Permissivism

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1. **Introduction**

You’re a jury member in a criminal trial, and along with your fellow jurors, you’ve carefully observed everything that has been said and done in the courtroom for the past several weeks. You’ve seen maps and photos of the crime scene, listened to police and medical reports, heard testimony from experts and eyewitnesses, and heard arguments from the defense and prosecution. The evidence has been complex, and it hasn’t seemed to obviously support any one conclusion. Over the course of the trial, you’ve entertained various hypotheses concerning the guilt of the defendant, but you’ve made a (successful) effort to avoid having any settled opinion about her guilt until after all the evidence has been presented. Now, you’re about to be dismissed to the deliberation room with the other jurors, and the time has come to make up your mind. Given the evidence in your possession, is there just one rational opinion you could form about whether the defendant is guilty? Or are multiple options open to you, given your evidence? What about your fellow jurors? Is it possible that they might rationally disagree with one another about the defendant’s guilt? Or is there just one opinion everyone ought to form, given the evidence?

These are the focal questions in the debate between *epistemic* *permissivists* and *epistemic* *impermissivists*. According to permissivists, sometimes, incompatible doxastic attitudes—such as belief and suspension of judgment—can both be rational responses to a proposition given a single body of evidence. According to impermissivists, a body of evidence always determines a *unique* rational doxastic attitude toward a proposition. At issue is how stringently a given body of evidence constrains what one is justified to believe: according to the permissivist, the evidence sometimes leaves open multiple options; according to the impermissivist, the evidence always fixes a unique response.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The contemporary debate between permissivists and impermissivists originated with Roger White’s seminal paper ‘Epistemic Permissiveness’ (2005), in which White offers a sustained defense of impermissivism.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the nearly twenty years since its publication, it has remained a touchstone for subsequent work on this topic. Dozens of authors have continued the debate, defending permissivism against White’s criticisms, contributing new arguments against permissivism, drawing connections with other epistemological questions, and developing various proposals concerning the nature of rational belief.

The main aim of this entry is to present an overview of the current state of the debate between permissivists and impermissivists. Since arguments for permissivism double as arguments against impermissivism, and vice versa, it will be convenient to structure the discussion as an evaluation of the status of permissivism. As we review the arguments for and against permissivism, three important choice points will emerge. These choice points are captured by the answers given by the theorist to the following questions:

1. **Attitude Type:** Do bodies of evidence sometimes rationalize incompatible *credences*, or do they only ever rationalize *belief and disbelief*, or *belief and suspension of judgment*?
2. **Intrapersonal vs. Interpersonal:** Do bodies of evidence sometimes rationalize incompatible attitudes for a *single subject*, or do they only ever rationalize incompatible attitudes for *distinct subjects*?
3. **Acknowledgeability:** Can subjects ever *rationally recognize* that their evidence rationalizes multiple incompatible responses?

How the permissivist (or impermissivist) answers these questions has implications for the plausibility of the resulting view. A secondary aim of this article is to draw attention to the advantages and disadvantages of the views that result from answering these questions in different ways. The entry will conclude by drawing out some of the lessons of this literature, noting unresolved questions and areas for future research.

1. **Arguments and Motivations for Permissivism**

The considerations in favor of permissivism can be divided into three categories: intuitive considerations, theoretical considerations, and counterexamples to impermissivism.

* 1. *Intuitive Motivations for Permissivism*

The idea that permissivism is intuitively plausible is among the earliest cited motivations for the view. White (2005, p. 446) notes that permissivism can seem attractive when one reflects on cases of apparent rational disagreement, quoting the following passage from Gideon Rosen:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. (2001, p. 71)

Typical appeals to the intuitive plausibility of permissivism make reference to particular cases (e.g. jurors disagreeing about the guilt of a defendant) or domains (science, religion, philosophy) and suggest that it is obvious that rational disagreement on the basis of the same evidence can occur within these domains.[[3]](#footnote-3) If this is an intuition that most people share, then permissivism has an advantage over impermissivism insofar as it aligns with most peoples’ pre-theoretical beliefs about the possibility of rational disagreement.

However, as some authors have recognized, there’s reason to be skeptical about whether our intuitions about test cases provide genuine support for permissivism. Even if most people, when presented with a candidate for a permissive case of the kind typically found in the literature, agree that the case involves a *rational disagreement*, it is still an open question whether these intuitive judgments imply *permissive cases*. Permissive cases involve subjects who have the same evidence and, based on that evidence, come to hold incompatible rational doxastic attitudes towards some proposition. Yet, there are several ways in which people could be thinking about the test cases that would lead them to judge that they are cases of rational disagreement without those judgments implying that they think the cases are also *permissive*. If so, the intuitive support for permissivism would be merely apparent.

How could we have the intuitions that we do about the test cases without those cases being permissive? Nathan Ballantyne (2018) suggests that our intuitive judgments may track the rationality of the *subjects* involved in a test case, rather than the rationality of their *attitudes* in this specific case. Subjects in would-be permissive cases are usually described as being reasonable, thoughtful, competent, and so on—all qualities that would encourage the reader to think of them as the kinds of people who tend to form rational beliefs. It’s plausible that describing the subjects in this way causes us to think of them as generally rationally people. However, the fact that two people generally form beliefs in a rational way doesn’t entail that in *this* case, their respective attitudes are rational. So if intuitive judgments are about the subjects and not their attitudes, intuitive judgments don’t support permissivism. Until we have some reason to rule out this possible explanation of our intuitions about test cases, we should avoid these intuitions too heavily in mounting a case for permissivism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Fortunately for permissivists, a strong case for the view can be made without appealing to intuitions about cases.

