

*Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief*¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I begin by defending permissivism: the claim that, sometimes, there is more than one way to rationally respond to a given body of evidence. Then I argue that, if we accept permissivism, certain worries that arise as a result of learning that our beliefs were caused by the communities we grew up in, the schools we went to, or other irrelevant influences dissipate. The basic strategy is as follows: First, I try to pinpoint what makes irrelevant influences worrying and I come up with two candidate principles. I then argue that one principle should be rejected because it is inconsistent with permissivism. The principle we should accept implies that it is sometimes rational to maintain our beliefs, even upon learning that they were caused by irrelevant influences.

1. Introduction

I was once talking to a very religious friend (let's call her "Carmen") about whether or not her particular religious beliefs were justified. As these conversations tend to go, we each proposed arguments that challenged the other's beliefs, responded to them, deemed the other's responses unsatisfactory, and neither of us budged. As a last attempt, I said to her: "Look, you must realize that if you had grown up somewhere else, you would not have all of these beliefs. You only believe as you do because of the influence of the people around you. How, then, can you be so sure you are right?" This thought, which had clearly occurred to her in the past, she found deeply troubling. I have another friend (let's call him "Joe") who once told me that the only challenge to his faith that ever *really* concerned him was the fact that his beliefs were caused by the community he was raised in.

I find the concern that Carmen and Joe share intriguing and I think it is one that many of us can relate to. It can seem very worrying that many of our deeply held convictions were caused by seemingly irrelevant influences, like the community we grew up in, the school we went to, or the friends we hang out with. My primary aim in this paper is to offer a response on my friends' behalf; that is, to argue that in many of the cases in which people worry about the irrelevant influences on their beliefs, they need not.

Given how pervasive these kinds of influences on belief are, I think it is extremely important that we figure out how we should respond when we learn about them.

For if it turns out that, upon learning that a belief was caused by an irrelevant influence, we are rationally required to give up this belief, the consequences would be quite drastic. This is because many of the beliefs that have been caused by irrelevant influences are religious, moral, political and philosophical beliefs. These are the kinds of beliefs that are very central to who we are, and to important decisions that we make about how to structure our lives.

Here is the general plan for the paper: first, I will provide some motivations for *permissivism*: the claim that sometimes, there is more than one rational² response to a given body of evidence. In recent years, permissivism has fallen out of favor and so it will take some work to defend this view and respond to the compelling arguments that have been offered against it. Second, I will argue that, if we accept permissivism, the concern raised by irrelevant influences on belief is, in many cases, unwarranted. Third, I will raise a problem for my view and respond to it. And finally, as a bonus, I will show how the view I defend helps sort out some issues related to peer disagreement.

Before delving into the argument, I would like to provide a more nuanced characterization of the view I will be defending, but first, I need to introduce some terminology. I'm going to call cases where we learn that our beliefs were caused by an irrelevant factor "IF cases." Later in the paper it will become clearer exactly what kind of factor counts as "irrelevant." So, for now, I hope you have an intuitive sense for which sorts of causes of beliefs are the worrisome ones. Also, I am going to use the term "doxastic attitude" to refer to any attitude which measures the degree of confidence an agent has in a proposition. Believing that p, being agnostic about whether p, and having credence 0.78 in p, are all examples of doxastic attitudes.

In a nutshell, my view is this: there are non-permissive cases (cases in which there is only one rational way to respond to a body of evidence) and permissive cases (cases in which there is more than one rational way to respond to a body of evidence). If we start out in a non-permissive case, and then we learn that we are in an IF case, a significant reduction of confidence may indeed be warranted. However, this is not so in permissive cases. I am going to argue that if you believe p in a case in which, given your evidence, it is permissible to believe p but also permissible to believe $\sim p$, then gaining additional evidence which suggests that your belief that p was caused by an irrelevant factor should not worry you. (Put in terms of defeators, the rationality of your belief in p is not defeated by the new evidence you get about the cause of your belief). You might find this obvious. After all, if I am a permissivist, and think that given my original body of evidence E, both belief and disbelief in p are rational, why should learning about the *cause* of my belief matter at all? I ended up with a rational belief! Isn't that all that matters? Although tempting, I will argue that this line of thought should be rejected. For this line of thought requires the permissivist to think of her beliefs in permissive cases as, in a sense, arbitrary, and, as I will show, a plausible version of permissivism will not yield this result. The argument for the claim that in permissive cases we should not be concerned with irrelevant influences will, therefore, require some care. In fact, it will turn out that there are very intricate connections between the debate

about permissivism and the debate about irrelevant factors. Some of the arguments against permissivism appeal to certain judgments about IF cases, and some of the motivations for reducing confidence in IF cases rely on views about permissivism. Part of what I aim to do is untangle these knots and make clear exactly what the connection between these two debates is.

Here is how the argument will go:

Main Argument

- P1. Permissivism is true.
- P2. If permissivism is true, the view that you should reduce confidence significantly in permissive irrelevant influence cases is unmotivated.
- P3. If the view that you should reduce confidence significantly in permissive irrelevant influence cases is unmotivated, you don't need to reduce confidence in such cases.
- C1. You don't need to reduce confidence significantly on the basis of irrelevant influences in permissive cases. (P1-P3).

In section two I defend the first premise, and in section three I defend the second premise. I won't say much in defense of the third premise. I take it that, as long you form your beliefs rationally to begin with, you needn't give them up (without further evidence) unless some sort of motivated defeat is provided. If I can convince you that no such defeat exists, you should accept the conclusion.

2. Permissivism (Defense of P1)

In this section I motivate the first premise of the main argument.

2.1 Motivations for Permissivism

Consider the following claim:

UNIQUENESS: For any body of evidence E, and proposition P, there is only one doxastic attitude to take towards P that is consistent with being rational and having evidence E.

Permissivism is the denial of **UNIQUENESS**. It is the claim that there are some cases in which there is more than one rational response to a given body of evidence.³ Before describing the motivations for permissivism, I should note that the debate about permissivism is different from (though related to) the debate about how to respond to disagreement. There is one question about whether two people who evaluate the same evidence can rationally come to different conclusions (this is what the permissivism debate is concerned with) and a different question about what two people should do when they *learn* that the other has come to a different conclusion (this is what the disagreement debate is concerned with). This section is concerned only with the first question.

Permissivism is motivated by both intuitive and theoretical considerations.⁴

(1) *Intuitive Motivations*

Gideon Rosen (2001) gives the following example in his defense of permissivism:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence . . . Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators. (71)

It is not just in scientific contexts in which it seems that people can reasonably arrive at different conclusions on the basis of the same body of evidence. We can imagine cases in which members of a jury are examining a complex body of evidence about who committed a crime, or people considering the evidence for and against the effectiveness of acupuncture, or the existence of God. In these cases too it seems that people may rationally come to different conclusions on the basis of a shared body of evidence.

