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Is There a Case for Permissivism?

Jennifer Kuo

Abstract: This paper discusses Schoenfield's arguments in favor of permissivism as discussed in "Permission to Believe," including its main intuitive and theoretical motivations. The focus is specifically on critically evaluating the arguments combating objections that cite permissivists' worrying arbitrariness in determining a truth-conducive method to lead to a conclusion based on a body of evidence. I argue that Schoenfield, in her defense of permissivism, uses instances of peer disagreement that do not qualify as permissivism due to inconclusive evidence, and that she does a better job showing alternative epistemic attitudes as implausible rather than strengthening the case for permissivism by overcoming major reasons to reject it. I also draw upon Horowitz's "Epistemic Value and Jamesian Goals" and Roger White's "Epistemic Permissiveness" to demonstrate that Schoenfield's arguments ultimately do not resolve permissivism's arbitrariness and question-begging.

In "Permission to Believe," Schoenfield argues in favor of permissivism in order to use it as a tool to combat the threat of irrelevant influences on our beliefs. First, she explains the intuitive and theoretical motivations that lead to the development of permissivism, then responds to common problems and objections that pose a threat. While Schoenfield convincingly demonstrates that permissivism is an attractive epistemic worldview, she oversimplifies the claims made by opposing views and does not successfully address the problems that threaten it.

Schoenfield considers permissivism the denial of uniqueness, which claims that for a body of evidence E and proposition P, only one doxastic attitude towards P can be consistent with rationality. Permissivism would instead hold that under certain cases more than one

response to the same body of evidence can be considered rational. Schoenfield breaks down two main motivations that make permissivism convincing. The first is intuitive, which draws upon the apparent impossibility of complete and guaranteed epistemic consensus among all rational investigators even when faced with the same body of evidence. Schoenfield uses several real-life examples, from scientific to societal to cultural contexts: paleontologists' disagreements on why dinosaurs went extinct, jury members disagreeing on who committed a crime, or vast disagreement on the existence of God. Schoenfield recognizes that perhaps in some cases, differing evidence is the root cause of diverse opinions and responses to a proposition. However, peer disagreement that is pervasive in all sorts of contexts, even when investigators share all evidence, is used epistemically here to demonstrate why uniqueness intuitively appears impossible.

The second motivation for permissivism is theoretical. Schoenfield notes that certain theories of justification require permissivism to fulfill its metaphysical justifications. For example, under Bayesianism, which involves degrees of belief and credences, uniqueness would imply that given a body of evidence E and a proposition P , there is a one unique number that gives the appropriate and rational response to E . Schoenfield argues however that forming principles that would generate a single unique credence to a proposition is difficult if not impossible (citing the Carnapian project's failure in the 1950s as evidence). If it is impossible to generate these set principles that would result in a single unique credence, then it seems that uniqueness proponents would have to take this matter as brute fact, which is theoretically unattractive. Another way that uniqueness may run into theoretical problems is when considering rational capacity. Commitment to uniqueness means believing that our rational capacity enables us to make very specific distinction when faced with propositions— for

example that there are a certain number n of black ravens one must see to believe the proposition that all ravens are black. Schoenfield argues that it is implausible for our rational capacity to be able to help us recognize one unique number n in a broad range of epistemic situations. Even though through reason we may be able to determine what range of numbers are perhaps irrational in response to different situations, it is difficult to imagine our rational capacity being able to single out one unique number.

Schoenfield has thus far pointed out theoretical and intuitive problems that Uniqueness faces, and uses them as reasons to, in the absence of major reasons to reject permissivism, embrace permissivism over uniqueness. She dedicates the next section of the paper to respond to arguments that have been presented against permissivism to make the claim that there are no major reasons to reject it. Several proponents of uniqueness that she responds to include White, Christensen, Feldman, and Sosa. She preliminarily states that uniqueness arguments do point out several serious problems with certain versions of permissivism, but she can demonstrate that the best version of permissivism does not fall victim to these problems. This “best version” of permissivism which Schoenfield will defend in this paper is dependent on the claim that every individual’s credences and beliefs are depend on the set of epistemic standards one adopts, and because there are different sets of reasonable epistemic standards, people faced with the same evidence can have different responses to the proposition in the epistemic situation presented. Epistemic standards are here defined as a function of evidence presented that would make an agent’s doxastic states “truth conducive—” that is, these standards allow the agent to form beliefs that have a high confidence of being true and low confidence of being false. This definition of epistemic standards is based on the reliabilism epistemological theory which explains justification of beliefs on the basis of truth-conduciveness, and this version of

permissivism would allow for multiple epistemic standards. Schoenfield notes that this view is important in her responses to arguments against permissivism.