* 1. *Theoretical Considerations for Permissivism*

*Theoretical* considerations for permissivism, as I will use the term, are considerations that do not appeal to our intuitive judgments about cases. Theoretical considerations can be indirect (purporting to show why impermissivism is unlikely to be true) or direct (purporting to show why permissivism is likely to be true).

*Indirect Arguments for Permissivism.* The most common indirect argument for permissivism is that impermissivism is an extremely stringent thesis, whereas permissivism is comparatively lenient. Permissivism is an existential claim: it says that *sometimes* the evidence rationalizes multiple attitudes. This leaves open the possibility that many bodies of evidence are impermissive. (The permissivist does not have to say that there are multiple rational opinions one can take towards the propositions ‘this fair coin will land tails’, or ‘I exist’.) The existential nature of the permissivist thesis also means that there is room for disagreement among permissivists about which cases are permissive. So long as a view entails that there is at least one situation in which a body of evidence rationalizes multiple doxastic attitudes, the view will count as permissive.

Impermissivism, by contrast, is a universal claim. It entails that even in situations where one’s evidence is ambiguous or extremely complex, only one response is rational. Friends of permissivism have pointed out that this commitment looks quite implausible when combined with the view that the appropriate way to respond to evidence is by forming a credence (a number between 0 and 1 that represents a person’s subjective confidence in a proposition). Then, for any body of evidence E and any proposition P, impermissivism entails that there is a *precise* *credence* that is the uniquely rational doxastic attitude to adopt toward P. This can seem hard to accept, especially when one thinks of propositions for which one’s evidence is either very minimal or very complicated. (Is there really a uniquely rational credence to adopt towards the proposition ‘There is a murder of crows within 1 kilometer of here,’ or the proposition ‘Scientists will succeed in bringing the Tasmanian tiger back from extinction before 2035’?) It seems more likely that the principles of rationality are not fine-grained enough to specify a precise credal response in every evidential situation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

One way of responding to the charge that impermissivism is an overly exacting thesis is to appeal to imprecise credences (sometimes called ‘mushy’ credences). Much of the time, we human believers fail to have a precise credence in a proposition. In these cases, it is argued, our doxastic state is better represented by a credence interval, such as [0.4—0.6]. The impermissivist might argue that in many evidential situations, the uniquely rational credence to adopt is imprecise.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, the viability of this strategy will ultimately depend on the theoretical plausibility of imprecise credences.[[7]](#footnote-7) Because of the difficulties associated with the imprecise credence framework, impermissivists often stick to defending a version of the view that employs precise credences or traditional doxastic attitudes (Horowitz et al., forthcoming; White, 2009).

This discussion brings us to the first choice point for both parties to the debate: the **attitude-type** targeted by their respective theses. Permissivism and impermissivism can be construed as theses about which of the traditional doxastic attitudes (belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment) one would be rational to adopt given a body of evidence, or as theses about the credences one would be rational to adopt. Early defenses of impermissivism tend to construe the thesis as applying to traditional doxastic attitudes (Feldman, 2006, 2007; White, 2005), with subsequent defenses following suit (Dogramaci & Horowitz, 2016; Matheson, 2011; White, 2013). However, despite this focus on traditional doxastic attitudes, most impermissivists are also on record as endorsing the more stringent credal version of the view. Matheson (2011, pp. 371–373) provides some reasons for thinking that adopting a more fine-grained view of doxastic attitudes does not pose additional problems for impermissivism, and White (2009) defends impermissivism as a thesis about credences.[[8]](#footnote-8) In evaluating the case for permissivism (or impermissivism), it will be important to consider whether the arguments under discussion work equally well for both ‘credal’ and ‘traditional attitudes’ versions of the views.[[9]](#footnote-9)

So far, we’ve noted that impermissivism seems overly exacting when construed as a thesis about credences, so one might think that the natural response for the impermissivist is to retreat to a version of the view that pertains to traditional doxastic attitudes. But there is also a version of the ‘overly exacting’ objection that targets impermissivism construed as a thesis about traditional attitudes. Suppose that your evidence about P is mixed: some supports P and some supports not-P. Stipulate that on the basis of this evidence, you suspend judgment about P, and that this response is rational. Now, imagine that you get a tiny bit of new evidence that supports P. As time goes on, you gradually get more and more bits of evidence that support P. At what point does it become rational for you to believe P? Impermissivists must say that there is a precise threshold at which you are rationally required to adopt the belief that P; there is no point at which both belief and suspension of judgment would be rationally permissible. Yet this seems implausible: surely there is no such precise threshold.[[10]](#footnote-10) Either way the impermissivist answers the **Attitude Type** question, she faces the objection that the resulting view is overly exacting.

*Direct Arguments for Permissivism*. The most well-developed defense of permissivism appeals to the idea that there are different ways of approaching the evidence which can be equally good from an epistemic point of view, and yet yield incompatible attitudes when applied to the same body of evidence. These distinct approaches to the evidence, permissivists claim, can yield rational but incompatible results when applied to a single body of evidence.