There is a way of thinking about evidence which suggests that the cases that Rosen and I are appealing to do not, in fact, motivate permissivism. Alvin Goldman (2010), for example, points out that two people rarely share *all* of their evidence. Consider, for example, the jury case. Although all the members of the jury know the same facts about this particular crime, they have all been exposed to different evidence throughout their life. Goldman argues that these differences may be relevant to the question of what it is rational to believe about the suspect. If Goldman is right, we might be able to maintain **UNIQUENESS** and acknowledge that the members of the jury can reasonably come to different conclusions. This is because we might be able to explain the diverse conclusions by appealing to the fact that the jury members each had a different body of evidence to evaluate. But to motivate permissivism, we need cases where people with the *same* evidence reasonably come to different conclusions. Therefore, you might think, these cases do not, in fact, motivate permissivism.

There are two things worth noting here: first, it seems right that, in *some* cases, diversity of opinions can be accounted for by diversity of evidence. But even if this approach works for some cases, it does not seem plausible that *all* cases in which, seemingly, people rationally come to have differing opinions on some matter can be explained by a diversity of evidence. Take, for example, Rosen's case of the disagreement among paleontologists about what killed the dinosaurs. It seems unlikely that this disagreement can be rationalized by appealing to subtle differences in the bodies of evidence that the paleontologists have. Although the paleontologists may have grown up in different places, had different childhood experiences, and shop at different grocery stores, presumably, the evidence relevant to the question of who killed the dinosaurs is limited primarily to the facts paleontologists study in their academic lives. This evidence, which they get from academic books and papers, is the kind of evidence that can be easily shared. Thus, it is implausible

that we can rationalize all of the paleontologists' disagreements by appealing to differences in their total body of evidence.

The second point worth noting is that using a suggestion like Goldman's to explain away all the cases we have been considering (which I do not think was actually Goldman's intention), comes at a significant cost. Here is why: a crucial part of our epistemic life involves deferring to the opinions of others who are better placed to answer certain questions than we are. Sometimes, this requires us to judge that subject A has more relevant evidence than subject B. But if it turns out that "relevant evidence" includes much more than we originally thought, we will rarely be able to make such judgments. To see this, suppose that A is a paleontologist and B is a philosopher who knows very little about paleontology. A and B each have some attitude regarding a proposition about dinosaurs. Seemingly, we should trust A over B because, with regard to *relevant evidence*, A has more of it. But if it turns out that knowing facts about, say, the layout of grocery stores in Ohio can be relevant evidence which *explains substantive disagreements between paleontologists*, it's no longer clear that A really *does* have more relevant evidence than B. After all, A may have read more books about paleontology, but B may have shopped at more grocery stores in Ohio! Clearly such reasoning is absurd, and A's judgment should be trusted. But in explaining the absurdity of such reasoning, we need to appeal to the fact that knowledge about grocery store layouts *just isn't relevant* to the question about dinosaurs. However, if we grant this, it will be hard to use such minor differences in evidence to explain why paleontologists disagree with each other.

In sum, there are two reasons to think that Goldman's appeal to subtle differences in evidence cannot undermine the intuitive motivation for permissivism. One reason is that it seems implausible to appeal to subtle differences in evidence to explain *all* cases of seemingly rational disagreement. The second reason is that attempting to make too much of these subtle differences comes at a significant theoretical cost: it makes it difficult to explain how we can frequently do a good job at figuring out who is best placed to answer particular questions.

(2) Theoretical Motivations

Certain plausible theories of justification require the truth of permissivism (in fact, according to Igor Douven (2009), *all* current plausible theories of justification require permissivism!).⁵ Coherentism,⁶ conservatism,⁷ and subjective Bayesianism,⁸ are perhaps the most well known permissive theories. I will not be able to go into the motivations for these theories here, but I do want to note that at least some theories of justification that reject permissivism are laden with some unfortunate metaphysical commitments. Let us consider, as an example, someone who thinks in terms of degrees of belief (like a Bayesian), and thinks that the appropriate way to respond to evidence is with a *credence* (a real number between 0 and 1 that measures one's confidence in a proposition). On such a picture, given any body of evidence E, and proposition p, there is unique real number which represents the rational response to E. Consider the proposition that there exist more than three hundred elephants. According to the picture we are considering there is a unique

real number that is the appropriate credence for me to have in this proposition.⁹ It is, however, somewhat mysterious what could ground such facts. It is not as if there exist some general principles like “infer to the best explanation” or “believe what is entailed by your evidence” or “set your credences to the known objective chances” that can determine a unique real number measuring the reasonable credence to have in such a proposition. (Carnap (1950) heroically attempted to come up with a set of principles that would do this sort of thing, but the Carnapian project ultimately failed).¹⁰ The defender of **UNIQUENESS**, then, will have to take such facts to be brute, and the commitment to a preponderance of these brute facts seems to be an unattractive feature of the theory.

Gideon Rosen seems to be motivated by a similar concern when discussing a case which he takes to be one of reasonable disagreement between us and a group of people called “The Bedrockers.”

Are the Bedrockers unreasonable? If they are, then it should be possible to locate their mistake: to describe a compelling dialectical route... or at the very least to identify some principle or rule of inference which they reject, the rejection of which strikes us—when we hold it up to the light—as somehow crazy or silly or perverse or unintelligible.

Rosen is suggesting that, in many cases, if one of the two positions is, in fact, unreasonable, this cannot be a matter of brute fact. Some *principle* is necessary to explain what is unreasonable about one of these positions. But plausibly, as the cases we have been discussing suggest, general principles of reasoning will not ground facts about justification that will determine a unique reasonable attitude to take in any given case.

Here is another way of making the point: rationality can be thought of as a kind of capacity. Somebody committed to **UNIQUENESS** thinks that the possession of this capacity will allow one to make extremely fine grained distinctions. Consider, for example, the proposition that all ravens are black. The **UNIQUENESS** defender is committed to thinking that there is some number n , such that if you see n or more ravens, all of which are black, it is rational to believe¹¹ that all ravens are black, but if you see fewer than n , it is not rational to believe that all ravens are black.¹² It is, however, implausible that possessing rational capacities would allow one to recognize a unique such number! Rational capacities are capacities that one can apply to a broad range of epistemic situations. They allow one to make computations and inferences, to recognize certain arguments as good or bad, to recognize certain features of evidence as telling in favor or against theories, and so forth. Being in possession of such capacities may enable us to *rule out* certain patterns of attitudes in response to observing black ravens, but it hard to see how such capacities would allow one to determine that you need a minimum of 28 ravens to warrant believing that all ravens all black.

In sum, at least on some theories of justification, the commitment to **UNIQUENESS** has significant disadvantages. This not to say that there is no theory of rationality that sits well with the **UNIQUENESS** assumption. My point is only that there are some *prima facie* theoretical reasons to reject **UNIQUENESS**. These reasons, combined with the intuitive motivations I described above are, I think, enough to support the

claim that, barring any serious reasons to reject permissivism, we should embrace it. In the next section, I will respond to some of the arguments that have been put forward against permissivism.

