Living on the Edge: Against Epistemic Permissivism

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Epistemic Permissivists face a special problem about the relationship between our first- and higher-order attitudes. They claim that rationality often permits a range of doxastic responses to the evidence. Given plausible assumptions about the relationship between your first- and higher-order attitudes, I show that you can't be on the edge of the range, so there can't be a range at all. Permissivism, in its traditional form, can't be right. I consider new ways of developing Permissivism to avoid my argument, but they have problems of their own.

1. Introduction

Matt and Abby are members of a jury for a murder case. They have all the same evidence and review it separately. When they convene to discuss their conclusions, they discover that they disagree. Matt is confident that Jones is innocent; Abby is confident that Jones is guilty. When they learn of their disagreement, what do they discover about themselves? Clearly, they learn that one of them is confident in a falsehood: either Jones is guilty or he isn't. But do they also learn that one of them has been less than fully rational, that one has failed to properly assimilate the evidence before him?

Proponents of *Epistemic Uniqueness* say yes: given your total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that you can take to any proposition.[1] Matt and Abby have the same evidence, but have different levels of confidence in the proposition that Jones is guilty (*Guilty*). Uniqueness entails that at most one of them is fully rational.

Proponents of *Epistemic Permissivism* say no. Matt and Abby may simply have different standards of reasoning. For example, Matt may tend to favour simple hypotheses, and Abby may tend to favour complex, more explanatory hypotheses. A permissivist thinks both

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[1] This formulation is from White (2005).

standards of reasoning may be perfectly rational, even though they sanction very different responses to the evidence.[2]

Permissivists paint a simple, attractive picture of rationality. There are some general, justifiable rules—for instance, Conditionalization, Probabilism, and the Principal Principle—and a wide range of permissible starting points. So long as you begin at one of these, and you follow the rules, you're doing fine. Permissivists charge that Uniquers paint a much more complicated, and metaphysically loaded, picture of rationality.[3] Uniquers must say everything Permissivists say, and much more—that there is a *unique* rational starting point, a *unique* rational credence in *Guilty*, and so forth.

I argue that Permissivists face a special challenge about the interaction between our first- and higher-order attitudes. They claim that rationality often permits a *range* of credences in a certain proposition. Yet, given certain plausible assumptions about the relationship between our first- and higher-order attitudes, you cannot adopt a credence on the edge of that range. But Permissivism says that for some such range, *any* credence in that range is rational. So Permissivism is false. I consider new ways of developing Permissivism to avoid this argument, but they have problems of their own.[4] Conclusion: Permissivism is not as simple as advertised, and without new motivations, it's not very attractive either. On to the argument.

2. Dominance

Suppose that Permissivism is true, and that Matt's and Abby's evidence rationalizes any credence between, say, 0.3 and 0.7 in *Guilty*. Quite plausibly, Matt is not always in a position to discern the *exact*

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[2] See Greco and Hedden (2015), Horowitz (2013), and White (2005) for arguments against versions of Epistemic Permissivism. See Ballantyne and Coffman (2012), Douven (2009), Kelly (2014), Kopec (2015), Meacham (2014), and Schoenfield (2014) for defences. See Kopec and Titelbaum (2015) for an overview of various arguments for and against.

[3] See, for example, Kelly (2014) and Schoenfield (2014) for this criticism.

[4] Strictly speaking, someone could be a Permissivist yet deny that there is ever a *range* of permissible credences in any proposition—you might think, say, that there are just two permissible credences in the proposition that Jones is guilty, 0.3 and 0.7. But the standard motivations—that there are some general, justifiable rules, and a wide range of starting points—strongly suggest that there will be a wide range of permissible credences in most propositions. If the Permissivist denies this, she owes us a general story about why there can never be such a range. Since no story like this has been told, I ignore this complication in this paper.

boundaries of the permissible range.[5] Compare: he isn't able to determine the exact height of a tree some distance off just by looking—his eyesight is nowhere near that good. Similarly, by reflection alone, he can't reliably determine the value of the upper and lower bounds of the permissible range to the nearest (say) 0.01 degrees of confidence—the evidence is too complex, and his powers of reasoning are nowhere near that good. Even if he truly believes that the lower bound is 0.3, he's merely guessing—for all he knows, the lower bound is 0.31 or 0.29. He can't reliably distinguish the actual case from one in which the lower bound is slightly higher or slightly lower.