There are many ways to fill in the details of this picture. One approach, suggested by Tom Kelly, is that there are different rational weightings of the Jamesian goals of *believing* *what* *is* *true* and *avoiding* *believing* *what* *is* *false* (Kelly, 2013). William James (1956) notes that while both goals are desirable from an epistemic perspective, they are often in tension with one another. Prioritizing avoiding error may lead you to suspend judgment on P in circumstances where someone who placed more importance on holding true beliefs would believe P. Yet, Kelly suggests, there is no single rational weighting of the relative importance of these goals. Thus, the fact that there are different acceptable attitudes towards epistemic risk means that there will be situations in which different individuals have different rational responses to the same evidence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Other permissivists hold that one’s response to the evidence will depend on one’s interpretation of the evidence (Decker, 2012), one’s prior probability distribution (Meacham, 2013), one’s epistemic standard (Schoenfield 2014), one’s cognitive abilities (Simpson, 2017), how one processes one’s evidence (Weisberg, 2020), or one’s epistemic style (Flores, 2021). Of course, not every epistemic standard, prior probability distribution, interpretation of the evidence, or whatever, will result in rational doxastic attitudes. There may be some approaches that are beyond the pale, rationally speaking. Rather, the claim held in common by these permissivist authors is that there is *more* *than* *one* rational approach.

Why think that there is more than one rational approach to the evidence? Answering this question will involve saying something about what makes an approach rational. It is a foundational assumption in epistemology that rational beliefs bear a connection to truth or accuracy. Of course, a belief’s being rational does not *entail* that that belief is true (one can have rational false beliefs, for example, when one forms beliefs on the basis of misleading evidence), but having rational beliefs is better, from the perspective of truth or accuracy, than having irrational beliefs. Thus, if it turns out that there are multiple ways of processing the evidence that are on a par from a perspective of generating accurate beliefs, this will be a reason to think that there are multiple rational approaches to the evidence. We will explore this line of thought in more detail in Section 2.3.

The idea that there may be different rational ways of approaching the evidence raises an important question: Can one person employ more than one rational approach? Different answers to this question generate very different kinds of permissivism. If a person can have no more than one rational approach to the evidence, and that approach always recommends a unique doxastic attitude, then a person’s approach and evidence will always fix a unique attitude for her. The result is *interpersonal permissivism*: the view that permissive cases always involve more than one person. If, on the other hand, there are multiple rational approaches available to a single person, then different doxastic attitudes may be rational for a person depending on which approach she uses (her evidence remaining fixed). The result is *intrapersonal permissivism*: the view that there are evidential situations in which multiple doxastic attitudes can be rational for a single subject.[[12]](#footnote-12) Epistemologists who think there are multiple rational ways of approaching the evidence tend to be interpersonal permissivists, but there are notable exceptions.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Before moving on to discuss counterexamples to impermissivism, we should mention another motivation for permissivism that is not based on the idea of people possessing different rational approaches to the evidence. Some authors are led to embrace permissivism through considerations of *epistemic* *supererogation*. The concept of supererogation is familiar from the moral realm, in which morally supererogatory actions are ones that would be good to perform, but are not morally required. More recently, some have argued that there is a parallel category in the epistemic realm, and that the existence of epistemically supererogatory attitudes entails a version of permissivism (Jackson, 2021; Li, 2018, 2019a). Variants of permissivism based on considerations of epistemic supererogation are generally intrapersonal, since both the epistemically good and the epistemically supererogatory attitudes are said to be rationally permissible for a subject in a permissive case.

* 1. *Counterexamples to Impermissivism*

The final kind of argument for permissivism to be discussed is argument from counterexample. Arguments for permissivism based in counterexamples differ from the intuitive considerations discussed in Section 2.1. Whereas the latter tend to rely on our judgments about generic cases of disagreement (e.g. ‘philosophical disagreement’, ‘political disagreement’), arguments by counterexample focus on highly specified situations and authors typically provide extended arguments for why we ought to think of these *particular* cases as permissive.

Matthew Kopec (2015) develops a counterexample in which a scientist with a mind-reading device tells you that he will hook you up to the device and observe its outputs over the next five minutes. At the end of that time, he will put a cat in a box only if you formed the belief, within the five minutes, that he would put a cat in the box. We can assume that you have good evidence that the scientist’s mind-reading device is reliable, and you have no prior beliefs about whether the scientist will put the cat in the box. Kopec argues that you would be rational to form the belief that the scientist will put the cat in the box, and you would also be rational to form the belief that the scientist will not put the cat in the box. Either belief would be formed using methods that are highly reliable and known to be as reliable as any other method you could use to form a belief on the matter.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This counterexample to impermissivism crucially depends on self-verifying propositions: propositions that are true if believed. Counterexamples based on self-verifying beliefs, if successful, demonstrate that both interpersonal *and* intrapersonal versions of permissivism are correct: not only would it be rational for two subjects to form different beliefs about whether the scientist will put the cat in the box, but a single subject would be rational to believe that the scientist will put the cat in the box, and rational to believe that the scientist will not put the cat in the box (though not necessarily rational to believe both at the same time).

One way to respond to purported counterexamples based on self-verifying beliefs is to argue that the uniquely rational doxastic attitude in such cases is suspension of judgment (or, a credence of .5). In Kopec’s mind-reading case, on might argue that learning that the outcome of the experiment depends on what beliefs you form is not evidence for one outcome or the other. What one learns from the experimental setup is the truth of two conditionals: ‘If I believe the scientist will put the cat in the box, then the scientist will put the cat in the box,’ and ‘If I believe the scientist will not put the cat in the box, then the scientist will not put the cat in the box.’ But these conditionals by themselves don’t give one a reason to believe or to disbelieve.

