**Permissivism and Intellectual Virtue**

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*Abstract:* This paper argues for a permissivism of personal rationality, a rationality concerning the epistemic evaluation of persons. I work from the perspective of virtue epistemology where the standards of evaluation are the intellectual character virtues. On this picture, an agent is personally rational in having a doxastic attitude when having it is the result of some exemplification of an intellectual virtue. Permissive cases arise when the emotional components of intellectual virtues conflict, making some potential conclusions both enabled and disabled for the agent. The agent is left in a confusion needing resolution, but if each of these conflicting emotions are components of intellectual virtues, then she has multiple personally rational options. This grounds a potential case of a permissivism of personal rationality, but this should be interesting to epistemologists in general since opting for one of the sides of this conflict leads an agent to have different doxastic attitudes.

Keywords: Permissivism, intellectual virtue, emotion, rationality

10,797 words

**Permissivism and Intellectual Virtue**

*I. Introduction*

This paper argues for an epistemic permissivism of a novel kind: an intrapersonal permissivism of personal rationality. Rationality plays a large role in the debate surrounding permissivism and uniqueness, but doxastic rationality and personal rationality can be distinguished from each other. I contend the latter is the realm of the intellectual virtues, contrasting with the former which seems to be the focus of most extant positions in the debate. Perhaps due to this, in the debate surrounding permissivism there has been little said on the role of intellectual virtue or the perspective of the virtue epistemologist.[[1]](#footnote-1) Filling this lacuna, I argue that there are cases where an agent is rationally permitted to opt for one of several conflicting intellectual virtues. As I will argue, an agent is personally rational in having a doxastic attitude when it is a result of her exemplifying an intellectual virtue, but permissive cases arise when the emotional components of virtues conflict. These emotional conflicts are underappreciated in epistemology. Emotions are commonly recognized as able to make certain conclusions more or less attractive, but emotions have another ability to enable or disable certain potential conclusions for an agent. An emotion enables (or disables) a potential conclusion when it makes the agent capable (or incapable) of seriously entertaining said conclusion. This feature of emotions becomes relevant when an agent has conflicting emotions, leaving her in a fit of confusion which demands a resolution. If the emotions are of the right kind, however, endorsing any of the conflicting emotions to resolve this conflict will coincide with selecting an intellectual virtue. So, the agent would be personally rational in resolving the emotional conflict in more than one way, grounding a permissivism of personal rationality since resolving the conflict in this way may result in the agent’s having a different doxastic attitude than she otherwise would have. While this discussion is framed primarily in the realm of virtue epistemology, the fact that one’s intellectual character can lead one to have different doxastic attitudes due to such emotional conflicts should make this discussion interesting even to the epistemologist who is unsympathetic to virtue epistemology.

 Since the position I defend is a version of permissivism, it is best to unpack the current debate on permissivism, uniqueness, and note where I depart from the mainline discussion. Permissivism[[2]](#footnote-2) and uniqueness[[3]](#footnote-3) are theses about what doxastic attitudes are rational to have given some evidence.[[4]](#footnote-4) I characterize these views in terms of doxastic attitudes like belief, disbelief, withholding judgment, suspecting, etc., but these positions can also be understood in terms of credences. Roger White distinguishes two kinds of permissivism in this way:

**Strong permissivism**: There are cases in which it is rationally permissible to believe P, but it is also rationally permissible to not believe P instead, given the very same evidence.

**Moderate permissivism**: There are cases in which there is more than one rationally permissible credence one can have towards P, given the same evidence.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Strong permissivism is obviously less plausible than moderate permissivism, but I think there is good reason to accept a virtue-theoretic version of it. Unless otherwise stated, I will be considering versions of strong permissivism for this paper, setting to one side the issue of credences. Now, permissivism can be either interpersonal or intrapersonal. That is, rationality may allow there to be multiple available doxastic attitudes for a single agent or between agents. The contrary position to permissivism, *uniqueness*, maintains that given some evidence, there is at most one doxastic attitude rationally available to have toward P. Interpersonal uniqueness can be distinguished from intrapersonal uniqueness by characterizing them as the denials of their respective permissivist counterparts. There are, then, four different positions to consider:

Where E is evidence relative to proposition P,

**Interpersonal Permissivism**: There are situations where at least two agents who share E have available to them (collectively) more than one rational doxastic attitude toward P.

**Intrapersonal Permissivism**: There are situations where a single agent who has E has available to them more than one rational doxastic attitude toward P.

**Interpersonal Uniqueness**: There are no situations where at least two agents who share E have available to them (collectively) more than one rational doxastic attitude toward P.

**Intrapersonal Uniqueness**: There are no situations where a single agent who has E has available to them more than one rational doxastic attitude toward P.

Quite a lot hinges on how rationality is understood, but I will be understanding it slightly differently than is standard in the literature on permissivism and uniqueness. I appeal to what I call *personal rationality* but to unpack this concept, I draw from a distinction Mylan Engel makes between doxastic justification and personal justification.[[6]](#footnote-6) To be sure, Engel is largely concerned with what is relevant for turning true belief into knowledge, but his comments have wider implications. Whereas doxastic justification, as the name suggests, concerns the epistemic evaluation of doxastic attitudes, personal justification concerns the epistemic evaluation of persons. His insight is that persons and doxastic attitudes are both proper objects of epistemic evaluation, but they may admit to different standards of evaluation. Following Engel[[7]](#footnote-7), I understand the distinction in the following way:

**Doxastic Justification** is a normative notion in terms of which *doxastic attitudes* are evaluated from the epistemic point of view.

**Personal Justification** is a normative notion in terms of which *persons* are evaluated from the epistemic point of view.