Matt ought to know this about himself. He ought to know that if he were to guess the exact values of the upper and lower bound, he'd likely err. Compare: since you know that you can't reliably guess the exact height of the tree some distance off, you shouldn't be certain that the tree is exactly 667 inches tall, even if it is—you should recognize that it might be slightly taller or slightly shorter. Similarly, Matt should acknowledge that the lower bound might well be slightly greater than 0.3.

So what should Matt believe about the boundaries of the permissible range? That, it seems, depends on what they actually are. If the lower bound is 0.3, then he should believe that it is roughly 0.3—he should believe it is between (say) 0.2 and 0.4. For even though rational requirements are not wholly transparent, they shouldn't be completely opaque to those who reflect carefully. After all, we regard careful reflection on our evidence as valuable precisely because it helps us form rational beliefs—beliefs that better reflect the force of our evidence. If the requirements of rationality were wholly inaccessible, what would justify such a practice?

So if Matt is rational, he believes that the permissible range of credences in *Guilty* runs from *roughly* 0.3 to *roughly* 0.7.[6] But if he believes *that*, it would be irrational for him to adopt credence 0.3. Why? Because Matt is not certain that a credence of 0.3 is rational, but there are other credences whose rationality Matt does not doubt—he is certain that a credence of (say) 0.5 is rational. But when you are certain that a given credence is rational, it is irrational to adopt any

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[5] See, for instance, Christensen (2010), Elga (2013), Horowitz (2014), and Williamson (2000) for sympathetic discussion of similar claims.

[6] Note that this point is not specific to Permissivism. If Epistemic Uniqueness is true, and the unique rational credence in *Guilty* is (say) 0.5, then Matt is not in a position to know that it is *exactly* 0.5, and so he too should believe that the rational credence is *roughly* 0.5. In my reply to the first objection, I'll show why this does not pose problems for the proponent of Uniqueness. Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

other credence that you are not certain is rational: it is irrational to adopt credences that are, what I'll call, *weakly rationality dominated*.

A bit more precisely. Let an *evidential situation* be a complete specification of which credences are rational responses to one's evidence. Then where c and c' are credences that a subject S might adopt,

> *Weak Rationality Dominance*: c weakly rationality dominates c' for S iff for every evidential situation that S rationally treats as a live option and in which c' is rational, c is too, and in some evidential situation that S rationally treats as a live option, c is rational, but c' is not.

Matt believes that the lower bound is *roughly* 0.3. To believe that the lower bound is roughly 0.3 is just to believe that it might be slightly higher or slightly lower than 0.3. Let's make a simplifying assumption that Matt treats three evidential situations as live options: that the lower bound is 0.2, that it is 0.3, and that it is 0.4. In each of these evidential situations in which it is rational to assign 0.3 to *Guilty*—that is, when the lower bound is 0.2 or 0.3—it is rational to assign 0.4 to *Guilty*. But in the evidential situation in which the lowest rational credence is 0.4, assigning 0.4 to *Guilty* is rational, and assigning 0.3 to *Guilty* is not. Hence, in some evidential situation that Matt rationally treats as as a live option, assigning 0.4 to *Guilty* is rational, but assigning 0.3 to *Guilty* is not. So assigning 0.3 to *Guilty* is weakly rationality dominated by assigning 0.4 to *Guilty* for Matt.

But dominated options aren't rational: it's not rational to adopt a credence that's risky by your own lights when you know of a safer option. It follows that it is not rational for Matt to assign 0.3 to *Guilty*. But the Permissivist's hypothesis was that it's rationally permissible to adopt *any* credence between 0.3 and 0.7. We've now contradicted that assumption. Given what Matt ought to believe about the permissible range, it is irrational for Matt to adopt a credence on the edge of that range.[7]

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[7] I should note that the dominance argument does not apply to an extreme version of subjective Bayesianism that says that our priors must be probabilistically coherent, but there are no other constraints on what they should look like. If any probabilistically coherent prior is permissible, the range of permissible credences in (almost) any proposition will be [0, 1]— any credence will be rationally permissible. And if that's right, we can be sure that our credences are rational, and so they won't be weakly rationality dominated. But for many, this extreme version of subjective Bayesianism will seem *too* permissive. (It doesn't rule out counter-inductivists, for example.) My argument targets any *moderate* Permissivist—that is, any Permissivist who wants to carve out a space between (extreme) subjective Bayesianism and Uniqueness.