2.2 Problems with Permissivism

Despite the intuitive and theoretical motivations for permissivism, many have thought that permissivism is not a viable option. Some of the recent defenders of **UNIQUENESS** include Roger White (2005), David Christensen (2007), Richard Feldman (2007) and Ernest Sosa (2010). I will respond to their arguments below. But before doing so, I should note that what I say here will not constitute a defense of *all* versions of permissivism. I think the arguments for **UNIQUENESS** point to a real and serious problem with certain versions of permissivism. However, what I take to be the best version of permissivism is immune from these arguments. According to the version of permissivism I will be defending here, what one ought to believe depends, in part, on what epistemic standards one has. On this view, if two people with the same evidence reasonably have different opinions about whether p, it is because these people have each adopted a different set of reasonable epistemic standards.

What are an agent's epistemic standards? There are different ways of thinking of epistemic standards. Some people think of them as rules of the form "Given E, believe p!"¹³ Others think of them as beliefs about the correct way to form other beliefs.¹⁴ If you are a Bayesian, you can think of an agent's standards as her prior and conditional probability functions. Since what I will be saying does not rely on a particular understanding of what a standard it is, we can just think of a set of standards as a function from bodies of evidence to doxastic states which the agent takes to be *truth conducive*. Roughly, this means that the agent has high confidence that forming opinions using her standards will result in her having high confidence in truths and low confidence in falsehoods.¹⁵ On the version of permissivism that I will be defending, there are multiple permissible epistemic standards,¹⁶ and what makes it permissible for agents to have different doxastic attitudes is that different attitudes may be prescribed by their different standards. In responding to the arguments against permissivism, this will turn out to be important.

I will first present an argument against permissivism which I think simply does not speak to the version of permissivism I am defending. I will then discuss a cluster of worries that have been raised for permissivism, which I think are more serious. These worries all center around the idea that a permissivist is committed to thinking of her beliefs as, in some sense, "arbitrary".

(1) The Evidence Pointing Problem (Sosa, White)

One way to argue against permissivism is to think about where the evidence "points." The kind of permissivist that I am interested in will sometimes want to say that it is permissible, given E, to believe p and permissible, given E, to believe $\sim p$.¹⁷ But surely it should only be rationally permissible to have beliefs that the total body of evidence supports, and it is impossible for the evidence to

support belief in both p and $\sim p$. After all, to whatever extent the evidence supports believing p , it supports disbelieving $\sim p$, and vice versa.

I think that the imagery being appealed to in this argument misrepresents the permissivist position I am defending. The permissivist I have in mind does not think that there is a special evidence “dial”, which points to the degree of confidence one should have in p , given E , and that, sometimes, the dial points in two directions at once (being confident in p and being confident in $\sim p$). Rather, the permissivist I have in mind thinks that there are multiple evidence “dials” corresponding to different permissible ways of weighing the evidence (different epistemic standards). Sometimes, all of the permissible standards warrant the same attitude, but other times, the different standards warrant different attitudes.

Less metaphorically, the reason it can be permissible for Anna to believe p , and Bob to believe $\sim p$, is *not* that there is a special set of epistemic standards, such that according to these standards, it is reasonable to believe p and reasonable to believe $\sim p$. Rather, the permissivist thinks that what it is reasonable to believe about p needs to be understood relative to some set of epistemic standards. Thus, the reason it is permissible for Anna and Bob to differ in their beliefs with regard to p is that Anna and Bob have *different* sets of standards, which differ regarding whether to believe p , given their body of evidence. Crucially, no one set of epistemic standards will ever warrant belief in p and $\sim p$.

(2) A Cluster of Worries: Arbitrariness (Christensen, Feldman, White)

The general worry raised by arbitrariness is as follows: if you think that, given E , it is reasonable to believe p and reasonable to believe $\sim p$, it looks like having one, rather than the other, belief is *arbitrary*. For if the evidence supports believing p to the same extent that it supports believing $\sim p$, what reason could you have to prefer your particular position?

Roger White uses an example which makes this worry especially pressing. He has us imagine a case in which the permissivist wants to say that, given E , it is permissible to believe p , and, given E , it is permissible to believe $\sim p$. We are then asked to suppose that there are two pills with the following feature: if we take pill #1, we will end up believing p , and if we take pill #2, we will end up believing $\sim p$. We are faced with a choice: Either, we could look at some evidence relevant to whether p and come to whatever conclusion we come to on the basis of that evidence, or, we could take a randomly selected belief pill and end up with our belief that way. It seems like it is better, from the point of view of obtaining true beliefs, to arrive at beliefs by a careful examination of the evidence rather than by a randomly selected belief pill. But if one is a permissivist, it seems like one should think that both methods are equally likely to lead to truth—for, after all, both methods are equally rational.

According to the arbitrariness worries, if Sally believes p , given E , while knowing that it is just as reasonable to believe $\sim p$, given E , she should think to herself: “why, given E , should I believe p rather than $\sim p$ when both are equally rational?” There are different ways of understanding this worry. On one way of understanding it, it is just a challenge to Sally to justify her believing p , rather than $\sim p$. If this is all

that the worry amounts to, there is no problem. Sally can justify her belief in the ordinary way: by appealing to evidence, arguments, reasoning, and so forth. For example, maybe Sally can defend her atheism by appealing to arguments like the Problem of Evil, or appeals to ontological simplicity. She can, at the same time, recognize that there are responses to these arguments that can seem compelling, and other arguments in favor of theism (like, perhaps, the Argument from Design). But despite realizing that there are alternative reasonable ways to weigh the evidence, Sally thinks that she is more likely to end up with a true belief by using her own standards of reasoning. (Recall that part of what it is to have standards of reasoning is to take them to be truth conducive.) So Sally will not regard her atheism as arbitrary at all. Atheism is the belief warranted by Sally's standards, which she takes to be more truth conducive than standards which warrant belief in theism, or agnosticism.

Appealing to an agent's standards of reasoning is also how we can respond to the case that White describes. Let's begin by thinking about how the pill in White's case is supposed to work. There are two possible mechanisms we should consider: The first mechanism would involve the pill changing the agent's belief *without* changing her standards. The second mechanism would involve the pill changing her belief *by* changing her standards. In either case, I will argue, the reason that an agent will prefer to form a belief about whether p by looking at the evidence, rather than taking a pill, is that the agent will think that evaluating the evidence is more likely to result in her having a true belief about whether p. Let's consider each mechanism in turn, beginning with the first. Why would a permissivist prefer to look at the evidence instead of taking a pill which will cause her to form a belief about whether p without changing her standards of reasoning? Because if she takes a randomly selected pill she may end up having beliefs that conflict with her standards of reasoning. Since she thinks that her standards of reasoning are truth conducive, she thinks she is more likely to end up with a true belief by applying her standards than by taking a pill. Let's now consider the second mechanism. This pill would work, *not* by potentially causing the agent to have a belief that conflicts with her standards of reasoning, but by changing the standards of reasoning themselves. This sort of pill will look equally unattractive to a permissivist. Although she knows that, later, she will not be violating her own standards (since she will have new standards), she does not now think that her later standards will be as likely to lead her to a true belief as her current ones. For this reason, an agent concerned with the truth about whether p, would refuse to take a pill that would change her standards of reasoning.^{18,19} Thus, although from some neutral standpoint, taking a pill and evaluating the evidence may look like equally good options, they certainly will not look equally good from the agent's own standpoint.