The evaluation that Engel has in mind, of course, concerns justification. So, perhaps Engel’s definitions should be amended by adding “regarding justification” at the end of each. The distinction is plausible since personal and doxastic justification can be pulled apart. To facilitate this, notice that one mark of personal justification (but not doxastic justification) is that the agent merits epistemic praise (and perhaps blame).[[8]](#footnote-8) Intuitively, it can be the case that an agent has a doxastic attitude that is justified but the agent is not praiseworthy for having this doxastic attitude. In such a case, my belief that P would be doxastically justified, but I would not be personally justified in having it. For example, suppose there is good evidence for P. Assuming that doxastic justification involves having evidential support, my belief that P would be doxastically justified, but suppose further that I came about this evidence in a reckless or malicious manner for which I lack praise. While my belief is doxastically justified, I would not be personally justified in having it. A second way to pull apart doxastic and personal justification is by looking at cases where an agent is praiseworthy for having a doxastic attitude even when said attitude is unjustified. For example, I may be responsible and praiseworthy for drawing conclusions based on my evidence when the evidence is difficult to interpret or highly complex. Suppose, though, that unbeknownst to me, my cognitive faculties are operating in an unusual environment making them unreliable. While I am justified in drawing the conclusions I do, my conclusions are not doxastically justified.

Engel’s main distinction concerns justification, but it is intuitive that there is an analog to personal justification in the realm of rationality. Aside from this intuition, there are two reasons to think that there is a personal rationality analogous to what Engel calls personal justification. First, rationality may be a person-level concept, as some have argued. Antti Kauppinen, for instance, defends this saying: “When we’re criticized for irrationality, it is we *ourselves* who are taken to task for our responses…Rationality, on my view, is akin to (if not an element of) personal justification: calling a belief or intention of mine irrational is only shorthand for *my* being irrational in holding it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) While I am sympathetic to Kauppinen’s position, I need not rely on it. All I need is that there seems to be a personal kind of rationality, an analog to personal justification. If Kauppinen is correct and rationality is an element of personal justification, then this amounts to denying that there is doxastic rationality—and that would be consistent with my position since I focus almost exclusively on personal rationality. I leave it to others to determine whether there is reason to jettison doxastic rationality. The second reason for positing a personal rationality analogous to personal justification is that different standards seem to be employed when evaluating a belief as rational and when evaluating a person as rational. This tendency has been recorded empirically: Robert Weston Siscoe discusses a study where participants were asked to evaluate whether certain objects are rational. When evaluating mental states such as doxastic attitudes, respondents treated “rational” as an absolute adjective, accepting only perfectly rational beliefs as rational (any belief that was less than perfectly rational was evaluated as simply not rational). Interestingly, evaluations differed when participants were asked to evaluate a person, Sherlock Holmes. Participants evaluated Holmes as rational even though he may not be perfectly rational, using “rational” as a relative adjective rather than an absolute one.[[10]](#footnote-10) Even Siscoe admits that respondents seem to be getting at a different kind of rationality when evaluating a person (what he calls the ‘capacity sense’ of rationality) than when evaluating doxastic attitudes (what he calls the ‘sanctioning sense’ of rationality). In light of the above, there is good reason to distinguish between doxastic rationality and personal rationality. While doxastic rationality pertains to the evaluation of doxastic attitudes, here is how I will be understanding personal rationality:

**Personal Rationality**: a normative notion in terms of which persons are evaluated as meeting the relevant standards of rationality.

With the above in hand, the question that I am interested in is whether there is a permissivism about personal rationality.

 Granting that personal rationality is both intuitive and worth taking seriously, the relevant standards of rationality proper to evaluating a person merit note. Recall that personal justification involves evaluating a person as praiseworthy (or perhaps blameworthy) for having the doxastic attitudes they do. For the virtue epistemologist, exhibiting virtues just is the way in which one is praiseworthy (and perhaps exhibiting vices makes one blameworthy). The connection between personal justification, personal rationality, and epistemic praise (and perhaps blame) gives the virtue epistemologist a foot in the door. Indeed, as Jonathan Kvanvig notes, the plausibility of personal justification (and *a fortiori* the notion of personal rationality), provides a “quick route to virtue epistemology”, though he is skeptical of this route’s success.[[11]](#footnote-11) Nevertheless, for the virtue epistemologist, the appeal to intellectual virtues as those standards relevant to personal rationality is the natural step to take.[[12]](#footnote-12) That is, when an agent has a doxastic attitude as a result of some intellectual virtue, they merit epistemic praise. In contrast, if an agent exemplifies an intellectual vice in having some doxastic attitude, they merit some negative evaluation—perhaps this is epistemic blame, but perhaps it is a non-blameworthy negative evaluation. If what I have suggested above is roughly correct and there is reason to accept a notion of personal rationality, then the virtue epistemologist turns to the intellectual virtues as those standards by which personal rationality is assessed. At least for the virtue epistemologist, the following condition seems plausible:

**Sufficient Virtue** (SV): An agent is (default) personally rational in having a doxastic attitude if that agent has that doxastic attitude as a result of exemplifying an intellectual virtue.

I say that the agent is *default* personally rational because, as I discuss later, there are conditions where their personal rationality is defeated even if the relevant doxastic attitude is had as a result of exemplifying an intellectual virtue. Now, the intellectual virtues have been let in the door (or perhaps they forced their way in!), and the next section unpacks the kind of intellectual virtues I appeal to, providing a way to support an intrapersonal permissivism in personal rationality.

*II. Permissivism of Personal Rationality*

The above should be acceptable to the virtue epistemologist. Since personal rationality is understood according to the virtues one exemplifies, the virtue epistemologist should also accept an intrapersonal permissivism regarding personal rationality. Before turning to how this permissivism arises, I should note the kind of virtues to consider. The kinds of virtues that are relevant to personal rationality are the intellectual character virtues, those personal virtues that have motivational and reliability components. What makes a virtue a character virtue is that the agent who has it is motivated in the right way (from their desires, emotions, etc.) for some epistemic good. Such epistemic goods are often considered to be (though not limited to) knowledge, understanding, cognitive contact with reality, personal intellectual worth.[[13]](#footnote-13) How the agent, through these virtues, achieves the epistemic good depends on the particular virtue in play, but that the virtues reliably achieve these goods is important. Even when the agent fails to achieve an epistemic good like knowledge, she may still be praiseworthy for having or exemplifying the virtue (though perhaps not as praiseworthy as when she does acquire the epistemic good). Notice, it is the *agent* that is praised for having the virtues. These virtues are personal in that persons have them, contrasted with sub-personal virtues like those of a well-functioning eye (had by parts of persons). These character virtues are acquired by cultivation and habituation, not merely hardwired into agents. Once acquired, the (now virtuous) agent has achieved something praiseworthy; they have aligned their motivations and habits to be something excellent. Further, *having* the virtue is the ultimate aim for agents, but it is also a mainstay in virtue theories that it is good to exemplify a virtue even when one does not yet possess said virtue. I will understand exemplifying a virtue here as acting as the virtue requires even if one has not yet formed the habits needed to possess the virtue. Even for those who are not quite virtuous, it is praiseworthy to inquire and believe as a virtuous person would.