The argument generalizes. For any range of putatively permissible credences in a proposition *P*, it is irrational to assign to *P* the lowest or highest value in that range— that is, it is irrational to adopt any credence on the edge of the permissible range.[8] But Permissivism says that there is some range such that any credence in that range is permissible. Contradiction.[9]

(Perhaps you wonder why we should care about rationality dominance: our ultimate epistemic goal is not rationality per se, but *accuracy*. Even if we grant this, we ought to recognize that epistemic rationality is a good *guide* to accuracy—in general, more rational credences are more accurate. On this view, we should avoid credences that are rationality dominated because we should do what we can to be most accurate. I return to this issue in my reply to Objection 5.[10])

In the remainder of the paper, I explore various objections to my argument and find them wanting. The upshot is that Permissivism faces a special challenge about the interaction between our first- and higher-order attitudes. Answering the challenge requires taking on new, unattractive commitments about how we form higher-order beliefs or about what it is permissible to do in the face of higher-order uncertainty. Perhaps we will conclude in the end that those commitments are worth carrying to save Permissivism. But if we do accept Permissivism, we should do so in full knowledge of those commitments. We should know what burdens we shoulder.

3. Objections and Replies

Objection 1: Your argument exploits the vagueness of epistemic permissibility. It relies on the premiss that if a certain credence is not

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[8] The dominance argument actually shows something stronger. If it is impermissible to take dominated options, then it will be irrational to adopt any credence that is *close enough* to the edge that you believe that it might fall just outside of the permissible range. This means that the argument goes through even if the range of permissible credences has no lowest or highest value.

[9] The Permissivist might object that I oversell the force of the dominance argument. If the range of permissible credences in *Guilty* is narrow, so narrow that Matt is not certain that any particular credence is rational, then his 0.3 credence in *Guilty* will not be rationality dominated. Granted. But the Permissivist shouldn't rest content. For the guiding motivations for Permissivism—for instance, that different people can rationally come to *opposite* conclusions about an issue—strongly suggest that the permissible range of credences will often be very wide. See Rosen (2001) and Schoenfield (2014).

[10] Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this to my attention.

rational, then no credence sufficiently close to it is rational either. But any premiss of that form is soritical, and so ought to be rejected.

Reply: *That* premiss is indeed soritical, but my argument doesn't rely on it. I do not say that since 0.3 is irrational, so too is 0.31. If my argument did rely on this premiss, it would have the (absurd) consequence that there are no rational credences. But it has no such consequence.

To see this, take the limiting case, where there is just one permissible credence in *Guilty*—say, 0.5. If 0.5 is the unique rational credence in *Guilty*, then Matt ought to believe that it is *roughly* 0.5 (reflection doesn't get us all the way to the truth, but it gets us somewhere). Now, if Matt believes that the rational credence is *roughly* 0.5, then if he assigns 0.5 to *Guilty*, he won't be certain that his own credence is rational. But that's not *itself* irrational: although Matt is not certain that his credence is rational, he is not certain, of any particular credence, that it is rational. There is no *other* credence Matt thinks would be better than his own.[11] When the rationality of everything is in doubt, assigning 0.5 credence to *Guilty* will not be rationality dominated for Matt. Like clear-eyed Permissivists, clear-eyed Uniquers are uncertain about the rationality of their credences; unlike clear-eyed Permissivists, they are not sure that any *other* credences are rational. (By 'clear-eyed Permissivist', I mean someone who believes, of a certain case, that it is a permissive one. By 'clear-eyed Uniquer', I mean someone who believes that there are no permissive cases.)