The defender of UNIQUENESS might think that appealing to standards in justifying having one, rather than another, permissible belief just pushes back the question: for what reason does Sally have for thinking that she is more likely to end up with a true belief by weighing the evidence *her* way, using *her* standards, rather than in some alternative way, if both ways are rationally permissible?

The answer is that Sally has no reason *independent of her standards of reasoning* for thinking that her standards are more likely to lead to the truth than some alternative. But note that the defender of UNIQUENESS is in no better position, for the defender of UNIQUENESS thinks that one set of standards is the uniquely rational set²⁰ and if we ask the defender of UNIQUENESS to give us a reason to think that *her* standards are the uniquely rational standards, she cannot do so in a way that is independent of these standards either. Whether we are permissivists or not, we can never give reasons for why we weigh the evidence in one way rather than another that are independent of everything else. This is just a fact about epistemic life that we have to live with: the methods that we use to evaluate evidence are not the sorts of things we can give independent justification for.²¹

Here is another way of seeing what is going on: there is a sense in which Sally thinks of alternative standards as “just as good” as her own and a sense in which she does not. For Sally thinks that although her standards are more truth conducive than some alternative, other standards may be just as rational. We might cash this out by thinking that the principles of rationality are going to be *general*: they will be principles about what kinds of considerations count in favor of what kinds of hypotheses. But these sorts of general considerations are not sufficiently robust to pin down a unique doxastic state given by any body of evidence. So even if Sally and her friend both conform to these principles, their standards may differ with regard to how exactly they weigh the different considerations and thus, in any given case, Sally and her friend might rationally come to different conclusions.

I think that the problem with this cluster of arguments for UNIQUENESS is that they all, in some way, rely one of two false assumptions. Either they assume that the permissivist cannot justify her belief in permissive cases, or they assume that our fundamental standards of reasoning need to be justified independently of those standards themselves. The first assumption is false because a permissivist can always make a case for her belief in the usual way. The second assumption is false because regardless of whether you are a permissivist, a justification for our standards of reasoning is not something we can provide independent justification for and the demand for such justification would result in widespread skepticism.²²

3. How Permissivism Bears on Irrelevant Factor Cases (Defense of P2)

In the previous section, I provided some motivations for thinking that, at least in some cases, there is more than one way to rationally respond to a particular body of evidence. From this point onwards, I will be assuming that permissivism is true. In this section, I show how permissivism bears on cases in which we learn that our beliefs were influenced by an irrelevant factor. In fact, the connections between the permissivism debate and the question about irrelevant influences on belief are quite intricate. Some of the arguments leveled against permissivism deal with cases of irrelevant influences (one such case is the case of the pills, and there is more to come), and some judgments on how to deal with irrelevant influences make assumptions about permissivism. The goal of this section is to argue for the second premise of the main argument. That is, that given permissivism, many cases

of irrelevant influences need not worry us. This is because many of the cases in which we worry about the irrelevant influences on belief are *permissive*, and, as I will show, in permissive cases, learning about an irrelevant influence doesn't justify a reduction of confidence.

Let me begin by introducing you to my opponent. My opponent is someone who thinks that learning that our belief was caused by an irrelevant influence should always cause us to decrease confidence in that belief, even in *permissive* cases.^{23,24} Here is how I will proceed: First, I will try to pinpoint what is worrying about irrelevant influence cases (IF cases) and come up with two hypotheses which might explain the worry. The first hypothesis, I argue, is true, but yields the result that we do not need to worry about permissive IF cases. The second hypothesis gives the result my opponent wants but is inconsistent with permissivism, and hence, false. Thus we arrive at the happy conclusion that, in permissive cases, we do not have to worry about irrelevant influences on our belief.

3.1 What's Wrong with Irrelevant Influences: Some Easy Cases and Two Proposals

I will start with a discussion of what we might find disconcerting about IF cases in the first place. To warm up, let's start with a very easy case.²⁵

DRUG: You have worked through a logic problem and concluded that p. You then learn that your evil logic teacher flipped a coin. If the coin landed heads she did nothing but if it landed tails she slipped a reason-distorting drug in your coffee. People who reason through logic problems under the influence of this drug nearly always get the answer wrong. You wonder whether you ought to reduce confidence in p.

In DRUG, it seems clear that you should decrease confidence in p.²⁶ There are two rough candidate explanations for why this is the case:

The “My belief might not be rational!” hypothesis: You should reduce confidence because you realize, upon learning about the drug, that there is a significant chance that the belief you ended up with is *irrational*.²⁷

The “My belief might not be true!” hypothesis: You should reduce confidence because you realize, upon learning about the drug, that there's a significant chance that the belief you ended up with is *false*.

These two explanations have not been distinguished in the literature, but I think the difference between these two explanations is important, *especially* if one is a permissivist. So the task ahead is to figure out which of these two (rough) explanations is the correct one. However, before moving forward, we need to make some refinements to our hypotheses. Here is why: Suppose that you are in DRUG and I tell you that you should reduce confidence; either because you have reason to suspect that your belief is irrational, or because you have reason to suspect that your belief is false. You might respond as follows: “Look, I grant that *before* solving the logic problem, learning about the drug would give me reason to suspect that I would come to have an irrational or false belief. But now that I have reasoned through the problem I know that, in fact, I did not reason poorly. For I now know that the correct answer to the problem is p, and I know that p is entailed by my

evidence, and furthermore, I believe p! So I have arrived at the correct and rational answer. I guess I didn't take the drug after all!" If you think that you should reduce confidence in DRUG, you will not be impressed with such reasoning. For you will think that when determining how likely you are to reason poorly, or make a mistake, you need to do so in a way that is *independent* of your reasoning about p. In other words, you cannot appeal to the very reasoning which is in question to defend the claim that you were not under the influence of the drug when reasoning. Frequently, to figure out how likely we are to be rational or correct in a way that is independent of the reasoning in question, we can do so by thinking about how we would have judged our chance of success *before* doing the reasoning. Here, then, are the refined versions of our hypotheses. I will call the refined versions of the two hypotheses mentioned above "RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE" and "TRUTH INDEPENDENCE."²⁸

RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE: Suppose that *independently of your reasoning about p*, you reasonably think the following: "were I to reason to the conclusion that p in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my belief would not be *rational*!" Then, if you find yourself believing p on the basis of your reasoning, you should significantly reduce confidence in that belief.

TRUTH INDEPENDENCE: Suppose that *independently of your reasoning about p*, you reasonably think the following: "were I to reason to the conclusion that p in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my belief would not be *true*!" Then, if you find yourself believing p on the basis of your reasoning, you should significantly reduce confidence in that belief.^{29,30}

In the next section, I will talk about which of these two principles we should accept. But first, I want to describe one more case which will be helpful to keep in mind when thinking about the more realistic cases (like religious belief) that I will be discussing in the next section.