A large part of the extant debate surrounding permissivism and uniqueness concerns evidence and perhaps there is a uniqueness regarding evidential support (*sans* agents). Even so, this uniqueness would be in the realm of doxastic rationality and so misses another side to the issue I want to emphasize. Perhaps there is a permissivism regarding what agents do in light of their evidence, a permissivism in the realm of personal rationality. Now, if the previous section is on track, then considering such a permissivism will involve looking at the intellectual character of the agents (their exemplifying intellectual virtues or vices). Specifically, those emotions of the agent that partly constitute the virtues (or vices) they exemplify will be relevant. This turn towards emotions is at home in virtue theory since it is a longstanding tradition to accept that emotions play some significant role in the virtues one exemplifies. This is clear in the moral virtues, but it is also the case in the intellectual virtues. In an inquiry, agents employ emotions in both acquiring the evidence they do as well as in drawing the conclusions they do. In many cases, when these emotions are employed well, they partly constitute the exemplification of an intellectual virtue (so the agent would be personally rational in employing them). In contrast, in most cases where these emotions are employed poorly, they partly constitute the exemplification of an intellectual vice (so the agent would be personally irrational in employing them). Below, I argue that there can be a permissivism in personal rationality due to conflicting sets of emotions each of which partly constitute competing virtues, but first I unpack some roles these emotions can play.

 Emotions, even in the intellectual realm, serve as motivational components of those character traits that are virtues (or vices), making certain actions or options more (or less) attractive to the agent. For example, consider *curiosity*, a quintessential epistemic emotion (an emotion whose object is some proposition).[[14]](#footnote-14) Now, as an emotion, curiosity performs two interesting functions. First, curiosity motivates and furthers an inquiry. I may have no stake in whether Ivan the Terrible really killed his son in a fit of rage, but I sure would like to know—I am curious about the proposition that Ivan the Terrible killed his son in a fit of rage. I then look to the historical records of this event, browsing through several articles (rather than just one) because I am curious; my curiosity motivates me to do so. The fact that I have the evidence I do at all is partly explained by my emotion of curiosity. Now, this is old news and not entirely helpful for the present task since I am wondering how emotions influence what agents do with their evidence. The second function of emotions is more relevant: they enable or disable certain conclusions for the agent.[[15]](#footnote-15) A conclusion is enabled for an agent when she is capable of seriously considering it, but disabled if she is unable to seriously consider it. To see this power of emotions, contrast open-minded and closed-minded agents. Consider how the open-minded agent (having the virtue of open-mindedness) entertains certain conclusions at all *because* she is curious about the proposition at hand. The curiosity of the agent is a key emotion, a component of her open-mindedness. Contrast this with the closed-minded agent. Such an agent fails to recognize certain conclusions as viable to draw from their evidence partly because they have some negative emotional reaction to them. An agent wedded to the artistic depiction of Ivan the Terrible and his son in Ilya Repin’s masterpiece may not be curious as to whether Repin depicts something true. Rather, this agent finds the conclusion that Ivan the Terrible did not kill his son unattractive partly because it would entail that Repin falsely depicts the son’s death. Whatever the specific negatively valanced emotion involved is, it undermines whatever curiosity the closed-minded agent may have and makes it the case that certain conclusions are disabled—they do not seem to be viable options at all. Such an agent is unable to engage seriously with these conclusions. In contrast, the open-minded agent, motivated by curiosity, has no such inhibitions relative to the proposition at hand. Through their emotion of curiosity, they draw different conclusions than others partly due to these conclusions being enabled for them.

 The case of curiosity shows how emotions allow agents to do different things with their evidence than they would, had they different emotions. There are other emotions and emotional dispositions that are worth noting due to their similar epistemic roles. Fear, for instance, has an interesting effect in that it seems to limit the kinds of conclusions of an inquiry an agent considers to those virtually congruent with what the agent already accepts.[[16]](#footnote-16) The idea, here, is that the agent has certain evidence, but their fear indicates that they are in a dangerous scenario where carefully considering previously unentertained hypotheses is too high of a risk. This is one way to make the agent closed-minded. While fear may have an intuitive influence on one’s epistemic work, things are slightly more complicated in cases of other emotions. Consider, for instance, esteem understood here as a kind of confidence or optimism in something’s abilities to achieve a set of goals and an evaluation of its worth in light of previous successes or failures. High levels of esteem exhibit positively valanced emotions while low levels of esteem exhibit negatively valanced emotions. *Self*-esteem is simply having this kind of esteem directed at oneself.[[17]](#footnote-17) Agents with low self-esteem seem to exhibit similar effects as fear in some evaluative contexts. The agent with low self-esteem is disposed to avoid unpleasant truths, so, in defense of their self-esteem, fails to entertain the possibility that some proposition is true.[[18]](#footnote-18) Surprisingly, low self-esteem agents also seem to struggle to accept pleasant truths like that others think well of them.[[19]](#footnote-19) Interestingly, low self-esteem agents have been found to be *more accurate* than their high self-esteem counterparts when inquiring whether other agents like them or desire for contact with them.[[20]](#footnote-20) In such an evaluative context, having lower self-esteem seems to be praiseworthy (of course, so long as the low self-esteem does not make one self-abasing, self-hating, or have any other disposition associated with extreme cases of low self-esteem). Understanding self-esteem as having certain emotional components, the agents in question seem to enable certain conclusions and disable others. Clearly, the specific conclusion (the proposition) that is the object of these emotions is important (but this is nothing new since emotions in general operate differently in different evaluative contexts). The point, here, is simply that what conclusions agents draw from the evidence they have partly depends on the emotional dispositions that the agents have. While the influence of emotions is traditionally taken to be negative, the examples of curiosity and self-esteem (depending on the evaluative context) show that there are positive—even intellectually virtuous—functions of emotions.