The dominance argument works against Permissivism because if there is a wide range of credences, Matt can be sure that certain credences in the middle of the range are rational—being in the middle will be safer, by Matt's lights, than being on the edge. But if you think there's just one rational credence, nothing will be perfectly safe by your lights. Matt may assign 0.5 credence to *Guilty*, because this credence will not be rationality dominated by any other credence.

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[11] Christensen (2010) gives an example of what seems to be a fully rational agent who is uncertain about what the rational credence is. Ava is considering the possibility that the next US President will be a Democrat (D). Christensen says, 'Ava gives D some particular credence, say, 0.7; this reflects a great deal of her general knowledge, her feel for public opinion, her knowledge of possible candidates, etc. But given the possibility that her credence is affected by wishful thinking, protective pessimism, or just failure to focus on and perfectly integrate an unruly mass of evidence, Ava very much doubts that her credence is exactly what her evidence supports. This seems only natural; indeed, eminently reasonable' (2010, p. 121)

Objection 2: Ideally rational agents know exactly what rationality permits. So, in particular, if Matt is ideally rational, he is certain that the permissible range of credences in *Guilty* runs from exactly 0.3 to exactly 0.7, and so he is no victim of the dominance argument.

Reply: Maybe.[12] But Epistemic Permissivism is not just a view about *ideally* rational agents, but about ordinary agents like you and me, with all our human limitations. Indeed, Permissivists often tout their view as the only alternative to an objectionably demanding epistemology. Try to imagine yourself in Matt's shoes, they say. You're faced with a mess of evidence. Jones's glove was found on the scene, but another suspect's fingerprints were there too. Three witnesses claim that Jones owned a gun and was prone to violence. Two others deny this. And so on. Could it really be that the only rational response to his evidence is for Matt to become (say) 0.6453 confident in *Guilty*? Surely not, the Permissivist says. Rationality does not require us to do the impossible— typically there is a wide range of responses to our evidence that would be rational.[13]

   If the Permissivist embraces this motivation, then surely when she says that it is permissible to hold any credence between 0.3 and 0.7, she means that it is permissible for someone like Matt—a *non-ideal*, cognitively limited agent— to hold any credence between 0.3 and 0.7. But I've argued that this can't be. A non-ideal agent ought not to be certain of the exact boundaries of the permissible range, so he cannot adopt a credence on the edge of that range.

   But even if the Permissivist eschews this motivation, I don't think she's much better off. To be sure, the dominance argument does not apply to those who are certain of the exact boundaries of the permissible range. So, for any credence between 0.3 and 0.7 in *Guilty*, perhaps there is an ideally rational agent who holds that credence. But the argument still applies to ordinary agents—*their* options will be much more constrained. This leaves us with quite a surprising account

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[12] Why 'maybe'? Because it isn't clear that even *ideally* rational agents are certain about which credences are licensed by their evidence. Here's one reason to think they aren't. Ideally rational agents aren't always in a position to *know* exactly what they know and don't know. In particular, knowledge does not obey negative introspection: ideally rational agents can fail to know *P* without also knowing that they don't know *P*. But if, following Williamson (2000), we accept that our evidence just is our knowledge, then even ideally rational agents won't know exactly what their evidence is—sometimes they will be rationally uncertain about which credences are rational.

[13] See Schoenfield (2014) for arguments like this.

of rationality, one that affords ideally rational agents many options, and limits ordinary agents to just one.

    This is exactly the *opposite* of what we should expect from a Permissivist who recognizes a distinction between ideal and non-ideal rationality. Permissivism is populist epistemology, a view for ordinary folk. Impermissivists ignore the realities of our actual cognitive lives. Permissivists don't. If the Permissivist grants that any form of rationality is impermissive, it should be an idealized notion, one that abstracts away from our actual cognitive limitations, and so, by their lights, has little relevance for people like us. Absent a suitable story about why things would be reversed—why it would be ideal rationality that is permissive and non-ideal rationality that is impermissive—we should be suspicious of an appeal to ideal rationality as a way of evading the dominance argument.