Even if these kinds of counterexamples are successful in establishing the truth of permissivism, it is worth noting that they establish a very conservative variant. Most proponents of permissivism believe that many ordinary disputes in science, politics, philosophy, and so on are permissive. If it turns out that the only permissive cases are those that involve self-verifying propositions, this will show that impermissivism is false, but it will not establish the widespread existence of permissive cases that most permissivists are committed to. A permissivism that limits permissive cases to those involving self-verifying beliefs therefore fails to fulfill some of the chief motivations for adopting permissivism.

A different style of counterexample is due to Michael Titelbaum and Matthew Kopec (2019). They present the following case:

**Reasoning Room**

You are standing in a room with nine other people. Over time the group will be given a sequence of hypotheses to evaluate. Each person in the room currently possesses the same total evidence relevant to those hypotheses. But each person has a different method of reasoning about that evidence.

When you are given a hypothesis, you will apply your methods to reason about it in light of your evidence, and your reasoning will suggest either than the evidence supports belief in the hypothesis, or that the evidence supports belief in its negation. Each other person in the room will also engage in reasoning that will yield exactly one of these two results.

This group has a well-established track record, and its judgments always fall in a very particular pattern: For each hypothesis, 9 people reach the same conclusion about which belief the evidence supports, while the remaining person concludes the opposite. Moreover, the majority opinion is always accurate, in the sense that whatever belief the majority takes to be supported always turns out to be true.

Despite this precise coordination, it’s unpredictable who will be the odd person out for any given hypothesis. The identity of the outlier jumps around the room, so that in the long run each agent is odd-person-out exactly 10% of the time. This means that each person in the room takes the evidence to support a belief that turns out to be true 90% of the time. (220)

Titelbaum and Kopec present **Reasoning Room** as an example of a permissive case in which each member of the room is rational to form the belief recommended by their own method of reasoning. This is plausible: after all, each person’s method of reasoning is extremely reliable with respect to the hypothesis that they are given to evaluate. And while the example is clearly contrived, Titelbaum and Kopec argue that “the core epistemic features of the situation are shared with many real-life examples,” as when different scientific working groups use different methods of analysis to analyze data, for example (2019, p. 219). In response, the impermissivist might dispute the set-up of the case by challenging the assumption that there are multiple distinct equally reliable methods of reasoning about a class of questions that nonetheless recommend, on occasion, distinct doxastic attitudes. Alternatively, the impermissivist might challenge the claim that a method’s being reliable is sufficient for its being rational. As we will see in the next section, however, existing defenses of impermissivism tend to equate rational belief with reliably-formed belief, making the first of these two responses preferable for the impermissivist.

1. **Arguments Against Permissivism**

Having reviewed the positive case for permissivism, let’s move on to the arguments against it. Here, the dialectical landscape can be divided into considerations that support impermissivism and considerations against permissivism.

*3.1. Arguments for impermissivism*

An early argument for impermissivism is the ‘evidence-pointing argument’, appeals to the nature of evidential support (White, 2005, p. 447, 2013, p. 314). Roughly, the argument is this: it is rational to believe P only if one’s evidence supports P; however, a single body of evidence cannot both support P and support not-P; hence, a body of evidence can never rationalize belief that P and belief that not-P.[[15]](#footnote-15) As several authors have noted, the claim that a single body of evidence cannot support P and support not-P is not plausible if, as many permissivists claim, one’s approach to the evidence affects what the evidence supports. As we have seen (Section 2.2), many permissivists hold that evidential support is a three-place relation that obtains between a body of evidence, a proposition, and one’s approach.

A different line of argument for impermissivism is pursued by Sinan Dogramaci and Sophie Horowitz (2012; 2016; forthcoming). Rather than appealing to the nature of evidential support, these authors take a more pragmatic approach, arguing that the truth of impermissivism is a necessary part of the best explanation of the value of our practice of making epistemic evaluations (i.e. of calling opinions rational, unjustified, and the like). The argument is complex. The first step is to establish that our practice of promoting rationality via issuing epistemic evaluations requires explanation. The authors then propose their own account of the value of this social practice: to ensure the reliability of the testimony of others, enabling us to treat them as *epistemic surrogates* who use the same reliable belief-forming rules as we do (2016, p. 136). Finally, they argue that this end is most effectively achieved if impermissivism is true, because only the truth of impermissivism can ensure that rational reasoners draw from a shared stock of reliable epistemic rules. Using a *permissive* conception of rationality would increase the risk that other rational reasoners are unreliable, since they may be using different epistemic rules to process the evidence (2016, p. 139).

This argument has several vulnerabilities. First, an inference from “impermissivism is necessary for a maximally effective practice of making judgments about rationality” to “impermissivism is true” is sound only if our practice of making epistemic evaluations *is* maximally effective. Unless there is good reason to think that our rationality-talk is as effective as it could be in cultivating reliable sources of testimony, this argument at best reveals something important about how we *ought* to use rationality-talk (Daoust, 2017).

Second, the argument relies on the assumption that the purpose of our practice of making epistemic evaluations is to cultivate reliable sources of testimony. But there may also be other uses for our rationality-talk: expressing our views about which belief-forming practices we take to be conducive to accuracy (as Schoenfield (2019) argues), or persuading others to adopt our beliefs (as suggested by Mercier and Sperber (2011, 2017)), for example. If our practice of issuing epistemic evaluations has aims other than (or in addition to) the one Horowitz and Dogramaci propose, we’ll need to reexamine the role impermissivism may or may not play in securing those aims.