 If an agent exhibits or expresses an intellectual virtue, they (often) employ emotions.[[21]](#footnote-21) Importantly, intellectual virtues inherit the effects of emotions such as making certain conclusions viable to draw from some evidence. This is a crucial implication since I am working with personal rationality, looking primarily at the intellectual virtues as those standards of rationality relevant to evaluating an agent’s having a doxastic attitude. Recall SV: an agent is (default) personally rational in having a doxastic attitude if that agent has that doxastic attitude as a result of exemplifying an intellectual virtue. An agent need not have a specific virtue in order to exemplify it. They need only conform to what virtue requires in the circumstances. More importantly, accepting SV and the input of emotions regarding the conclusions virtuous agents draw gives one an interesting approach to the issue of uniqueness and permissivism. A uniqueness about evidential support (*sans* any agent drawing conclusions, there is at most one rational doxastic attitude to have towards P) would be a uniqueness within the jurisdiction of doxastic rationality. It is not obvious, in light of such a uniqueness, that the corresponding uniqueness about personal rationality is true. Once the intellectually virtuous agent is involved, the effects of their emotions may support a permissivism.

 Keeping SV and the role emotions play in mind, identifying a case of conflicts between intellectual virtues is a promising way to support a permissivism of personal rationality. There are two kinds of conflicts between virtues to keep in mind. First, as is standard in virtue theory, for an action or doxastic attitude to count as virtuous it needs to be overall virtuous. That is, if exemplifying one virtue in a specific evaluative context leads one to express a disposition that is a vice in said context, then the virtuous thing for the agent to do is to fail to exemplify this virtue so as to allow their action or doxastic attitude to be overall virtuous. The virtue in question is *overridden* by the overall virtuous requirement. Call this kind of conflict an *overriding conflict*. I set this to one side for now, but it will be relevant in later developments of my argument. The second kind of conflict between virtues is more pertinent to my purposes. This would be a conflict where exemplifying one virtue precludes exemplifying a different one, but exemplifying either virtue does not prevent the action or doxastic attitude from being overall virtuous. So, neither virtue is overridden as in the first kind of conflict. It is not the case that one of the virtues is more important than the other (since I assume it is not a case of overriding conflict). The agent, in such a case, is left with the option of exemplifying one of these virtues but not both, and it seems that they are virtuous regardless of the virtue they pick. Let’s call such conflicts *parity conflicts*. In such conflicts, the agent must pick between the conflicting virtues where there is nothing about virtues *per se* that informs her on which to pick.

A case of parity conflict between intellectual virtues where picking one of these virtues results in a different doxastic attitude than the agent would have had they picked differently would be a case of an intrapersonal permissivism regarding personal rationality. A clear case of parity conflict between intellectual virtues occurs, in light of the above, when the agent has conflicting emotions each which factor into a different intellectual virtue. Picking between these emotions just is to pick between the corresponding intellectual virtues. Here is a case that seems to have such a conflict: Suppose an undergraduate university student, Masha, considers whether she has free will. She reads ten classic essays on the free will debate and no more. Masha certainly has evidence in favor and against the proposition that she has free will, but her evidence also includes the fact that she is merely an undergraduate student; her philosophical reasoning skills are less than ideal. Further, she recognizes that there is a large literature on the topic that she has not read. One may want to stop here, consider doxastic rationality, and discuss what doxastic attitude is merited in light of Masha’s evidence. I suggest that we look further and consider Masha’s emotions and how they factor into different intellectual virtues she may exhibit in this evaluative context.

Suppose Masha has the following three sets of emotions. First, regarding her ability to reason, Masha has low esteem. That is, she is modest regarding her philosophical abilities, lacking confidence in them. Now, Masha need not have a poor view of herself as a result of this and she need not be motivated solely by her low esteem (that would lead her into intellectually vicious territory). In response to her low esteem, suppose she also has *hope* that her philosophical inadequacies can be overcome with time, practice, or with the help of others. Importantly, this combination of low esteem towards her abilities and hope is part of the virtue of intellectual humility.[[22]](#footnote-22) This set of emotions pushes Masha to withhold judgment on whether she has free will. Indeed, the prospects of believing or disbelieving that she has free will seem non-viable options in light of the low esteem she has towards her own philosophical abilities—both conclusions are disabled. Even if Masha finds one of the surveyed arguments quite convincing, the emotions listed above make it the case that the only viable conclusion she has is simply to withhold judgment. Here is a second set of emotions that Masha may have: she cares about the truth of the matter whether she has free will, but suppose she also *hopes* that she does, in fact, have free will. The object of hope in this second set of emotions is notably different from the object in the first set. Contrary to the first set of emotions, hope’s positive valence enables the conclusion that she does have free will. Of course, if Masha were to believe purely on the basis of this hope, this would be a clear case of wishful thinking, but Masha does not fall into this due to the fact that she cares about the truth of the matter. The conclusion that she has free will is a viable one, but her care, informed by her evidence, intuitively prevents her from fully believing in it and tempers hope’s affinity for belief. As a result, this set of emotions pushes Masha to *suspect* that she has free will. This combination of care and hope is part of the intellectual virtue of intellectual caution. The intellectually cautious agent mitigates the power of positively valanced emotions via the emotion of care even if they find themselves more disposed to believe or disbelieve a proposition.