Objection 3: Matt should believe that he is in the middle of the permissible range. Suppose we grant that it is impermissible to adopt dominated options. Then we must say that, *if Matt believes that the boundary of the permissible range is roughly 0.3*, it is irrational for him to be 0.3 confident in *Guilty*. Matt shouldn't regard himself as taking an unnecessary risk. But that doesn't mean the 0.3 credence has to go, as I've argued. Rather, it's Matt's higher-order beliefs that should change: Matt should believe that his 0.3 credence is close to the *middle* of the range of permissible credences in *Guilty*, so that he is certain that 0.3 is rational.

Reply: If you pursue this strategy, you need a story about how we form higher-order beliefs which explains why agents on the edge of the permissible range must always believe falsely that they are in the middle. To be sure, agents can form false beliefs about what rationality permits if they have *misleading* higher-order evidence. Matt may get misleading higher-order evidence suggesting that the permissible range of credences in *Guilty* runs from roughly 0.1 to roughly 0.5. I don't doubt that it would then be permissible for him to assign 0.3 to *Guilty*. But Epistemic Permissivism is not just a view about what we are permitted to believe when we are *misled*. We need an account of how we form higher-order beliefs which explains how it can be rational for agents on the edge to believe falsely that they are in the middle, even in the absence of misleading higher-order evidence.

    The kind of story about higher-order belief formation that we are interested in is one that tells Matt and Abby to believe that they are in

the middle of the permissible range. So, since Matt assigns 0.3 to *Guilty*, he ought to believe that the range of permissible credences in *Guilty* is roughly 0.1–0.5, and since Abby assigns 0.7 to *Guilty*, she ought to believe that the range of permissible credences is roughly 0.5–0.9. What kind of method must Matt and Abby be using to form these higher-order beliefs? It must be one that takes into account their *own* credences in *Guilty*.

Perhaps the story goes like this. In general, you are rationally entitled to believe that your own credences and beliefs are rational. So when Matt examines the evidence and adopts a credence of 0.3, he is thereby permitted to infer that a credence of 0.3 is rational. Similarly, when Abby examines the evidence and adopts a credence of 0.7 credence, she is thereby permitted to believe that a credence of 0.7 is rational. Now, the story can't stop there, for since Matt and Abby are clear-eyed Permissivists, they think other credences are rational too. Which ones? A natural thought: those that are sufficiently close to their own! Matt reasons, 'I know that a credence of 0.3 is rational. So any credence as low as 0.1 or as high as 0.5 is probably rational too', and Abby reasons, 'I know that a credence of 0.7 is rational, so anything as low as 0.5 and as high as 0.9 is rational too'. Can this procedure explain how Matt and Abby could *rationally* believe that they are in the middle of the range?

I think not. For if your credence is sufficiently close to the edge, this procedure will lead you astray about the upper and lower bounds of the permissible range, as it does for Matt and Abby. Now, the unreliability of the method is not itself the problem—perhaps it is sometimes rational for us to use unreliable methods. What is worrying is that a clear-eyed Permissivist is in a position to *know* that the method is unreliable.

To see why, it will be instructive to compare Permissivism to Uniqueness on this issue. Suppose that I am a clear-eyed Uniquer. In that case, I know that, if my first-order belief or credence is rational, then if I come to believe that my own credence is rational, my belief will be true. In short, if Uniqueness is true, then the method I've discussed guarantees that *rational* agents will form true beliefs about rationality, and clear-eyed Uniquers are in a position to rationally believe this about themselves.

Things are different for Permissivism. Matt is a clear-eyed Permissivist. He believes that his credence in *Guilty* is rational, and infers that all credences close to his are rational. That's how Matt comes to believe that the range of permissible credences in *Guilty* is

roughly 0.1 to roughly 0.5. But although being rational guarantees that you will form true beliefs about the rationality of your *own* credence, it does not guarantee that you will form true beliefs about the upper and lower bounds of the permissible range of credences—it doesn't guarantee that you will form true beliefs about what other credences are rational.