Finally, one might challenge the claim that an impermissive conception of rationality is superior to a permissive conception in its ability to promote reliable testimony. Permissivism allows communities of reasoners to benefit from a variety of methods and approaches, and reduces the risk of convergence on falsehood or lack of progress if shared epistemic rules should turn out to be unreliable (Kitcher, 1990; Rueger, 1996; M. Weisberg & Muldoon, 2009). Given these advantages, it’s possible that a permissive conception of rationality does a better job of promoting convergence on the truth than an impermissive one (Thorstad, 2019). Moreover, suppose Titelbaum and Kopec are correct that there are multiple *reliable* ways of reasoning about a body of evidence that nonetheless sometimes produce incompatible attitudes. If so, rationality will be permissive, but this will not increase the risk that rational reasoners will be unreliable. Much more work is needed to show that the truth of impermissivism is necessary to make sense of our existing practice of making epistemic evaluations.

*3.2 Problems for Permissivism*

Proponents of impermissivism often charge permissivism with a kind of instability, inconsistency, or arbitrariness that renders it implausible at best and incoherent at worst. This challenge can take different forms, but typically involves problems that arise for the self-reflective agent who understands herself to be in a permissive case. In what follows, I’ll use the term ‘arbitrariness objection’ because it is already commonly used in the literature to refer to this style of objection[[16]](#footnote-16); however, we can keep in mind that strictly speaking there are several distinct but closely related arguments that fall under the heading of ‘arbitrariness objections’ to permissivism.

Worries about the arbitrariness of permissivism first surface in White (2005, pp. 447–448). White asks us to consider the following scenario.

**Belief-inducing Pills**

You have no evidence concerning P, and are given the choice between two pills, one of which will cause you to form the belief that P and the other of which will cause you to form the belief that not-P. You choose to take one of the pills at random, and end up with the belief that P.

White then points out that, so long as you retain an awareness of how your belief was formed, you will recognize that P is no more likely to be true than not-P. But it seems that you cannot coherently continue to believe P while recognizing that not-P is just as likely to be true. So if you find yourself in this situation and you’re rational, you’ll suspend judgment about P. So far, so good. White then invites us to consider a new scenario:

**Influenced by Permissivism**

You have come to believe that permissivism is true, and that a particular body of evidence E rationalizes the belief that P and rationalizes the belief that not-P. That is, you believe that there are two alternative paths that your reasoning could take from E, one of which would lead to the rational conclusion that P and one of which would lead to the rational conclusion that not-P. You choose to reason from E in the first way, and end up with the belief that P.

White then argues that this case is like **Belief-inducing Pills** in the following way: the person who thinks that believing P and believing not-P are both rational responses to her evidence will, like the person who formed a belief on the basis of taking a pill, have to recognize that P is no more likely to be true than not-P. But then, this person will not be able to coherently continue to believe that P. Thus, if permissivism is true, it licenses subjects to be in the incoherent state of believing P while believing that not-P is just as likely to be true. The correct theory of rationality will not license subjects to be in incoherent states. Therefore, the correct theory of rationality cannot be permissive.

While White’s initial formulation focuses on the incoherence exhibited by a subject who believes P while believing not-P is rational, sometimes formulations of the objection focus on the perspective of an agent who has not yet adopted any attitude but regards multiple attitudes as rational responses to her evidence. Here is Robert Mark Simpson:

If you say DA1 [doxastic attitude 1] and DA2 are both rationally permissible doxastic attitudes to hold towards P given E, it’s hard to see what reasons you could have—other than arbitrary reasons, like what’s more fun to believe—for singling out either of these as *your* belief. Once you’ve registered the notion that both DA1 and DA2 are, by your own lights, rationally permissible, it’s arbitrary to accept one in preference to the other. (2017, p. 522)[[17]](#footnote-17)

To respond to this challenge, permissivists must explain why it is rationally permissible to prefer one attitude even while acknowledging that an incompatible attitude is rational, given one’s evidence. Schoenfield (2014) offers a version of permissivism that provides such an explanation. On Schoenfield’s account, people have different approaches to the evidence, which she calls *epistemic standards.* A subject’s standard is responsible for determining what beliefs that subject forms based on their evidence. Schoenfield holds that more than one epistemic standard is rationally permissible, so different subjects can come to hold rational yet incompatible doxastic attitudes based on the same body of evidence as a result of holding different rational epistemic standards.

Schoenfield adds to this picture that *rational* epistemic standards are *strictly* *immodest inductive methods*: a subject who possesses a rational standard necessarily takes that standard to be more truth-conducive than rival standards (2014, p. 199).[[18]](#footnote-18) That is, the subject is necessarily highly confident that following their own standard will lead them to have high confidence in truths and low confidence in falsehoods, and is less confident that rival standards will deliver this result. On this view, rational subjects will judge that an attitude other than their own is rational on the basis of their evidence when they recognize that it is required by a standard that they do not hold, but is nevertheless rationally permissible. On this view, sticking to one’s own (rational) belief isn’t incoherent or arbitrary, because one necessarily sees other rational beliefs as less likely to be true than one’s own. And one is under no obligation to adopt beliefs that one regards as unlikely to be true.