The third set of emotions merits separate discussion. In addition to the above, let’s suppose that Masha is worried about the fact that she, as far as she knows, may not have free will. This worry has two sides: it disables the conclusion that she does not have free will and it makes Masha uncomfortable with the fact that she lacks a definitive answer on the issue. She recognizes that her intellectual abilities are not ideal, and she has a negatively valanced emotional reaction (perhaps anxiety) to the fact that she currently lacks the capacities to determine a definitive answer to whether she has free will—indeed, she may be understandably frustrated. Now, Masha’s recognizing that she lacks ideal capacities should not be understood as her lacking confidence in herself. *Confidence*, here, should be understood as the familiar emotion related to courage: confidence in oneself (quite different from the degree of doxastic confidence one has in a proposition). Masha may lack confidence in herself in light of the fact that she does not have ideal reasoning capacities, but this need not be the case. She can be confident in herself and endorse what she finds herself attracted to believe.[[23]](#footnote-23) This is not alien to us, as it turns out that agents who are more confident in themselves (in the above sense) are more likely to have higher doxastic confidence in certain propositions. In other words, those who are more confident in themselves believe P rather than simply suspect P.[[24]](#footnote-24) This combination of confidence in oneself in the face of a problem (the lack of an answer to whether she has free will) are the ingredients for the virtue of intellectual courage.[[25]](#footnote-25) This understanding of intellectual courage mirrors how moral courage is commonly thought of as having confidence in the face of adversity or something fearful. If Masha endorses such confidence in herself and faces the problem before her, she is likely to take a stand on the issue of whether she has free will—believing that she has free will.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In an interesting way, Masha has a slew of options here. She has three sets of emotions, each of which push her to have a different doxastic attitude towards the proposition that she has free will. Masha certainly feels the internal turmoil of these conflicting sets of emotions, and whatever set emerges victorious in this conflict will lead Masha to have the corresponding doxastic attitude. Notice that the permissivism, here, is not rooted in Masha’s being able to select what doxastic attitude to have. Rather, she has available to her multiple ways to resolve the conflict between her emotions. Once the emotional conflict is resolved, *then* she has the corresponding doxastic attitude. The kind of permissivism motivated here is an epistemic permissivism that is rooted in a permissivism concerning how to resolve conflicts among one’s emotions. However the conflict is resolved, the victorious set of emotions would be ingredients for an intellectual virtue. If, by resolving the conflict one way, Masha would exemplify an intellectual virtue, then SV entails that she would be personally rational in having the resulting doxastic attitude.

If the above is right, then Masha has available to her three doxastic attitudes that she would be personally rational to have because each one sits at the end of an intellectual virtue that is available to her. The way Masha finds herself in a case of this kind of permissivism should not be unfamiliar. Indeed, it is not uncommon for agents to find themselves with the internal turmoil of conflicting emotions, pushing them to accept different conclusions. While I need not defend any particular strategy on how one resolves such internal conflicts, one way seems attractive. It is possible for Masha to *endorse* or identify with one set of emotions over the others. In doing so, she is, in a sense, choosing what kind of person she is—she picks one of the sets of emotions which will largely determine her character. Since she gets to decide if she is more courageous, cautious, or humble of a person, she has a say in her intellectual character in in virtue of resolving these kinds of conflicts. Of course, her making this decision does not preclude her from having the other unchosen virtues in her life. Rather, Masha has a chance to endorse a set of emotions which are the ingredients to a certain virtue and, in turn, set a priority for this virtue over others—a priority which applies in at least this one case.

The case of Masha supports an interesting result: a permissivism that is consistent with a uniqueness about evidential support. That is, even if it is the case that the evidence, *sans* agents, supports a unique doxastic attitude to have, it is possible that an agent has multiple (personally) rational options in virtue of them having parity conflicts between intellectual virtues. Of course, this kind of conflict depends on a conflict between emotions the agent has, the resolution of which gives the agent different viable conclusions to draw from the evidence.

Before turning to objections in the next section, a preliminary worry needs addressing. So far, I have been silent on whether Masha is aware of her multiple rational options, and one may think that the case changes significantly if she is so aware (if Masha’s case is one of acknowledged permissivism). Suppose, then, that Masha is fully aware that if she endorses a certain set of emotions over the others, she will in turn have a different doxastic attitude towards the proposition that she has free will. Even if she recognizes this, Masha is still stuck in the internal conflict of emotion which cries for resolution. Now, one may worry that in light of Masha’s acknowledgment, her resolution strategy must involve asking which doxastic attitude is, in fact, more accurate given her evidence. So, the worry goes, an appeal to emotions simply brings the issue back to evidential support. I doubt that it does. In order to determine which of the available conclusions is indeed more accurate (assuming Masha would even know which one is accurate) one first needs to determine which conclusions are viable at all. At least phenomenologically, when an agent has internal conflicts of emotions in the above way, what conclusions are viable is constantly in flux; their cognitive workings are unstable and unable to draw conclusions until some resolution is reached. Indeed, *utter* *confusion* is commonly felt when one is stuck in these kinds of conflicts. In order to get a set of viable conclusions, then, Masha needs to resolve the conflict of emotions at hand. Only after this conflict does Masha have the opportunity to consider which conclusion is most accurate. So, if I am correct, a permissivism regarding personal rationality along the lines of intellectual virtues is not undermined by a need to ask which conclusion is most accurate.

*III. Objections*

*a. Phronesis*

The first objection to consider is one from those in virtue theory. One may wonder whether the virtue epistemologist even has the adequate machinery that is needed to make a case like Masha’s possible at all. After all, many in virtue theory accept that the virtue of phronesis[[27]](#footnote-27) plays a large role in exemplifying or having virtues. Further, it is the job of phronesis to choose between conflicting virtues, to mediate through such cases. Zagzebski puts the point this way:

[Phronesis] permits a person to sift through all the salient features of the situation—that is, all those features that are pertinent to *any* of the virtues—and to make a judgment that is not simply the judgment of a person qua courageous, qua generous, or qua humble but is the judgment of the *virtuous* person.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Drawing on this, an objector may claim that there cannot be cases of permissivism about personal rationality. Masha may be functioning merely qua courageous, qua humble, or qua cautious person, but not qua virtuous person. The objector may further claim that I have misrepresented virtue epistemology by focusing so much on SV. Agents are not to act or believe according to certain virtues, they are to act and believe as the virtuous person would. Indeed, for any Aristotelian conception of virtues, the virtuous person is classically the standard by which actions and persons are evaluated.[[29]](#footnote-29) The objection from phronesis, then, insists that Masha be evaluated according to how the phronimos would function—what resolution the virtuous person would endorse and what doxastic attitude they would end up having as a result. The virtuous person, through phronesis, would see which of the conflicting emotions (and their corresponding virtues) is more important in this evaluative context and resolve the emotional conflict, accordingly, setting a standard for what it is personally rational for Masha to do here. So, including phronesis in their account may commit the virtue epistemologist to uniqueness about personal rationality, contrary to my argument.