But Matt in a position to *know* this about the method he is using. Matt should be highly confident that he is on the edge of the permissible range of credences in *some* propositions, and, for all he knows, *Guilty* is one of them. So, Matt should recognize that, for all he knows, his credence is on the edge of the range of permissible credences in *Guilty*. Matt should doubt the conclusion of the method he is using: he should think, 'Even if my credence in *Guilty* is rational, I might be on the edge of the permissible range, in which case my belief that all credences close to my own are rational will be false!' But it can't be rational to use a method whose conclusions one doubts. If I am in a position to know a priori that a conclusion I've drawn could easily be false, I shouldn't believe it. Pending a suitable story about higher-order belief formation, we ought to be suspicious of a view that says that we must always believe that our credences are close to the middle of the permissible range.

Objection 4: You assume that if Permissivism is true, then Matt can rationally believe he is in a permissive case. But some Permissivists deny this. For example, Stewart Cohen (2013) is a Permissivist who defends *Doxastic Uniqueness*, the claim that a subject cannot rationally hold one credence while believing that some other credence is just as rational. That is, a subject can never rationally believe that she is in a permissive case. If Matt doesn't believe that there is a range of permissible credences in *Guilty*, the threat of dominance evaporates.

Reply: Granted. But the traditional motivations for Permissivism strongly suggest that if Permissivism is true, then we can, at least sometimes, rationally believe that we are in a permissive case.[14]

Permissivists usually motivate their view, at least in part, by reflection on particular cases—cases of disagreement among jurors about whether Jones is guilty, among palaeontologists about what killed off

[14] See Ballantyne and Coffman (2012), Douven (2009), Kelly (2014), Schoenfield (2014), and Kopec and Titelbaum (2015) for defences of clear-eyed Permissivism, the view that Permissivism is true and we are sometimes in a position to know, of a certain case, that it is permissive.

the dinosaurs, and among philosophers about whether we have free will. But if we can know that a particular case is permissive when we're doing epistemology, what could stop us from continuing to know that a particular case is permissive *when we're in one*?

A second way of motivating Permissivism, the 'competing theoretical virtues' argument, also suggests that we often know that we're in a permissive case. Permissivists say that what it's rational for us to believe depends not just on the content of our evidence, but on how we balance certain theoretical virtues against each other—things like simplicity, predictive strength, and explanatory power. There are many different yet equally rational ways of balancing these virtues against one another, and they will often yield different levels of confidence in various hypotheses.[15]

But surely we can tell, at least sometimes, how simple, predictive and explanatory a certain hypothesis is. If we can, then we can also determine, say, that balancing simplicity and predictive power in *this* way would yield high credence in *Guilty*, and weighing them in *that* way would yield lower credence in *Guilty*. But if we also know that both these ways of balancing the theoretical virtues are rational, we can put two and two together, and conclude that high credence and low credence in *Guilty* are both rational.[16]

Objection 5: It can be permissible for Matt to hold on to a credence that is rationality dominated. Matt's credence has something else going for it: he expects it to be most accurate. Why? Because Matt's credence is recommended by his own epistemic standards, which he *endorses*: Matt expects the credences recommended by his standards to be more accurate than those recommended by any other standards.

This argument is not new: it's Schoenfield's (2014) response to White's (2005) charge that if Permissivism is true, then it should be fine to switch arbitrarily from one permissible credence to another.[17] We can think of Schoenfield's brand of Permissivism as a kind of *Intrapersonal Epistemic Uniqueness*: there are many, equally permissible sets of epistemic standards, but once you've settled on one, you have

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[15] See, for example, Douven (2009), Schoenfield (2014), and Titelbaum (2015a) for arguments along these lines.

[16] Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this point.

[17] White presents many arguments against Permissivism, but I take this to be the central objection unifying all of them.

reason to adopt the credences your standards recommend. (For Schoenfield, that's because if you're rational, you expect your standards to maximize expected accuracy.)[18] So, contra White, it is never rational to switch arbitrarily from one permissible credence to another.

If we're convinced by Schoenfield's reply to White, might we use it to reply to my challenge as well?

