberger (2018) for an argument that this claim requires a commitment to epistemic conservatism, and that certain ‘accuracy-first’ ways of thinking about rationality cannot justify such a commitment [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. See White (2005; 2013) for arguments to this effect. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. Indeed, it even holds for extremely demanding moral theories that require agents to take actions that maximize a certain quantity, so long as more than one available action can maximize that quantity. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)