

Horowitz, Dogramaci, and Schoenfield (2023) “Are You Now, Or Have You Ever Been, An Impermissivist? A conversation among friends and enemies of epistemic freedom”

Handout by Haley Linscott

- I. **Question:** given that two subjects have the same total evidence, is it  
(*Permissivism*;) rational for them to hold conflicting views, or is it  
(*Impermissivism*;) irrational for them to hold conflicting views?
- A. The Impermissivist supports the *Uniqueness Claim*:  
“[A] rational person’s total evidence always determine[s] a unique set of beliefs that they must hold”. (1)
- B. Classic readings on this debate: White 2005, Kelly 2005, and Kelly 2013
- II. **The Views**
- A. What the parties agree on: to answer the above question, we should focus on *accuracy* as the/an aim of rationality (i.e., take an “accuracy-first perspective”) (1-2)
- B. What the parties disagree on:
1. Miriam’s View(s):
    - a) “*there [is] more than one way to believe well*” (3, italics added)
    - b) *the dispute between the impermissivist and permissivist is a merely verbal or metalinguistic one* (4)

\*For further reading on the views that Miriam puts forth in this paper, check out Schoenfield 2014 and Schoenfield 2019.
  2. Sophie and Sinan’s View:
    - a) *impermissive rationality best explains “our practice of making rational ascriptions...to cultivate accurate and trustworthy testimony”* (2, italics added)

\*For further reading on the views that Sophie and Sinan put forth in this paper, check out Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016.

### III. The Dialogue (in a nutshell)

*Miriam* If you (the Impermissivists) are correct, then we should be able to use natural language to specify which unique credence we can expect the most accuracy from. But we can't do that, so Impermissivism is false. (4-9)

*Sophie, Sinan* Actually, we just need to be able to *promote accuracy* using rationality-talk. Whichever view (ours or yours) can do *that* is correct. Impermissivism, and not Permissivism, can do that job. So Impermissivism, and not Permissivism, is correct. (10-14)

Also, we (might) sometimes have *mushy* credences. If Permissivism is true, then we'll *sharpen* our credence in the mushy cases. But sharpening is irrational. So, at least in the mushy cases, being a Permissivist is not rational, and so, false again. (14-19)

*Miriam* In the cases where we ourselves are *deliberating* about what to believe, both of us will sharpen (not just the Permissivist) – even if you won't *say* it's rational to sharpen. So, in the deliberating case, our argument is merely verbal. As for the cases in which we're *evaluating* others' beliefs, our disagreement is metalinguistic. Neither of these disagreements are for epistemologists to sort out. (But, for what it's worth, the Permissivist fairs better in the metalinguistic disagreement.) (19-26)

*Sophie, Sinan* We think there's a more substantial debate between us than you suggest. In the deliberating case, it doesn't seem like the permissive norm is playing a valuable role. And, in the cases where we're evaluating others' beliefs, Impermissivism better promotes accuracy than Permissivism does. (26-28)

*Miriam* It's still not clear to me that talking like an Impermissivist is better than talking like a Permissivist. But that's an empirical matter. And the permissive norm *does* play a valuable role: it allows us to deliberate and talk so as to appreciate that truth is not *all* that matters to us. (28-29)

*Everyone* If we can agree on anything, we can agree that the Permissivism - Impermissivism debate is centered on how to promote accuracy. (29)

#### IV. Breaking Down the Arguments

##### *Argument 1: A Narrow Challenge to the Impermissivist (Miriam, p. 4-9)*

- (1) We use rationality-talk to do a certain job, viz., express our views about what promotes accuracy. (9)
- (2) Given (1), if Impermissivism is true, then we can, using natural language, specify which credence we can expect the most accuracy from. (7, 9)
- (3) We have mushy (imprecise) credences, which – rather than uniquely self-recommending (for accuracy) – leave open multiple options (for accuracy). (7, 9)
- (4) Given (3), we cannot, using natural language, specify which unique credence we can expect the most accuracy from. (9)
- (5) So Impermissivism is false. (9)

##### *Reply to Argument 1: Meeting the Broad Challenge (Sophie and Sinan, p. 10-14)*

- (1) “[W]e use rationality-talk to promote our aim of having accurate beliefs” (not necessarily, as Miriam says, to express our views about what promotes accuracy). (11)
- (2) Given (1), the correct notion of rationality is one that allows us to use rationality-talk to promote accuracy. (12)
- (3) The notion of rationality that allows us to use rationality-talk to promote accuracy is the one that allows us to evaluate others epistemically. (12)
- (4) The notion of rationality that allows us to evaluate others epistemically is the one that allows us to safely trust the testimony of others. (12)
- (5) The notion of rationality that allows us to safely trust the testimony of others is Impermissivism and only Impermissivism. (12)
- (6) So the correct notion of rationality is Impermissivism and only Impermissivism. (13)

##### *Argument 2: the Harm of Sharpening (Sophie and Sinan, p. 14-19)*

- (1) If Mushy Permissivism is true (i.e., if we have mushy credences and permissivism is true), then sharpening is rational. (14-15)
- (2) A method of rationality ascription is more useful only if that method promotes stability and reliability. (17, 19)
- (3) Sharpening doesn’t promote stability and reliability. (15, 17, 19)
- (4) So Mushy Permissivism, as a method of rationality ascription, is less useful. (19)

*Argument 3: Reframing the Disagreement (Miriam, p. 19-26)*

- (1) In cases of deliberation and action, arbitrarily shifting beliefs (e.g., sharpening) will be rational to both the Permissivist and the Impermissivist (even though the Impermissivist may not *say* it's rational). (21)
- (2) If (1), then in cases of deliberation and action, the Permissivist-Impermissivist disagreement is merely verbal. (20-21)
- (3) So, in cases of deliberation and action, the Permissivist-Impermissivist disagreement is merely verbal. (21)
- (4) In cases of evaluation, the permissivists and impermissivists disagree on only (i) how to use the word 'rational' and (ii) how to promote accuracy in mushy cases, and not (iii) how many response-types a testifier can give about whether or not P. (25)
- (5) If (4), then, in cases of evaluation, the Permissivist-Impermissivist disagreement is merely meta-linguistic. (24)
- (6) In cases of evaluation, we'll better promote accuracy if we (as the permissivist claims) say all of the imprecise credences are rational rather than (as the impermissivist claims) say nearly all of our beliefs are irrational. (24-25)
- (7) So the permissivist and impermissivist's disagreement is merely verbal in the cases of deliberation and action and merely metalinguistic in the cases of evaluation; and the permissivist's recommendations better promote accuracy in evaluation cases. (25-26)

*Reply to Argument 3: Recommend Impermissively! (Sophie and Sinan, p. 26-28)*

- (1) In mushy cases, the Permissivist will recommend one or more of the belief states; the impermissivist will disrecommend all of the belief states. (21, 26-28)
- (2) Given (1), in the mushy cases, the Permissivist and Impermissivist disagree about what to recommend. (27)
- (3) Disrecommending belief states in the mushy case is better for achieving our accuracy aims than recommending one or more of the belief states. (27-28)
- (4) So, when recommending beliefs, Impermissivism, and not Permissivism, is better for achieving our aims (in mushy cases). (27-28)