Reply: There are two ways of understanding Schoenfield's reply on behalf of the Intrapersonal Epistemic Uniquer, one weaker, one stronger: the weaker, though plausibly an effective response to White's challenge, is no objection to mine; the stronger is indeed an objection to the dominance principle, but intuitively it is far too strong.[19]

The weaker version of Schoenfield's reply says that expecting some credence to be most accurate is *sometimes* a reason to prefer it—in particular, it is a reason to prefer it when the rationality of the various credences you're considering *is not in doubt*. This is in fact the thought that motivates Schoenfield's reply to White (see footnote 21 below). Plausibly, Schoenfield has answered White's challenge—she has explained why, when you know that some other credence is just as rational as yours, you still have reason to prefer your own.

But the weaker version of Schoenfield's reply does not help the Permissivist answer *my* challenge—Schoenfield does not (nor does she intend to) explain why it would be permissible to hold on to credences that are rationality dominated. After all, cases in which your credence is rationality dominated are precisely those cases in which the rationality of one of the credences you are considering *is* in doubt.

The stronger version of Schoenfield's reply says that expecting your credence to be most accurate is *always* a reason to prefer it—in particular, it is a reason to prefer it even when the rationality of that credence *is in doubt*. This is indeed an objection to the dominance principle, the principle that it is always irrational to adopt weakly dominated credences. The stronger version of Schoenfield's reply says that you should stick to your credence when it is rationality dominated because you expect it to be most accurate.

But the Permissivist should not be happy to pursue the stronger version of Schoenfield's reply. It implies that we should never be

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[18] Kelly (2014), Meacham (2014), and Kopec and Titelbaum (2015) also defend Intrapersonal Uniqueness, and discuss how this view helps us respond to White.

[19] Thanks to Bernhard Salow for discussion on the arguments of this section.

moved to revise our credences by evidence that we've been less than fully rational. This is not a welcome consequence. Those who refuse to revise their beliefs in the face of evidence that they are irrational seem over-confident, indeed dogmatic—they seem paradigmatically irrational.

Suppose Jill has examined all the evidence and becomes highly confident that the Warriors, her favourite NBA team, will win the championship. A trusted friend tells her that she always overestimates the likelihood of favourable outcomes. The Permissivist we are considering says that Jill should remain highly confident that the Warriors will win, despite her friend's warning. Since she expects her high credence to be most accurate, she needn't be worried by evidence that she has been irrational.

This doesn't seem right. When she has reason to believe her credence is irrational, Jill shouldn't be able to appeal to the perceived accuracy of her credence as a reason to hold on to it. Compare this to a case of all-out beliefs. Suppose that Jill simply believes that the Warriors will win, and her friend tells her that the evidence doesn't support belief. Jill couldn't reply to her friend's concern, 'Well, I must have got lucky—even though the evidence supports lower confidence, I've wound up with a true belief!'[20] Return to the case of credences. Jill can't respond to her friend's concern about the rationality of her credence with 'Well, I must have got lucky— even though my evidence supports a lower credence, my credence is more accurate!' Evidence that she has been irrational should make her doubt the accuracy of her credences and beliefs, and she should lower her confidence accordingly.

Similar things can be said of Matt's credence in *Guilty*. He worries that his credence might be too low. But he's sure that it's not too high—he's certain that it would be rational to assign a credence of 0.4 to *Guilty*. The Permissivist we're considering says that he needn't be moved by doubts about the rationality of his 0.3 credence in *Guilty* because he expects it to be most accurate. But again, this seems wrong. Matt cannot appeal to the perceived accuracy of his

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[20] For defences or sympathetic discussion of the claim that it is irrational to maintain some credence or belief when you acquire evidence that it is irrational, see Christensen (2010), Elga (2013), Greco (2014), Horowitz (2014), Sliwa and Horowitz (2015), Smithies (2012), and Titelbaum (2015b). For criticism, see Coates (2012), Lasonen-Aarnio (2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2015), and Williamson (2011).

credence as a reason to maintain that credence when its rationality is in doubt.[21]

This is connected to a worry I mentioned earlier: don't rational agents care about rationality *only as a guide to accuracy*, and not for its own sake? If so, accuracy always comes first. But then my dominance principle is false: because Matt expects his credence to be more accurate than any other credence, he should stick with a credence of 0.3 even if he isn't sure it is rational and he is sure that a credence of (say) 0.4 is rational. To shift from 0.3 to 0.4 in order to ensure rationality—at the cost of accuracy, by Matt's lights—would be irrational.