While Schoenfield’s view offers a consistent response to worries about arbitrariness, her view also faces serious challenges. One respect in which the view seems improbable is in its implications for how rational subjects ought to regard their own methods of belief-formation. Any theory that entails that rational subjects can believe that other standards are rational, yet less truth-conducive than their own, will imply that there are cases in which I ought to regard others with the same evidence as me as having rational yet inaccurate beliefs based on that evidence. But this is an odd combination of attitudes: it amounts to thinking that I have some way of forming accurate beliefs apart from reacting rationally to my evidence (Christensen, 2016, p. 590).

Another problem for a view on which the rational standards are strictly immodest is that it doesn’t give subjects leeway to rationally question their own belief forming methods. On such a view, there will be no possibility of stepping outside of one’s standards to evaluate them: the credentials of any standard I possess can only be assessed from within, by using the standard itself. Because rational standards are strictly immodest, the inevitable result of any attempt to evaluate one’s own rational standard will be that one continues to regard one’s own standards as maximally truth-conducive. This is a bad result: subjects are just as likely to be mistaken about what the most truth-conducive standards are as they are to be mistaken about other questions (*cf*. Christensen 2013). This should cause us to doubt that rational standards must be strictly immodest.

A second reply, due to Titelbaum and Kopec (2019), is to challenge the assumption that the agent in a permissive case, like the pill-popper, must regard their own belief as formed by a method that is no more likely to be reliable than chance. The authors develop this response by arguing that most approaches to the evidence employed by rational people will be generally truth-conducive, even if those approaches are non-equivalent and sometimes yield different results when applied to the same evidence (2019, pp. 217–219).[[19]](#footnote-19) If this is correct, the authors argue, some degree of arbitrariness in how a subject’s approach is acquired shouldn’t concern us, so long as the approach they employ is generally reliable. Even if there is no special reason to prefer our own rational method of reasoning over another rational method of reasoning, there’s no interesting epistemic problem here if both methods are equally likely to produce true beliefs.

The possibility that there are different permissible ways of approaching the evidence that are equally truth-conducive is an important insight in this debate. However, the weakness of this reply is that it still fails to give a satisfactory explanation of how a subject in a permissive case can rationally retain her own belief when she judges that an incompatible doxastic attitude is rational. Granting that there are different rational standards that are equally reliable, the following kind of case can still arise:

**Equally Reliable Methods**

I use method M1 for assessing the evidence, and you use method M2. We both know that each of us uses a distinct rational method that reliably yields true beliefs. We are given evidence E and asked to apply our respective methods to determine whether P is true. I flawlessly apply M1 to E and end up with the belief that P. You flawlessly apply M2 to E and end up with the belief that not-P. We tell each other the results of our reasoning about E.[[20]](#footnote-20)

How should you and I respond after learning that we disagree about P? Although I know that our distinct methods reliably yield true beliefs, I have no reason for thinking that in this particular case, my method is the one that’s gotten things right. You are in the same position. Without further information about which reliable method got things right on this occasion, it seems that we should both suspend judgment about P. But if so, then once again permissivism leads to a contradiction: it says that, in the case under consideration, it is rational for me to believe P, while at the same time, the rational response is suspension. We’re back to White’s original objection that permissivism licenses subjects to be in incoherent states.

This discussion brings us to a final choice point for the permissivist: the question of **Acknowledgeability.** A permissive case is one in which a single body of evidence rationalizes more than one doxastic attitude. Call an *acknowledged* permissive a permissive case in which a subject who holds a rational attitude based on his evidence can rationally believe that an incompatible attitude is rational based on that evidence. *Acknowledged permissivism* is the view that acknowledged permissive cases are possible. *Unacknowledged permissivism*, by contrast, holds that permissive cases are possible, but *acknowledged* permissive cases are not.[[21]](#footnote-21)

It is widely recognized that worries about arbitrariness arise only for acknowledged permissivism. Arbitrariness problems get traction only when an agent takes a perspective on their own situation, coming to believe that an attitude in addition to their own is rational, or trying to justify a preference between two doxastic attitudes or standards that they judge to be rational. Since unacknowledged permissivism denies that permissive cases can retain their permissive character when subjects take up such a perspective, it sidesteps concerns about arbitrariness.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Permissivists might be tempted to turn to unacknowledged permissivism to escape the arbitrariness objection. However, both permissivists and impermissivists often take this to be an unappealing option. White (2005, p. 450) argues that such a position is self-undermining, as it entails that in a particular case, agents involved in the case can’t believe it’s permissive. According to White, this makes it difficult to rationally believe that permissivism is true. Echoing this concern, Ballantyne and Coffman (2012, pp. 666–667) argue that unacknowledged permissivism has the implausible consequence that permissive cases have as an *essential feature* that nobody can know that they are permissive.

These objections are unsuccessful. They apply only to an extreme version of unacknowledged permissivism on which permissive cases are *in principle* impossible to identify. However, authors who endorse unacknowledged permissivism typically defend a more moderate view, on which it is only the subjects who are in permissive cases who cannot rationally recognize that they are (Cohen, 2013; Smith, 2020).[[23]](#footnote-23) These authors accept the central premise of the arbitrariness objection; namely, that regarding an attitude other than your own as rational creates rational pressure for you to modify your own attitude. That is why coming to view a case as permissive destroys the permissive nature of the case. Nevertheless, permissive cases can and do obtain, and may be identified as such by subjects with different evidence from the participants.