ZAPPER: You start out having no idea whether p. You then look at some evidence which either entails p or entails $\sim p$. (Suppose that there is only one rational response to this evidence: if it entails p, you should believe p, and if it entails $\sim p$, you should believe $\sim p$). You reason and conclude that p. You then learn that an evil scientist flipped a coin to determine what you will believe. She decided that, if the coin lands heads, she will zap your brain so that it seems to you that there is a good argument for p, and if it lands tails, she will zap your brain so that it seems to you that there is a good argument for $\sim p$.

There are some differences between DRUG and ZAPPER, but despite these differences, it should be clear that the same reasons that motivate decreasing confidence in DRUG also motivate decreasing confidence in ZAPPER. For just as in DRUG, it is true in ZAPPER that, if you set aside your reasoning about p, it is quite likely that, by reasoning, you would end up with an irrational and false belief. To see why, imagine, once again, that you knew about the zapping set up *before* you formed the belief. At this point, you have no idea whether p, and you have no idea whether the evidence you will get supports p. You do, however, know that, no matter what, you will end up believing p. Thus, you will think that there is a significant chance

that your belief in p will be false and irrational, and so, no matter which principle is correct, you should decrease confidence in ZAPPER as well.

3.2 The Argument for Maintaining Belief in Permissive Cases

We are now ready to set aside pills and zappers and consider the kind of case we encounter in real life:

COMMUNITY: You have grown up in a religious community and believe in the existence of God. You have been given all sorts of arguments and reasons for this belief which you have thought about at great length. You then learn that you only have the religious beliefs that you do, and only find the reasoning that you engaged in convincing, because of the influence of this community. If you had grown up elsewhere, you would have, on the basis of the same body of evidence, rejected those arguments and become an atheist.

I am going to assume that COMMUNITY is a permissive case. This is a substantial assumption, which I believe to be correct, but I will not be arguing for that here. If you do not think the case is permissive, just plug in your own favorite permissive case. Now the question is as follows: do the hypotheses we've considered that motivate decreasing confidence in DRUG and ZAPPER also motivate decreasing confidence in COMMUNITY? Note that, structurally, COMMUNITY is very much like ZAPPER. For, in effect, your community acts like the evil scientist. Your community determines what belief you will come to have about religious matters. Ultimately, I will argue that you need not significantly decrease confidence in COMMUNITY by arguing that, in general, you should not decrease confidence in permissive IF cases.

The general point I will be making is as follows: if you start out with E, and, you know that on the basis of E, it is permissible to believe p and permissible to believe $\sim p$, learning that your belief in p was caused by an irrelevant factor does not give you reason to decrease your confidence in p. The argument for P2 of the main argument will proceed as follows:

Argument for P2

- P3. The best motivation for reducing confidence in permissive irrelevant influence cases requires TRUTH INDEPENDENCE.
- P4. TRUTH INDEPENDENCE says to decrease confidence in all permissive cases (even when there are no irrelevant influences!).
- P5. If you have to give up your belief in all permissive cases, there are no permissive cases. (definition of permissivism)
- P6. TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is inconsistent with permissivism. (P4, P5)

- C2. If permissivism is true, the view that you should reduce confidence in permissive irrelevant influence cases is unmotivated. (P3, P6)

I will first argue for P3, and then for P4.

Defense of P3: To see why P3 is true, let's continue to use COMMUNITY as our toy permissive case. I will now argue that if RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE is the right

principle, it is permissible to maintain belief, whereas if TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is right, you must give up your belief in COMMUNITY. Recall that RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE says to decrease confidence if you worry that your belief in p might be irrational. In the case we are imagining, however, the community not only caused you to believe in God, but instilled in you rational standards of reasoning that warrant belief in God (this is why you find the arguments for theism plausible). If you had grown up in a different community, you would have been instilled with a different set of rational standards which would have warranted atheism. Since the case is permissive, you were guaranteed to end up with a rational belief *no matter what*. So if worries about the *rationality* of one's beliefs are what explain why sometimes we should decrease confidence in IF cases, we will never have to be worried by irrelevant influences in permissive cases.

What about TRUTH INDEPENDENCE? If TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is the correct explanation of why we should sometimes decrease confidence in IF cases then you *should* decrease confidence in COMMUNITY. Why? Because *independently of your reasoning about religious matters*, you should think that there is a significant likelihood that you would form a false belief as a result of your community's influence. (As in ZAPPER and DRUG, you can see this by imagining that you are judging the likelihood of forming a true belief about God's existence *before* you joined the community and reasoned about the question. In this state you know that you will come to believe in God on the basis of your community's influence, but you are agnostic about God's existence. Thus, you will think that there is a significant chance that the belief you will form will be false. This is the perspective you have to occupy when you set aside your reasoning about religious matters).

Thus, whether we should decrease confidence in COMMUNITY boils down to which of our hypotheses is the correct one. In the next subsection I will argue that we should reject TRUTH INDEPENDENCE and instead explain the easy cases we started out with using RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE. Since, in COMMUNITY, you can be confident that the belief you formed was rational, you do not need to abandon your belief.

Defense of P4: Here is where we are: I have suggested two principles which might explain why we should sometimes decrease confidence when learning that our beliefs were caused by irrelevant factors. As a reminder, here are the two principles once again:

RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE: Suppose that *independently of your reasoning about p* , you reasonably think the following: “*were I to reason to the conclusion that p in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my belief would not be rational!*” Then, if you find yourself believing p on the basis of your reasoning, you should significantly reduce confidence in that belief.

TRUTH INDEPENDENCE: Suppose that *independently of your reasoning about p* , you reasonably think the following: “*were I to reason to the conclusion that p in my present circumstances, there is a significant chance my belief would not be true!*” Then, if you find yourself believing p on the basis of your reasoning, you should significantly reduce confidence in that belief.

I have argued that the worry about irrelevant influences in cases like COMMUNITY (where you learn that your religious beliefs were caused by the community you grew up in) arises only if TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is correct. In this subsection, I will argue that we should reject TRUTH INDEPENDENCE, and hence, we can rationally maintain belief in such cases.

Here is how the argument will proceed. My opponent wants a principle like TRUTH INDEPENDENCE to explain why you should give up belief in cases of irrelevant influences. This means that she needs a hypothesis which will distinguish a case in which you do some reasoning and believe in God on its basis *without* any irrelevant influences, from a case in which you do some reasoning and believe in God, but as a result of an irrelevant influence (as in COMMUNITY). I will grant to my opponent that TRUTH INDEPENDENCE yields the result that one should decrease confidence in COMMUNITY. However, I will argue that TRUTH INDEPENDENCE will tell you to give up your belief in permissive cases *all the time*, even when everything is hunky dory. So, as a matter of fact, if TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is correct, *there are no permissive cases*. Any time you try to have a belief in a permissive case, TRUTH INDEPENDENCE will tell you to give it up. Thus, the principle will fail to distinguish permissive cases in which there are irrelevant influences, from cases in which there are not.