But I deny that it can be rational for Matt to expect his credence to be most accurate when he has reason to believe that his credence might be irrational and he is sure that some other credence is rational. If Matt were sure that his credence was rational, then perhaps it would be rational for him to expect it to be most accurate. But the moment he starts doubting the rationality of his credence, continuing to assume that it is most accurate seems overly self-confident and dogmatic.

Even if we don't care about rationality for its own sake, it *is* a good guide to accuracy—in general, more rational credences are more accurate than less rational ones. But then we ought to see it that way—if we expect one credence to be more rational than another, we should also expect it to be more accurate, and so we should prefer it. Since Matt expects a credence of 0.4 to be more rational than one of 0.3—he is sure that 0.4 is rational, but he is not sure that 0.3 is—he should also expect 0.4 to be more accurate than 0.3, and Matt should revise his credence accordingly. On this view, avoiding dominated credences is just part of doing what we can to be most accurate.

Let's take a step back. As we've seen, I'm not the first to object to Permissivism. White argued that if you know that you're in a permissive case, then it should be permissible to switch credences arbitrarily. As we saw in Objection 4, some Permissivists simply deny that we ever know that we are in a permissive case, and such Permissivists escape my dominance argument.

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[21] Schoenfield's discussion of irrelevant influences on belief makes it explicit that she endorses only the weaker version of Intrapersonal Uniqueness. She is interested in cases where you learn that your belief was influenced by an irrelevant factor. In cases like this, it seems we should revise our earlier beliefs. Schoenfield explains this intuition by saying that we should revise our beliefs *when we have reason to believe that they are irrational* (2014, pp. 203–6). Schoenfield accepts that if you have evidence that you've picked standards in a way that was unlikely to leave you with rational ones, then you ought to change them. It's a short step from this thought to my dominance principle.

But the Permissivists who endorse the traditional motivations for Permissivism—such as competing theoretical virtues—say that you *can* know that you are in a permissive case, but it is nonetheless impermissible to switch arbitrarily. These Permissivists must say that rational agents have some reason to privilege their own credences even when they know that some other credence is just as rational. Perhaps the reason is that the standards of a rational agent maximize expected accuracy for that agent, as Schoenfield argues. Or perhaps it's simply that we should be (diachronically) consistent; we shouldn't change our minds for no reason.[22]

But whatever the reason is, we must ask the question that I asked in response to Schoenfield: what is the *force* of the reason? Do we *always* have reason to adopt the credences that our standards recommend? Or rather, can it be *defeated* by evidence that our credences (and so our standards too) are irrational? As we have seen, the Permissivist should accept that if you have reason to believe that your standards are irrational, then whatever reason you had to adhere to your standards is defeated—when the rationality of a certain credence is in doubt, that it is recommended by *your* standards is no reason to prefer it.

The thought that you shouldn't change your mind for no reason is a far cry from the thought that you shouldn't change your mind *even when you have reason to believe that your present attitude is irrational*. But I have argued that *this* is the predicament of the clear-eyed Permissivist on the edge of the permissible range. It's not that he believes that some other credence is just as rational as his. No, it's that he expects some other credence to be *more* rational than his. (Matt is sure that a credence of 0.5 is rational, but he is not sure that one of 0.3 is rational.) To privilege your credence when the rationality of that credence is not in doubt is one thing; to do so when you have reason to believe it might be irrational, and you're sure that some other credence is rational, is quite another.

The dominance argument goes through as long as you admit that it is rational to revise your credence when you're not sure that your credence is rational but you *are* sure that some other credence is rational. And *any* Permissivist should admit this much.

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[22] See Kopec and Titelbaum (2015) for a discussion of how appealing to certain norms of diachronic consistency helps us reply to White.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that if you are on the edge of the permissible range of credences in a certain proposition, your credence will be rationality dominated by certain credences closer to the middle. Since dominated options aren't rational, it's not rational to adopt a credence on the edge of the permissible range. But Permissivism says that, for some such range, *any* credence in that range is rationally permissible. I have considered some objections to my argument and found them wanting. Permissivism, in its traditional form, cannot be right.[23]

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