It is also claimed that unacknowledged permissivism is unmotivated because fails to fulfill the intuitive motivations for permissivism (i.e., the intuitions about cases discussed in Section 2.1).[[24]](#footnote-24) However, failing to satisfy the intuitive motivations for permissivism may not be much of a problem: as already noted, there is reason to be skeptical about whether our intuitions about test cases provide genuine support for permissivism.[[25]](#footnote-25)

An alternative response to the arbitrariness objection is offered in Laura Callahan’s (2021) existentialist permissivism. Like other permissivists, Callahan argues that what it is rational to believe based on one’s evidence can vary according to one’s approach to the evidence—in Callahan’s terminology, one’s “framework”. Callahan adds to this that in evidentially murky situations, one can *create* a rational basis for precisifying one’s framework through *committing* to that precisification. In Callahan’s words, “we can give ourselves extra reason to be, e.g., a more cautious or trusting intellectual agent, by willing or committing to be such” (p. 549). This provides a solution to the arbitrariness objection: in permissive cases, one’s own framework can be rationally preferred *in virtue of its having been chosen.* The viability of this variant of permissivism will depend on whether choosing an approach to the evidence as an act of will can rationalize one’s choice, as Callahan claims.

1. **Conclusion and Areas for Future Research**

Over the course of reviewing the motivations and arguments for and against permissivism, three important choice points for the permissivist have emerged: (i) the type of attitudes (beliefs or credences) that are held by the agent in permissive cases; (ii) whether the thesis is intersubjective or intrasubjective; and (iii) whether permissive cases can be rationally acknowledged by those involved in them. We saw that how the permissivist (or impermissivist) answers these questions has implications both for how well the resulting view handles various objections, and for which kinds of motivations it satisfies.

We have also seen that the permissivism/impermissivism debate is deeply intertwined with a number of adjacent questions in epistemology. First, there are questions about the nature of evidential support. Is it a two-place relation that holds between bodies of evidence and propositions or a three-place relation that holds between a body of evidence, a proposition, and some third factor such as standards, prior probabilities, or whatever? Versions of permissivism that take evidential support to be a three-place relation also raise questions about the nature of the third element of the relation—the one that is supposed to encompass one’s “approach” to the evidence: Should it be understood in terms of prior conditional probabilities, cognitive abilities, dispositions, values, beliefs about how to go about forming beliefs, or something else? How one answers this question gives rise to further questions about how one acquires a standard, the rationality of possessing more than one standard, the rationality of changing standards, and questions about what the substantive constraints on rational epistemic standards may be. Some authors have suggested that the permissivist’s prospects for giving consistent and compelling answers to these questions are bleak.[[26]](#footnote-26) If satisfying answers to these questions can’t be produced, then a permissivism that appeals to different rational approaches to the evidence is off the table. However, these questions have been largely underexplored in the literature, so any conclusions about permissivism’s prospects for answering them at this point would be premature.

Another point that emerged from our discussion of Titelbaum and Kopec’s Reasoning Room is that much rides on the question of whether there are in fact distinct methods of reasoning (standards) that are equally reliable. The idea that there could be multiple reliable ways of reasoning is not helpful for the permissivist if, in point of fact, people can’t or don’t employ a variety of reliable methods. (Or at least, this would be an unwelcome result for the permissivist so long as they want to argue that permissive cases are prevalent.) Therefore, fruitful theorizing about this question will need to take into account empirical data about human cognition and the psychology of human reasoning. The impermissivist, for her part, must either deny that there are distinct equally reliable methods, or deny that a method’s being reliable is sufficient for the belief that it produces to be a rational response to the evidence. Establishing either of these claims will require further argument.

The permissivism/impermissivism literature has also given rise to interesting subsidiary metalinguistic questions about our practice of issuing epistemic evaluations. What is the value of this practice? Is it limited to the value of promoting accurate beliefs, or does it serve some further purpose? What do we mean when we call an attitude ‘rational’ or ‘irrational’? Are there ways in which our current practice falls short of the ideal and could be improved? These questions are interesting in their own right, but will hold special interest for those who seek to understand the strength of the overall case for permissivism or impermissivism.