To see why TRUTH INDEPENDENCE rules out any permissive cases, consider a case in which an agent reasons just as you do in COMMUNITY, but this time, without any irrelevant influences. We can make this the most idyllic permissive case imaginable. This agent, Caveman, is a perfectly rational being who sits in a cave and carefully considers the arguments for and against the existence of God. No drugs, no zaps, no communities. Just pure, unadulterated, reason. Suppose that after careful deliberation, he comes to believe that God exists (let's call this proposition "G") on the basis of the same reasons that you are given in COMMUNITY. He also recognizes that someone could rationally reject G on the basis of the same evidence that he has. If permissivism is true, cases like this must exist.³¹ But, as I will show, even in this idyllic case, TRUTH INDEPENDENCE will tell the agent to give up his belief in G.

For Caveman to determine whether he can maintain his belief in God given TRUTH INDEPENDENCE, he must think about how likely he is to be right, in a way that is independent of his reasoning about the existence of God. As in the other cases, we can think of the perspective from which Caveman has to reason as the one that Caveman was in before he went into the cave to deliberate about the existence of God. From this point of view, how likely should he think it is that, were he to reason to the conclusion that God exists, this belief would be true? Answer: not very likely.

The reason is as follows: once Caveman has set aside his reasoning about the existence of God, what he is left with is a perspective that is *neutral* with respect to the existence of God.³² *From this neutral state*, he should think it is unlikely that he will form a true belief about God's existence on the basis of his reasoning. This is because he knows that the case is a permissive case, and so, both G and \sim G are rational given his evidence. If he cannot appeal to the actual reasoning and standards that led him to the conclusion that he reached, he has no

reason to expect that, of the two rational positions he might adopt, he will come to have the correct one. Thus, even in this idyllic permissive case, TRUTH INDEPENDENCE would tell Caveman to give up his belief in G. And so, if we accept TRUTH INDEPENDENCE, we get the result that *even when there are no irrelevant influences*, we should give up belief in permissive cases. This means that there could be no idyllic permissive cases like the ones I described. Since permissivism says that there could be such cases, TRUTH INDEPENDENCE is inconsistent with permissivism.

Here is a somewhat deeper explanation of what is going on: If you are a permissivist, setting aside your reasoning (in permissive cases) will leave you in dire straits. Recall that the permissivist was faced with an arbitrariness worry. Why, if it is rational to believe p and rational to believe $\sim p$, should you think that *your* belief (whichever one it is) is the right one? I argued that the permissivist should deny the accusation that her belief in p is arbitrary. The reason, I claimed, the permissivist should not regard her belief as arbitrary is that she can appeal to her particular standards, reasons, and arguments for believing p. But TRUTH INDEPENDENCE says that for a belief to be rational, we must think it likely to be true, *even if we set all of that aside*.

Note that if you are not a permissivist, the condition set by TRUTH INDEPENDENCE will frequently be met. For even if you set aside your actual reasoning, when there is no funny business going on, it is safe to assume that you reasoned *rationally*. Since rational beliefs tend to be true, you do not need to appeal to any actual reasoning you did to justify the claim that the belief you ended up with will likely be correct. In permissive cases, however, this is not an option. For if believing p and believing $\sim p$ are both rational responses to a body of evidence, we cannot think it likely that our belief in p is true on the basis of it being rational, since the very same reasoning would lead us to think that a $\sim p$ belief would be true.

In sum, if, in a permissive case, we must judge it likely that we would come to the right conclusion, even setting aside our reasoning about the issue, the arbitrariness worry returns, and this time, with the upper hand. For once you have set aside the actual reasoning that led you to p, you have no reason to think that the belief you end up with will be true. In other words, what TRUTH INDEPENDENCE demands is exactly what the permissivist cannot provide: an *independent* reason for thinking it likely that her beliefs, in permissive cases, are true. But this has nothing to do with irrelevant influences. The permissivist can never provide this kind of independent justification, and should reject any principle which suggests that such justification is required.

3.3 An Application

Here is what happened so far: I have argued for permissivism, and I have argued that, if permissivism is true, we need not significantly decrease our confidence in permissive IF cases. In the next section I am going to present a problem that arises for my view, but before doing so I want to consider one more case that has been much discussed in the literature. This case was first described (autobiographically) by G.E Cohen (2000):

SCHOOL: You are a graduate student in philosophy at Oxford and come to believe that there exists an analytic/synthetic distinction. You then realize that if you had gone to graduate school at Harvard you would have come to reject the existence of the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Assuming that the question of whether or not there is an analytic/synthetic distinction is (or was) a permissive one, this case may look quite similar to COMMUNITY, and one might have thought that, for this reason, this is a case in which it is permissible to maintain one's own belief. However, I think that there is a distinction between these cases which may turn out to be important: namely that, in COMMUNITY, the relevant beliefs and standards of reasoning that you formed, were formed early in life, while in SCHOOL, the relevant beliefs and standards of reasoning that you formed were formed later in life.

Why should the time at which you formed the belief make a difference? Because I think it is not implausible that, in SCHOOL, there is a fact about what belief my standards sanction regarding the analytic/synthetic distinction prior to my having gone to graduate school. If this is true, then learning that I have adopted the beliefs that I have because of the school I went to gives me a reason to be concerned. This is because this realization gives me a reason to think that I may have not *rationally* come to the belief that I currently possess. This belief may, in ways unbeknownst to me, be in tension with other beliefs and standards of reasoning that I have, and so the belief may be irrational. As I mentioned earlier, I think that we have good reason to decrease confidence in IF cases when there is a concern that our belief is irrational (by RATIONALITY INDEPENDENCE), and SCHOOL might be such a case.

The earlier on my belief in p was formed, the less likely it is that this belief is in tension with other beliefs and standards of reasoning that I possess. This is because it is likely that many of the beliefs and standards we formed early on are deeply entrenched in the way we think about a host of other issues. Since the beliefs we formed early on had a strong influence on the construction of our (hopefully) coherent system of beliefs, it is unlikely that these beliefs are in conflict with the rest. However, if we form a belief later in life, and learn that it was caused by an irrelevant influence, we might have reason to think that, independently of the reasoning in question, it is likely that we've reasoned *irrationally*, by reasoning in ways that are inconsistent with other beliefs and standards that we have. For this reason, I am more certain that in cases like COMMUNITY we are permitted to maintain belief even upon learning about the irrelevant influences on that belief, than I am about the permissibility of maintaining confidence in cases like SCHOOL.

