

## “EPISTEMIC PERMISSIVENESS” BY ROGER WHITE

### 1 | BACKGROUND.

Key issue: What rational constraints does one's *evidence* put on belief? White is interested in two theses:

**Uniqueness:** Given one's total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition (p. 445).

**Permissiveness:** any position that departs from uniqueness & entails that epistemic rationality permits more than one doxastic attitude in response to evidence.

White's goal: Raise challenges for views that deny uniqueness.

### 2 | EXTREME PERMISSIVISM.

White begins by arguing against the following (extreme) version of permissivism:

**Extreme Permissivism:** There are possible cases in which you rationally believe P, yet it is consistent with your being fully rational & having your current evidence that you believe  $\neg P$  (p. 447).

*Preliminary objection:* Consider a proposition P that I cannot rationally believe or disbelieve without evidence. If I gain evidence for P, it is necessarily evidence against  $\neg P$ , and vice versa. Since it is only my evidence that can determine which belief is rational, it is not consistent with my being fully rational that I believe either one.

- White: evidence generally points us toward the truth.
- White: if our evidence permits a belief of P or  $\neg P$ , it must favor neither conclusion.

*Primary objection:* Imagine I am trying to decide if Smith is guilty. I do not have any beliefs about Smith's guilt prior to receiving evidence. But I have two pills, one of which will lead me to believe the truth about Smith's guilt and the other will lead me to believe a falsehood. I take a pill and find myself convinced that Smith is guilty.

- Claim 1: Reflecting on the process that resulted in my belief should make me 50/50 about Smith's guilt.
- Claim 2: If extreme permissivism is true, then I could arrive at different conclusions about Smith's guilt through entirely rational reasoning processes. But then I should be 50/50 about Smith's guilt.

Problem: extreme permissivists should see updating on evidence and taking the pill as equally reliable. Believing P is not rationally compatible with believing that one could just as rationally have believed  $\neg P$ .

- Conclusion: extreme permissivism says that equally rational reasoning processes could get us to a belief in P and  $\neg P$ . So then knowing that I used a rational reasoning process does not (by my own lights) support my belief in P. I cannot rationally accept extreme permissivism with respect to my own beliefs.

White considers and denies three ways out of the puzzle for the extreme permissivist (p. 450-452):

- Believe that permissive standards apply to others but not oneself. (White: ad hoc and unmotivated!)
- Say that extreme permissivism is true but we cannot act as though it's true. (White: shouldn't have to!)
- Be permissive about a limited set of cases that we cannot identify. (White: permissivists want more!)
- Say people have different (legitimate) standard for interpreting evidence. (White: problem re-emerges!)

**Question:** Can we develop the first answer so it doesn't seem ad hoc? Consider: priors, other evidence, etc.

### 3 | MODERATE PERMISSIVISM.

Even if Extreme Permissivism isn't true, what about a more moderate form of permissivism?

**Permitted Suspension:** there are cases in which the evidence rules out a belief that  $\neg P$ , but it is rationally permissible to believe  $P$  or suspend judgment as to whether  $P$  or  $\neg P$  is true.

**Permitted Degrees of Belief:** there are cases in which there is leeway in the degree of belief it is rationally permissible to have given one's evidence.

White's objection: suppose that the range of rationally permissible degrees of belief is wide enough that it includes the conviction that I should vote Guilty for Smith, but that Not Guilty is also appropriate. Then I can both believe Smith is the murderer and think it's rational to let him go free—the evidence plays no role.

For suppose that before considering the evidence I am persuaded that there is this range of rationally permissible degrees of conviction. If I am correct in really thinking this, then there should be nothing wrong with arbitrarily choosing a verdict without bothering to look at the evidence. For there should be nothing wrong with my arbitrarily choosing a degree of conviction (induced perhaps by a magic pill that is within the rationally permissible range...For assuming that rationality and evidence do not determine a unique degree of conviction, then even if I am perfectly rational, there is no predicting what my degree of conviction will be upon evaluating the evidence. And hence there is no predicting how I will vote, whether Smith is guilty or not. Justice is no more likely to be done given that I examine the evidence than if I just vote however I like (p. 453).

**Question:** What role does the connection between rational belief and action play in White's argument?

**Question:** Does this objection successfully target all moderate forms of permissivism?

### 4 | RESPONSIVENESS TO EVIDENCE.

White: rejecting Uniqueness makes it difficult to see why we must be responsive to confirming evidence.

- Consider: two agents share total evidence, with  $cr_1(P) = x$  and  $cr_2(P) = y$  and  $x > y$ . Then it's rational for  $cr_1(P) = x$  after getting evidence  $E$ , since it's rational for  $cr_2(P) = x$  after updating on  $E$ . But then it is rational for  $cr_1$  to fail to be evidence-responsive, and that can't possibly be correct.

### 5 | ONE FINAL DEBATE.

White: Permissivism creates a kind of arbitrariness. If multiple states are rationally permissible in response to the same evidence, why privilege my beliefs (and so hold them) over some other rationally permissible beliefs?

Response: "To induce a belief that one takes to be false violates the aim of believing what is true" (p. 456). Effectively, what matters (for belief and action) is how I regard  $P$ , not whether it's epistemically obligatory.

White: Rationality is a guide to the truth and can conflict with our beliefs. In these cases, we want rationality to be able to win out. E.g., I might believe a plane is going to crash while knowing that the statistics make it very unlikely. In this case, it would be rational to take a pill to change my beliefs. How I regard  $P$  doesn't matter.

**Question:** Is the plane example an instance of belief? Or is it another kind of doxastic state?