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1. Throughout this entry, I will be using the terms ‘rational’ and ‘justified’ interchangeably to designate a positive normative status that is distinctly epistemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In ‘Epistemic Permissiveness,’ White follows Richard Feldman (2007) in referring to the claim that a given body of evidence supports a single rational doxastic attitude as ‘Uniqueness.’ Feldman defends Uniqueness (or, in his words, the ‘Uniqueness Thesis’) in his paper ‘Reasonable Religious Disagreements’ (2007, p. 205). At the time White’s paper was published, Feldman’s paper was still in press. Throughout this entry, I’ll refer to the view that there are cases in which a given body of evidence can rationalize incompatible doxastic attitudes toward a proposition as *permissivism* (and to those who endorse the view as *permissivists*)and, following Sophie Horowitz (2013), I’ll refer to the view that a given body of evidence only ever rationalizes a single doxastic attitude toward a proposition as *impermissivism* (and to those who endorse the view as *impermissivists*). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rosen goes on to discuss a case in which paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs, White (2005, p. 446) elaborates on a jury case, and Schoenfield (2014, pp. 196–197) appeals to disagreement over scientific, medical, and religious matters to illustrate the intuitive appeal of permissivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Ballantyne (2018) for additional suggestions about how our intuitions about test cases may fail to imply the truth of permissivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schoenfield discusses variants of this objection in several places in her published work (forthcoming; 2014, pp. 197–198, 2019). See also Thomas Kelly (2013, pp. 299–301) for an articulation of the objection that impermissivism is an overly exacting thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Kelly (2013, pp. 300–301). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Joyce (2010) and Moss (2021) for defenses of imprecise credences, and Carr (2020), Elga (2010b), and White (2009) for criticisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sinan Dogramaci and Sophie Horowitz (2016; forthcoming) also believe that their defense of impermissivism (to be discussed in Section 3) works equally well for credal and traditional belief versions of impermissivism. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is also in principle possible to hold that permissivism (or impermissivism) is true as a thesis about one attitude type, but false as a thesis about the other. The details and plausibility of this kind of position will depend on one’s views about the relationship between credences and traditional doxastic attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Schoenfield (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also (Levinstein, 2017) for the idea that different attitudes toward epistemic risk can be rational. See (Horowitz, 2017) for criticism of the ‘Jamesian goals’ strategy. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The labels “interpersonal” and “intrapersonal” are due to Thomas Kelly (2013, pp. 303–304). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. One exception is Jonathan Weisberg (2020), who defends a version of intrapersonal permissivism. He argues that what doxastic attitude is rational for a subject depends on how the subject processes the evidence. Weisberg draws on relevant psychological literature to argue that there is an element of randomness in evidence processing such that a single subject’s evidence processing might yield one doxastic attitude on one occasion and another doxastic attitude on another occasion. Given some plausible assumptions about the nature of an ‘approach’, the result is that a single subject can possess or instantiate more than one approach. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See also Raleigh (2017) and J. Drake (2016), who discuss similar counterexamples based on self-verifying beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Feldman presents a similar line of reasoning at (2006, p. 231, 2007, pp. 204–205). Matheson (2011, p. 365) also endorses this argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example Robert Mark Simpson’s (2017) “Permissivism and the Arbitrariness Objection”, or Ru Ye’s (2019) “The Arbitrariness Objection Against Permissivism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Weisberg (2020, 3) and Ye (2019, 3) formulate the objection in terms of the “internal instability” of permissivism. Here is Weisberg: “[Permissive views] allow us to embrace one set of beliefs while simultaneously acknowledging that an alternative view is just as good. But acknowledging that a second perspective is equally legitimate threatens our commitment to the first. How can we favor one view over another if they are equally good?” Feldman (2007, p. 206) puts the objection in terms of the permissivist needing a reason for preferring one rational approach (or ‘starting point’) to another. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. According to David Lewis, an *immodest* *inductive* *method* is an inductive method that calculates that its own expected accuracy is *not exceeded by* the expected accuracy of any rival method (1971, p. 55). It is often taken to be a condition of an acceptable inductive method that it be immodest (e.g. Lewis 1971; Elga 2010; Horowitz 2013). In Lewis’ sense of immodesty, it is sufficient for a standard to be immodest that it calculates that some other standard is just as likely to yield true beliefs. But since Schoenfield claims that a subject who holds a rational standard should think of rival standards as *less* likely to lead her to a true belief than her current standard (2014, p. 201), she is best interpreted as taking a (rational) epistemic standard to be a *strictly immodest* inductive method. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Think back to their toy permissive case, Reasoning Room, discussed in Section 2.3. Titelbaum and Kopec’s suggestion is that most ordinary permissive cases are like Reasoning Room in that they involve subjects using distinct methods of reasoning that comparable in reliability but are not extensionally equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. If M1 and M2 are both highly reliable, then they will be much more likely to produce the same recommendation about what to believe about P than to produce conflicting recommendations. Still, in a minority of cases the methods will produce conflicting recommendations. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The term ‘unacknowledged permissivism’ is due to Titelbaum and Kopec (2016, p. 191), although earlier authors discuss the view under different names. See, e.g. White (2005), Ballantyne and Coffman (2012), Cohen (2013), and Horowitz (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. There are additional arbitrariness-style objections to permissivism that we have not had space to discuss. For example, Daniel Greco and Brian Hedden (2016) argue that a subject who regards more than one attitude as rational, given their evidence, adopts inconsistent commitments about what to believe. Ginger Schultheis (2018) argues that a subject in an acknowledged permissive case is forced into inconsistent commitments when she adopts a credence on the edge of the range of rationally permissible credences. And Matthew Wilson (2017) argues that internal tensions arise for the permissivist who regards the debate about permissivism as a permissive case. Unacknowledged permissivism also avoids these objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Stewart Cohen (2013, p. 101) argues that “a subject cannot rationally believe that there are two (or more) rational credences for [a hypothesis] h on [a body of evidence] e, while rationally holding either.” And Julia Smith (2020, p. 161) defends the view that there are cases where evidence E rationalizes belief and P and belief that not-P, but that a subject who holds evidence E cannot rationally believe P while judging that a belief that not-P is rational. Neither of these views entail that permissive cases are in principle unidentifiable. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, e.g., White (2005, p. 451) and Schoenfield (2014, n. 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See discussion of Ballantyne (2018) in Section 2.1., as well as Smith (2020, pp. 162–167). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, Li (2019b) argues that two main contenders for a theory of standard-possession both fail to satisfy the motivations for adopting a standards-based permissivism in the first place. Horowitz (2017) raises a number of challenges for permissivists who would like to think of ‘standards’ as different approaches to epistemic risk. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)