 At first glance, this objection may seem toothless. Indeed, it is often unhelpful to appeal to phronesis and assume how the phronimos would decide. As Jason Baehr notes, “when the phronimos chooses a particular end or course of action, she does so on the *basis* of certain normative considerations or factors. And it is these considerations that we are after…”[[30]](#footnote-30) So, one who makes this kind of objection may simply be assuming that, contrary to appearances, there are no true parity conflicts between virtues. The kinds of considerations the phronimos would recognize need to be clear, then, in order to see if the case of Masha is a case of permissivism. In Masha’s current situation, she needs to resolve the emotional conflict in order to get out of her confusion. As far as I can currently tell, there is no fact intrinsic to this conflict that works as a deciding factor, making one option more rational than another. Even so, the objector may claim, there may be facts extrinsic to Masha’s conflict by which the virtuous person determines one option as more important than the others. Consider how Barbro Frödding and Martin Peterson describe the virtuous person’s choices in parity-like moral cases. They argue that when a virtuous agent must choose between two options which are roughly equal (or on a par), then the agent must base her decision on non-moral (and not immoral) reasons.[[31]](#footnote-31) For instance, if a university committee views two candidates for a job as equally well-suited, then it should base its decision between the candidates on something like the practical consideration of bettering gender diversity.[[32]](#footnote-32) Now, consider the epistemic analog to this kind of analysis: If an agent is left with no epistemic consideration on which to base a decision between conflicting emotions with epistemic implications then she should appeal to non-epistemic considerations. Perhaps Masha judges that the world needs more humble people, so she should exemplify humility rather than courage. Alternatively, Masha may judge that having courage would better help her job prospects or the helping of others later in life. Whatever the non-epistemic considerations are, it seems that they are relevant to how Masha should choose according to virtue theory. So long as the non-epistemic considerations decisively count in favor of one virtue, then it seems that Masha’s case is not a permissive one.

 The objection above, in order to be effective, needs to claim that when the epistemic reasons run out, there will always be some non-epistemic reason that makes one of the relevant doxastic attitudes the uniquely rational one to have. This is a strong claim, and it is doubtful that it is true. Even if it is true, it is unclear why phronesis would require Masha to let such considerations influence how she determines her intellectual character. Suppose that Masha judges that the world needs more humble people, but she chooses to be intellectually courageous. It is odd to claim that this kind of decision makes Masha personally irrational. Indeed, it is implausible that considerations of what kind of people the world needs impose restrictions on Masha regarding what kind of virtuous person to be. There is nothing *wrong* with her being courageous; intellectual courage is still a virtue, and she is not exemplifying a vice in so choosing. Indeed, so long as Masha’s choosing her virtue to exemplify does not preclude her from making an overall virtuous decision, it seems that Masha is within her rights to choose a virtue even if there are some non-epistemic considerations favoring a different outcome.

*b. Virtuous Toggling?*

One of the most common kinds of objection to permissivism (especially intrapersonal permissivism) is the objection from arbitrariness. Perhaps the most popular form of this objection is the toggling objection.[[33]](#footnote-33) A virtue-focused version of the objection that applies to the above runs as follows, focusing on just two virtues for the sake of simplicity. Assume for the sake of argument that Masha would be rational if she endorsed those emotions that lead to her being courageous and she would be rational to endorse those emotions that lead to her being humble. Suppose also, as above, that Masha is aware that she has multiple ways to resolve her emotional conflict and would result in being rational in having different doxastic attitudes according to her chosen resolution. It may seem that Masha can toggle between these options. Indeed, there are individuals who toggle between their emotions, going back forth about how they feel regarding some state of affairs or some decision. Intuitively, these individuals are being irrational, but the challenge here is that my position may commit me to judging them rational. Masha, for example, may endorse her esteem and hope, resulting in her intellectual humility. Next, Masha reverses her endorsement and goes with confidence and anxiety, resulting in her intellectual courage. While it may seem rational to endorse one of these conflicting sets of emotions, it is certainly irrational to toggle between them. Those sympathetic to my position may be at a loss, for now, since it may seem difficult to show how toggling between two rational options can itself be irrational.

 Toggling is usually taken to be irrational due to the fact that whatever brings one to select one option over another then revert back to the initial selection must be arbitrary. I understand a method as arbitrary if, given the circumstances, it does not have any bearing on the truth of the issue for which the method is employed.[[34]](#footnote-34) Flipping a coin to select what one eats is arbitrary since the coin’s result has no connection with the truth of the matter of what one should eat. Arbitrariness may be innocent in some evaluative contexts, but it is largely agreed that it is illicit in methods for adopting certain doxastic attitudes. Since arbitrariness is predicated of methods, however, it is slightly unclear how exactly arbitrariness emerges in the case of Masha’s toggling. For the sake of simplicity, let’s suppose that Masha has available to her two pills: one pill resolves the emotional conflict in favor of the humility-leading emotions; another pill resolves the emotional conflict in favor of the courage-leading emotions. Masha takes the former pill, resulting in her withholding judgment on the issue whether she has free will. Then, Masha takes the latter pill, resulting in her believing that she does have free will. Now the toggling method is clearly arbitrary. That is, since the pills themselves are not connected to the truth of whether Masha does, in fact, have free will, Masha’s resolving her emotional conflict and selecting the resulting doxastic attitudes via taking these pills injects arbitrariness into her doxastic attitude forming method. Notice that the arbitrariness supposedly undermines Masha’s rationality in having the doxastic attitude she does as a result of the resolution of the emotional conflict.[[35]](#footnote-35)

 My current task is to show how toggling via taking the above pills is irrational even when Masha would be personally rational in having the resulting doxastic attitudes, as shown in the previous section. I have another task as well, since it seems irrational for Masha to take either of the pills in the first place as a method for forming rational doxastic attitudes. Agents are irrational in taking the pills (either for the first time or for toggling) but this evaluation needs to be in the realm of personal *ir*rationality. If I can show that Masha would exemplify an intellectual *vice* in her taking the pills, then I may be able to dispatch this version of the toggling objection. To this end, here is one principle that the virtue epistemologist should find immediately plausible:

**No Rational Vices** (NRV): If having a doxastic attitude exemplifies a vice, then an agent is personally irrational in having said attitude.