4. A Problem

So far I have argued that, while in cases like DRUG, which are non-permissive, we should reduce confidence in our beliefs (because of RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE), the considerations which motivate reducing confidence in DRUG do not give us reason to reduce confidence in permissive IF cases. Given my defense of permissivism, this

may seem surprising. For recall that, in defending permissivism against arbitrariness worries, I argued that a permissivist should not be willing to take a pill which will cause her to adopt a new set standards, *even if those standards are rational*. And yet here I am suggesting that if you find out that, unbeknownst to you, you *did* take a pill (or get zapped, or grow up in a certain community) which caused you to adopt some rational set of standards, then you have no reason to abandon your belief. In effect, then, what I am suggesting is this: don't take the pill, but if you do, don't worry about having taken it. There is a seeming tension here which I aim to bring out this section.

We can make this problem more precise by noting that the judgment that we need not reduce confidence in permissive cases seemingly conflicts with the following plausible principle:

REFLECTION: If you know that, in the future, you will rationally, without loss of information, have doxastic attitude A towards p, you ought to now have doxastic attitude A towards p.

A version of this principle was first introduced and defended by Bas van Fraassen (1984) and, for reasons of space, I will not venture into an extended defense of REFLECTION here. But the intuitive idea behind REFLECTION is this: From an epistemic standpoint, more evidence is better. Since you know that your later self will be better informed, and that the judgment made on the basis of that additional information is the rational judgment, you should view your later self as an expert (at very least, an expert relative to your current self). Thus, if you know what your later more informed and rational credence in p is, you should adopt that credence now.

To see how a REFLECTION violation can arise, consider a case that Roger White raises in defending UNIQUENESS. The case is very similar to SCHOOL, except in this case, we imagine that you learn about the irrelevant influence *before* attending school.

BEFORE SCHOOL: You are currently agnostic about whether or not there is an analytic/synthetic distinction (p). You are going to study at Harvard or Oxford where you will hear lots of arguments about the distinction. You know that if you go to Harvard you will come to believe p, and that if you go to Oxford you will come to believe $\sim p$ on the basis of the very same evidence. *Furthermore, you know that in either case, your belief will be a rational one.*³³ The mail comes and you learn that you were accepted to Oxford and rejected from Harvard.

Once you learn that you will be going to Oxford, you learn that you will, in the future, rationally believe that there is an analytic/synthetic distinction. So, according to REFLECTION, you should believe in that distinction now. But it would be crazy go from agnosticism about the analytic/synthetic distinction to belief in it merely by deciding what school to go to!

To solve this problem, I will argue the permissivist has *independent* reason to reject REFLECTION, and so a violation of this principle is not problematic for her.

Additionally, the permissivist can accommodate what is plausible about REFLECTION by endorsing a variant of the principle which I will call PERMISSIVE REFLECTION that does not yield the problematic result. To begin, let's see why the REFLECTION principle, *as stated*, is one that the permissivist should reject. Suppose that I am a permissivist and am considering whether to defer to an expert about p. If I were not a permissivist, it seems like all I would need to know to make it the case that I should defer to this expert is that the expert has more evidence than I do, and that the expert always has attitudes that are rational given her evidence. But if I am permissivist, this is not a sufficient reason to defer. In order for it to make sense for me to defer, I must think that, not only are the expert's attitudes always supported by the evidence, *but that the expert weighs evidence in the same way I do*. To see why, consider the following example: Suppose that I am an atheist and think that theism and atheism are equally rational. I may think that my neighborhood priest knows much more about the bible than I do, but I will not defer to him about whether or not Jesus performed miracles because I think that he has different standards of reasoning than I do. In this case, I think I may be more likely to believe the truth by using my own standards with less information, than by deferring to the priest who has more information, but adopts different standards than my own.

Recall that one of the primary motivations for REFLECTION is that we should consider our more informed future selves to be experts and, hence, should defer to them for the same reason we defer to experts. Therefore, just as a permissivist should not always defer to an expert with different standards than her own, she should also not always defer to a future time slice of herself with different standards than her own. The reflection principle, then, that the permissivist should accept³⁴ is as follows:

PERMISSIVE REFLECTION: If you know that, in the future, you will, without loss of information, rationally have doxastic attitude A towards p, *and your future self has the same standards of reasoning as your current self*, you ought to now have doxastic attitude A towards p.

It is crucial in the case we have been discussing that your future self has *different* standards than your current self. For recall that if the Harvard and Oxford students permissibly have different beliefs about the analytic/synthetic distinction, this difference must be explained by appealing to a difference in their standards. Thus, if you know that you will reasonably believe p in the future, you know that, when you go to school you will adopt some standards that you currently do not possess (since you are now reasonably agnostic about p, we can suppose that your current standards are either silent about whether p, or dictate that you should be agnostic, while your future standards will bring about a belief in either p or $\sim p$). Since you know that your standards at the later time will differ from your current standards, the version of REFLECTION that the permissivist will accept will not imply that you ought to believe or disbelieve p merely on the basis of deciding what school to go to.

5. Disagreement

I would like to end with a few brief remarks about how what I have said bears on the debate about how to react to peer disagreement.³⁵ There has been much discussion in recent years about whether or not learning that an epistemic peer disagrees with us, gives us a reason to suspend judgment in that belief.³⁶ I think that much of what I have said here about irrelevant influences has applications to the disagreement debate as well.

The views in the disagreement literature according to which you should decrease confidence in the face of peer disagreement are motivated by the very same kind of independence principles which motivate decreasing confidence in IF cases. The thought is that if somebody is my peer and we disagree, then, independently of the reasoning in question, the probability of my being right is equal to the probability of my peer being right. This means that, independently of the reasoning in question, I can't assign a very high probability to my belief being true.

As we have seen, learning that, independently of your reasoning about p, you judge there to be a significant chance that your belief is false is not enough to motivate decreasing confidence. The correct independence principle is one according to which you should decrease confidence in cases in which, independently of the reasoning in question, you don't assign a high probability to your belief being *rational*. Thus, whether we should decrease confidence in cases of peer disagreement is going to depend on whether or not the case is permissive, just as whether or not we should decrease confidence in IF cases depends on whether or not the case is permissive.

This result can, I think, shed some light on a number of problems that have been discussed in the context of disagreement. According to conciliatory views,³⁷ you should suspend judgment when you learn about a peer's disagreement. But there is a problem with such views, which Elga (2007) calls the “spinelessness worry.” The worry is that if we think we should suspend judgment in cases of peer disagreement, we will have to suspend judgment on a large number of our important beliefs (given how much disagreement there is), and the result will be that that we will be epistemically “spineless.”

While the conciliatory views can be accused of, perhaps, too much humility, the alternative views (sometimes called “steadfast views”³⁸) can be accused of too much epistemic arrogance. One of the much discussed cases in the disagreement literature is the following:

RESTAURANT: You and your friend are dining together at a restaurant. You get the bill and decide to add an extra 20% for tip, and then split the total. You each do the calculation to determine how much you owe and come to different conclusions. This is not the first time this has happened. In fact, since you are frequent dining partners, this has happened a great number of times and in half of those times it turned out that you were right, and in the other half, it turned out that your friend was right.³⁹

It seems obvious that, in a case like this, you should decrease confidence in your answer. Doing otherwise would display an inappropriate kind of epistemic hubris. And yet the steadfast views, according to which peer disagreement does not give

you a reason to decrease confidence, say that, assuming you calculated correctly, you should not decrease your confidence.