The first argument against permissivism presented is the Evidence Pointing Problem proposed by Sosa and White. This argument points out that permissivists would believe that given one set of evidence E , it is rationally permissible to believe in both p and $\sim p$. This is impossible, given that to the extent that a set of evidence supports p , it should support disbelieving $\sim p$ and vice versa. It is almost as if there is an evidence “dial” that can simultaneously point towards confidence in p and confidence in $\sim p$, an impossible situation. Schoenfield argues that this metaphor is the wrong way of visualizing the permissivist argument. Rather, there should be multiple evidence dials, each representing permissible epistemic standards to weigh evidence. Thus, whether a rational agent should believe p or $\sim p$ is relative to the set of epistemic standards, or “dial” the agent is adopting. Most importantly, a single set of epistemic standards would never both lead to believing p and believing $\sim p$. When rational agents have differing beliefs regarding the same proposition it is because they have different epistemic standards.

The second argument against permissivism is a “cluster of worries” that all address the problem of arbitrariness, presented by Christensen, Feldman, and White. The general summary of these worries is that if it is both reasonable to believe p and $\sim p$ as the permissivists claim, it appears that the belief in one of the other is now arbitrary—what reason would one prefer one position over the other if the evidence can equally well support both? White uses an example of a thought experiment in which there are two pills: taking pill #1 would lead to believing p and taking pill #2 would lead to believing $\sim p$. The agent could come to his/her conclusion based on the regular form—carefully examining the relevant evidence and using reason to determine the

true belief—or simply by randomly selecting a pill to take. The regular form seems to rationally be the better way of obtaining a true belief, but proponents of the arbitrariness argument point out that permissivists would be just as likely to use either method and believe both to be equally truth-conducive, leading to a worrying arbitrariness. If both p and $\sim p$ can be considered rational given evidence E , then it can be questioned why a permissivist can be justified in believing one over the other. According to Schoenfield, this question is easy to respond to. The permissive agent in this case can simply justify their belief regularly, through appealing to the evidence provided and their reasoning processes to build the argument. The agent can do this and believe that the current standards of reasoning they employ is most likely to lead to true belief, while recognizing that there are alternative, equally reasonable standards of reasoning that lead to a different belief. Therefore, the permissivist's belief in either p or $\sim p$ is not considered arbitrary at all.

Schoenfield further responds to White's case of the pills by breaking down the two possible mechanisms of that thought experiment and arguing that in either case the agent will always prefer to reach their beliefs through regular examination of evidence rather than taking a pill because they will see the regular method as more likely to be truth-conducive. The first mechanism works by having the pill changing an agent's belief without changing their reasoning standards. In this circumstance, taking the pill would mean that the permissive agent could be randomly selecting a pill that may lead to beliefs in conflict with their standards. If the agent's standards of reasoning are considered be most likely to lead to true beliefs, then it would not make sense to take a pill. The second mechanism works by changing the agent's standards of reasoning. This would allow the agent to form beliefs contradictory to their current ones without violating their standards of reasoning because the pill would give them new ones. Schoenfield

argues that in this circumstance the agent would also refuse to take the pill. While the pill would allow for different beliefs without violating the agent's (new) standards, the agent believes that their current standard of reasoning is the most conducive to true beliefs. Thus, the agent would refuse the pill in order to keep their current standard of reasoning. If the agent is at all concerned with reaching true beliefs, taking the pill and forming beliefs through the regular appeal to reasoning and evidence would not be equally attractive methods.

Defenders of uniqueness may also ask how agents can justify that their current standards of reasoning are the most truth-conducive if another alternative standard that leads to different beliefs is rationally permissible. It seems like the agent can only make this justification dependent upon their standards of reasoning. However, Schoenfield points out that proponents of uniqueness face the same problem too. If a uniqueness agent is questioned why they believe that their specific standards of reasoning are uniquely rational, they would not be able to answer independent of those standards either. Schoenfield points out that it is simply a fact of epistemology that it is impossible to independently justify why we use the methods we do when evaluating evidence to come up with true beliefs.

Ultimately, Schoenfield points out that the permissive agent thinks of other alternative standards of reasoning not as "just as good" in that they are equally truth-conducive, but that they are equally rational. Essentially, the principles of rationality that rational agents must follow are general to the point where they do not lead to a unique credence or belief from a set of evidence, so that different individuals are able to rationally come to different conclusions. Schoenfield concludes that the "cluster of worries" regarding arbitrariness stem from two false assumptions about permissivism: one, that justifying beliefs in permissive cases is impossible, and two, that one's standards of reasoning must be justified independently of the standards

themselves. She argues that permissivists can always justify their beliefs in the usual way of appealing to evidence and reasoning, and that the demand for independent justification of any type of standards of reasoning (permissive or otherwise) would only lead to incurable skepticism.

I want to first address the intuitive and theoretical motivations that Schoenfield uses to argue for permissivism. The main problem with the intuitive motivation is that basing an argument off intuition and so-called common sense makes it extremely challenging to achieve logical legitimacy and the strict standards that such an epistemic argument requires. In many of the real-life examples Schoenfield uses of situations that lack epistemic consensus, the kind of evidence that is involved is not epistemically “neat.” Permissivism stresses the importance of agents facing the exact same body of evidence even while reaching different conclusions, but cases like the extinction of dinosaurs and the existence of God have complex and diverse evidence that are difficult to evaluate, so that it is hard to pinpoint whether disagreements really stem from different reactions to the same evidence or because of the lack of shared evidence. Thus, it becomes difficult to evaluate whether these cases can even be considered permissive. While Schoenfield does recognize that some peer disagreement in such contexts stem from differing evidence, she does not address the reality that agents may choose to use different aspects or pieces of the same set of evidence in order to form their beliefs. If it cannot be pinpointed whether these situations can be qualified as permissive, then the intuition that permissivism is the root of epistemic disagreement is misguided.