This principle is intuitive for the virtue epistemologist in that it also details defeaters for the rationality of certain intellectual actions. If an agent exemplifies a virtue in believing something, then by SV they are default rational in believing it, but this evaluation can be defeated. Despite this virtue, if their believing is also exemplifying a vice, then the agent is *irrational*. This mirrors moral cases where exemplifying a vice renders the action wrong even if some virtue is also exemplified.[[36]](#footnote-36) Above, I described Masha’s case as her having to resolve a conflict of emotions and her exemplifying a virtue if she resolves it in certain ways. It is possible, though, that even if she were to exemplify a virtue as a result of her resolution that she also exemplifies a vice. For example, if it were the case that in her being humble Masha ends up being cowardly, then, by NRV, she would no longer be personally rational to be humble in this evaluative context. More pertinently, if Masha’s use of a certain method to resolve her emotional conflict exemplifies a vice, then NRV implies that her using this method is irrational.

 By showing that taking the pills to resolve one’s confusion regarding whether they have free will exhibits a vice, it should be clear (to the virtue epistemologist) why the agent is irrational in taking such pills in the first place and why they would be irrational to toggle. Let’s first consider Masha’s taking a pill in the first place to resolve her confusion regarding whether she has free will. The relevant vice that she would exemplify is *intellectual dependence*. This vice is the contrary to the virtue of intellectual autonomy—the disposition to rely on one’s own intellectual powers when appropriate. Notice that Masha has engaged in an inquiry and, when faced with her emotion-driven confusion, she resorts to some external object to resolve the conflict for her. That is, Masha is not, herself, endorsing any of the options she has but has offloaded the work to some external thing. This choice of what emotions to endorse is *Masha’s* choice to make and not properly one left for some external mechanism to determine (especially since this choice partly determines Masha’s character). She would similarly have exemplified this vice if she decided to side with whatever her friends believe regarding their having free will (even if her friends are not experts on the topic). Masha, in taking the pill in the first place has given up on her intellectual autonomy. Now, when considering her toggling between the options available to her, the relevant intellectual vice is *intellectual flaccidity*.[[37]](#footnote-37) This vice is exemplified when one fails to maintain their intellectual commitments. Suppose Masha avoids being intellectually dependent and endorses one of the sets of emotions. When she does so, she is making an intellectual commitment to the corresponding virtue. If Masha were to take the relevant pill to then switch her endorsement, she is giving up on her commitment too easily. The “too easily” here is important since Masha may be rational in giving up on a commitment after due deliberation or in the face of new evidence. This change in commitment, though, is innocent and plausibly rational (so long as doing so exemplifies an intellectual virtue). Lacking this new deliberation or evidence, Masha’s toggling between the sets of emotions exemplifies intellectual flaccidity even if the sets of emotions to which she toggles leads her to exemplify an intellectual virtue. At least for the virtue epistemologist, what makes toggling objectionable is its role in exemplifying an intellectual vice. If the above is right, then my position has the resources to put the toggling objection to rest. Taking a pill to resolve one’s confusion and toggling via these pills (and in general) exemplify vices which, according to NRV, makes the agent personally irrational.

*IV. Conclusion*

I have argued that there is a kind of rationality pertaining to the evaluation of persons, a personal rationality; the standards of which are the intellectual character virtues. An agent is personally rational in having a doxastic attitude when they have it as a result of their exemplifying an intellectual virtue. This rationality may be defeated by the exemplification of a vice in the relevant process, but there is enough room to carve out a potential case of permissivism of personal rationality. When the emotional components of distinct intellectual virtues are in conflict, an agent, like Masha, may be left in a confusion where certain potential conclusions are enabled by some emotions and disabled by others. Agents like Masha need to endorse one set of these conflicting emotions, selecting an intellectual virtue as a result. So far, it seems that Masha has available to her multiple ways to resolve this conflict and would be personally rational in having any of the doxastic attitudes sitting at the end of these ways. She would be personally rational in having any one of these doxastic attitudes because she would have them as a result of exemplifying an intellectual virtue. So, there is a case of a permissivism of personal rationality.