The theoretical motivations that Schoenfield uses do not actively strengthen the case for permissivism, but rather demonstrate that alternative attitudes are implausible. Based on the constraints of our rational capacity, she points out that the formulation of one or one set of principles that would lead individuals to a unique doxastic attitude towards a proposition is

impossibly difficult. Yet I believe that this reality should not then lead to the conclusion that proponents of uniqueness must resort to using brute facts to justify their reasoning and that this leads to *prima facie* reasons to reject uniqueness (as Schoenfield argues). Simply that coming up with these principles is difficult is insufficient to demonstrate why permissivism is epistemically superior, and perhaps this challenge only shows rational agents the importance of developing such principles to avoid resorting to permissive attitudes. To make this particular argument successful would necessitate proving that it is indeed impossible for our rational capacity to come up with a principle that leads to uniqueness, and that permissivism is the superior alternative. Schoenfield does not do this “Permission to Believe.”

Despite some problems with permissivism’s intuitive and theoretical motivations, Schoenfield still successfully shows that it is appealing epistemically. However, I believe that she does not fully defend permissivism from problems raised by its opponents. The first major problem she addresses is the evidence pointing problem. Schoenfield claims that those who appeal to the evidence pointing problem falsely assume that permissivists believe confidence in p and $\sim p$ are both possible simultaneously when faced with the same evidence; rather, different but equally rational epistemic standards can lead to differing attitudes towards a proposition and set of evidence. The main strength of this argument relies on differentiating epistemic standards from the rational credences/beliefs that they result in, becoming permissive when it comes to the rationality of different epistemic standards rather than the truth-conduciveness of the consequent belief. However, I believe that the epistemic standards argument is problematic and does not solve the evidence pointing problem. To demonstrate this, I would like to draw upon Sophie Horowitz’s paper on Jamesian Goals. In that paper, Horowitz argues that things like epistemic standards or values should also be truth-conducive just like credences and beliefs. This is an

argument echoed by Schoenfield in her paper as well. Horowitz further argues that because of this, it would be necessary to understand epistemic standards and values in a non-doxastic way for the permissivist argument to be successful. In other words, differences in epistemic standards are not due to arbitrariness in some sort of epistemic valuation difference; they are due to disagreements on what would be “truer” in the same way that the eventual credence/belief is disputed. If permissivists are using acceptance of different but equally rational epistemic standards to explain their tolerance of different resulting credences/beliefs that are truth-conducive, then if epistemic standards are also chosen by their truth-conduciveness, the permissivist argument is now question-begging.

The second major problem that Schoenfield addresses is the cluster of worries about arbitrariness, specifically highlighting the “pills” thought experiment used by Roger White in his paper “Epistemic Permissiveness.” Schoenfield’s main response is the central problems with this cluster of worries is that they make two false assumptions: that permissivists cannot justify their beliefs in permissive cases, and that epistemic standards must be justified independent of the standards themselves. I do not think that proponents of uniqueness like White are making the claim that permissivists cannot justify their beliefs in the normal way by appealing to the evidence, reasoning etc. The problem is that based on the permissivists’ argument, it does not make a difference whether the rational agent goes through the process of evaluation the evidence or simply “takes a pill—” the agent could end up on the same conclusion either way, so it can be questioned why the agent would go through the trouble of pursuing the rational reasoning process. Schoenfield argues that a rational agent would find an action like taking a pill unattractive because they would not see it as truth-conducive as the regular method. This reasoning might be true, but practically it makes no difference if the same conclusion could be

reached, and the question then must be raised on how the epistemic standards can be determined in a non-arbitrary way in the first place.

Schoenfield argues that it is impossible for anyone to justify their standards of reasoning independent of the standards themselves, and that this attempt would lead to widespread skepticism. She claims that those proposing the arbitrariness worry falsely assume that this independent justification is possible. However, I believe that proponents of uniqueness have no need to provide this kind of independent justification, simply by virtue of believing there is only one rational response to any set of evidence and proposition; their standards of reasoning can then be justified by what produces the one rational response. Proponents of uniqueness do not run into the conundrum of having to argue for the truth-conduciveness of their standards, only the rationality of their resulting credence/belief. This is a problem that permissivists face, and in attempting to solve this problem will inevitably fall into the question-begging fallacy as previously demonstrated.

Schoenfield does demonstrate in “Permission to Believe” that permissivism is an attractive epistemic worldview. However, in defending permissivism against detractors, she relies too heavily on using differing epistemic standards to avoid further justification of how a permissivist can conclusively end up with any credence or belief when faced with a set of evidence. In this way, the permissivist either still ends up in a cycle of arbitrariness or in a question-begging situation.

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