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1. Axtell (2011) is an exception, but Axtell is largely concerned with the pragmatic implications of accepting uniqueness and its relation to evidentialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Extant defenses of permissivism can be found in Ballantyne and Coffman (2011), Chakravarrtty (2017: chapter 7), Daoust (2017), Douven (2009), Decker (2012), Drake (2017), Jackson (2021), Kelly (2013), Kopec (2015), Li (2019), Meacham (2013), (2019), Podgorski (2015), Schoenfield (2014), (2018), Sharadin (2015), Titelbaum (2010), Titelbaum and Kopec (2019), Ye (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arguments for uniqueness can be found in Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016), Feldman (2007), Greco and Hedden (2016), Hedden (2015), Horowitz (2014), (2019), Matheson (2011), Schulthesis (2018), Siscoe (2022), White (2005), (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately discuss the notion of evidence, I have in mind only total evidence. I take this to include an agent’s beliefs but to preclude live hypotheses available to the agent. I think my forthcoming arguments can be congenial with most conceptions of evidence, and it is worth noting that concerns about evidence need to be addressed delicately. If evidence is understood too broadly, then uniqueness becomes uninterestingly true (see Titelbaum and Kopec (2016)) and may distract us from the issue that I, like other permissivists, am interested in: what rationality requires of beings like us. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. White (2013: 312). See also Kelly (2013). White’s original statement only mentions doxastic attitudes of believing P and believing not-P, but I see no reason that even the strong permissivist need assent to there being cases of this specific variety. So, I have changed the options to believing P and not believing P. Likewise, White characterizes credences as degrees of confidence. I have switched these terms for ease of reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Engel (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Engel (1992: 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Engel (1992: 139). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kauppinen (2019: 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Siscoe (2022: 587). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kvanvig (1992: 71). While he argues that the quick route falls short, Salim (2021) provides a response. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Leonard (2011) for a developed appeal to intellectual virtues along the lines of personal justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Baehr (2011), Battaly (2018b). Roberts and Wood (2007) and Zagzebski (1996), for extensive discussion of this type of intellectual virtue and the relevant epistemic goods. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On curiosity, see Ross (2020). On epistemic emotions in general, see Brady (2013) (2018), Candiotto (2017) (2019), Morton (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. One may worry that so long as certain conclusions are disabled then an agent is irrational. This is a mistake. As Battaly (2018a: 265-6) notes, not every potential conclusion merits attention. Someone investigating a murder is not closed-minded or vicious if she failed to consider David Bowie’s ghost as a potential suspect. So, certain conclusions can be disabled for an agent while the agent is still personally rational. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Smith & Ellsworth (1985), Mathews & MacLeod (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. One may protest that I conflate self-confidence with self-esteem which, as Kristiansson (2010, 115ff) argues, should be kept apart. The conflation, here, is intentional as I am following the psychological literature which seems to employ the concept I mention here. A more careful treatment of self-esteem is certainly needed in this literature, but reworking this literature in light of the sophisticated understandings of self-esteem is outside the scope of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Tanessini (2021: 150) suggests that the emotion in play in such cases is fear, but it is not obvious that she is right. Any painful emotional experience would prompt an agent to avoid entertaining certain unpleasant truths. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Wallace and Tice (2012) for a helpful survey of literature on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Mortiz & Roberts (2020). Since this result is comparative, it may be due to the fact that higher self-esteem agents tend to let their self-esteem infect their judgements on the views of others. It is worth mentioning, though, that Alloy & Abramson (1988) and Taylor & Armor (1996) would suggest *depressive realism* explains this result. They argue that those agents who are depressed or have low self-esteem have such dispositions *because* their beliefs are accurate—Most others simply have positive biases in their inquiries favoring their own self-esteem. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Whether they always employ emotions is somewhat controversial. All I need for my purposes is to focus on cases where the intellectually virtuous agent does employ emotions. See Morton (2010) and Candiotto (2017) for whether emotions are necessary for intellectual virtues. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Tanessini (2021, chapter 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Following Callan and Arena (2009: 111), one may think that Masha would be closed-minded in forming a belief this way since this method may involve an emotional attachment to the belief that she has free will. Masha need not be closed-minded here. As Battaly (2018a) has argued, being closed-minded involves one’s being unwilling or unable to engage seriously with relevant intellectual options. Masha may form the belief that she has free will partly from her aforementioned emotional dispositions, but she can still be willing to engage with the relevant intellectual options. Indeed, if presented with new arguments to her, Masha may happily engage with them even if they count against her having free will. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. McGregor & Marigold (2003), though it merits mention that they focus on extreme cases: narcissistic and vain individuals. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. One may worry, in light of what I say about intellectual courage, that Masha’s exemplifying humility would instead be exemplifying cowardice, making her vicious in withholding judgment. The problem for my view would be that Masha’s low esteem in her philosophical abilities is the root of the problem that Masha could face with confidence (exemplifying courage), but this low esteem is also a component of humility as I describe it. In expressing humility, then, wouldn’t Masha be *succumbing* to her low esteem and the corresponding anxiety, making her a coward? Not quite. Expressing humility involves having low esteem, but Masha is not succumbing to it. Rather, she answers it with *hope* that her inadequacies can be improved with time, practice, or the help of others. She certainly may still have some negative feelings towards her lack of an answer on whether she has free will, but via hope she accepts that an answer will come in time (at least, she accepts that her inadequacies can be overcome in a way that would yield an answer). Indeed, hope is an essential component of humility (see Tanessini 2021, chapter 4) which distinguishes it from a kind of intellectual fear or servility. Without hope, Masha may exemplify cowardice but with it she would exemplify humility. So, Masha’s low esteem poses a problem to which she has two virtuous responses available: she can have hope and exemplify humility, or she can have confidence in herself and exemplify courage. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Zagzebski (1996: 223) has a similar understanding of the virtue of intellectual courage, though she puts it in terms of making intellectual commitments. Competing accounts of intellectual courage understand it as largely a virtue concerning inquiry rather than concerning the kinds of conclusions one draws from inquiry, as I have. For these competing accounts, see Baehr (2011) and Roberts and Wood (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. While discussing the phronimos (the practically wise person) is standard in cases like this, it is perhaps inaccurate. There is also the sophos (the theoretically wise person) and perhaps they should be my focus. Nevertheless, I will assume that discussions of the phronimos include considerations of the sophos. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Zagzebski (1996: 222). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Specifically, Aristotle’s definition of virtue makes explicit appeal to the virtuous person, the phronimos. See his (2009), 1106b35. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Baehr (2011: 187). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Frödding and Petterson (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Frödding and Petterson (2012: 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See White (2005), (2013); Hedden (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Skipper (2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It is not the case that Masha’s choosing to take pills to resolve this conflict makes her irrational in having the emotions she does (though *toggling* between these emotions certainly seems to be a mark of irrationality). This point is not that using medication to resolve these emotional conflicts is always irrational. Rather, using medication in order to form certain doxastic attitudes and toggling between them seems irrational. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Stangl (2010). Hursthouse echoes this when mentioning vice prohibitions (1999: 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For extensive discussion of this, see Roberts and Wood (2007: 185-193). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)