The view that I am advocating can solve both of these problems. Since whether or not we should give up a belief in the case of peer disagreement depends on whether or not the case is permissive, there will be some cases in which we should decrease confidence and some cases in which we should not. In RESTAURANT, it is quite clear that, independently of the reasoning in question, I have good reason to think I have reasoned irrationally and so I should indeed decrease confidence. But decreasing confidence in cases like this does not lead us to spinelessness. There will be lots of cases in which I can maintain my beliefs in the face of peer disagreement and these will be permissive cases. As long as I have reason to think that both my peer and I are rational, the disagreement between us will not give me a reason to abandon my belief.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that our theory of rationality should be permissive; that is, that sometimes there are multiple rational responses to given a body of evidence. I have also argued that the way we should react to learning that our beliefs were caused by irrelevant influences depends on whether or not the case is a permissive one. If we think that the irrelevant influence may have caused us to reason irrationally, learning about the influence may give us reason to reduce confidence. In contrast, if the irrelevant influence caused us to have one versus another rational belief, learning about the irrelevant influence doesn't give us a special reason to reduce confidence.

As I mentioned at the beginning, many of the beliefs that play very central roles in shaping our lives were caused by irrelevant influences. In this paper I have focused primarily on our beliefs about the existence of God, but there are several beliefs we have that have been caused by the influence of our communities, schools, friends and family. I hope to have convinced you that many of these beliefs are not threatened by learning certain facts about their causal history. While this may be a comforting thought, it is important to remember that the argument I have given only works if we take these central beliefs of ours to be ones in which the alternatives are rationally permissible. So while the position I am defending allows us to be dogmatic, in the sense that we can maintain our beliefs on these matters despite knowledge of the influence of irrelevant factors and peer disagreement, this kind of dogmatism is warranted only by a great deal of epistemic tolerance. We can only maintain our beliefs if we recognize that the alternative beliefs in question are just as rational as our own.

Notes

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and audiences at Barnard/Columbia, MIT, University of Leeds, University of Southern California, University of Texas at Austin, and Yale University. I would also like to dedicate this paper to my brother, Yossi Schoenfield, who inspired me to write on this topic.

² In other work (Schoenfield (2012) and Schoenfield (ms^a)), I argue that the word “rationality” is ambiguous and that it is important to distinguish *what one ought to believe* from *what the evidence supports*. I will be setting this distinction aside for the purposes of this paper since everything I have to say about permissivism applies equally well to both notions.

³ Actually, the view that I will be defending here (and calling “permissivism”) is somewhat stronger than the denial of UNIQUENESS. For I will be maintaining that there are some cases in which it is rational to believe p given E and also rational to believe $\sim p$ given E . However, it is consistent with denying UNIQUENESS that no such cases exist. You might adopt a version of permissivism according to which there are sometimes multiple permissible attitudes to take towards some proposition p , but it is never the case that given some body of evidence E , it is rational to believe p on the basis of E , and rational to believe $\sim p$ on the basis of E . However, for reasons I cannot get into here, I do not find this position to be a well-motivated one. (The basic idea is that the position will face all the problems that more extreme versions of permissivism face, without getting the benefits that the more extreme versions enjoy). I will therefore be setting this view aside for the remainder of the paper.

⁴ For other defenses of permissivism see Ballantyne and Coffman (forthcoming), Douven (2009), Kelly (forthcoming), Kopec (unpublished manuscript) and Meacham (unpublished manuscript).

⁵ For a thorough discussion of which views are ruled out by UNIQUENESS see also Ballantyne and Coffman (forthcoming).

⁶ See, for example, Quine and Ulian (1970), BonJour (1985) and Elgin (1996).

⁷ See, for example, Harman (1986) and Lycan (1988).

⁸ See, for example, Jeffery (1965).

⁹ Some people, like Levi (1974) and Joyce (2005) think we can avoid such problems by moving to a version of Bayesianism that represents doxastic states with a *set* of probability functions, rather than a single function. However, I do not think that moving from single functions to sets of functions actually solves the problem. (This version requires that for any body of evidence there is a unique *interval* which represents the credence one ought to have in a proposition). Additionally, there are independent reasons to be worried about this version of Bayesianism. See White (2010^a), Elga (2010), and Schoenfield (2012).

¹⁰ See, for example, Burks (1953), Horwich (1982), and Titelbaum (2010).

¹¹ Or, if you prefer, have a credence above 0.9, or have a credence interval above 0.9. Thanks to Christopher Peacocke for suggesting this case.

¹² Of course, the rationality of believing that all ravens are blacks depends on more than the number of ravens you see, but let's hold everything else fixed for now and consider only differences in the number of observed black ravens.

¹³ Kopec (ms), Goldman (2010).

¹⁴ Elga (ms).

¹⁵ In terms of degrees of beliefs, taking your standards to be truth conducive means having high confidence that assigning credences using your standards will result in credences with high expected epistemic value, where epistemic value is measured by a scoring rule. A scoring rule is just a function that measures the epistemic “success” of a credence in a proposition. These rules will assign high value to high credences in truths and low credences in falsehoods, and low value to high credences in falsehoods and low credences in truths.

¹⁶ The fact that there are multiple permissible epistemic standards does not mean that *any* set of epistemic standards is permissible. It is consistent with permissivism that there be substantive rational requirements on a set of epistemic standards. In fact, I think that the most plausible version of permissivism *does* posit such constraints (however, see Horowitz (ms) for an argument that the permissivist who posits substantive constraints is faced with a special challenge that other versions of permissivism can avoid).

¹⁷ See footnote 3 for an explanation of why I am restricting my discussion of permissivism to views according to which it is sometimes permissible to believe p and permissible to believe $\sim p$ given E .

¹⁸ White describes another case which is meant to be problematic for the permissivist and avoids the response I have given here. However, I will postpone discussion of this case to later in the paper where it becomes especially relevant.

¹⁹ For other responses to White's arguments see Ballantyne and Coffman (forthcoming), Douven (2009), Kelly (forthcoming), Kopec (unpublished manuscript) and Meacham (ms).

²⁰ A set of standards is rational just in case following these standards will result in rational beliefs.

²¹ You might think that although the non-permissivist and the permissivist are equally unable to justify their set of standards in a way that is independent of the standards themselves, the non-permissivist can do *something* that the permissivist cannot do. For the non-permissivist, perhaps, can justify the rationality of some *particular* standard by an inductive inference from the rationality of other standards. For example, suppose that the non-permissivist in question is an objective Bayesian. She thinks that the unique probability to assign towards the proposition that there exist pink elephants, (call this “p”), given her evidence, is .0023. Perhaps she can think to herself: “I have lots of other rational standards, which are best explained by my having some excellent rational capacities, so it is likely that this standard is rational as well.” Although, like the non-permissivist, the permissivist can justify the *rationality* of some standard by appealing to the rationality of others, she cannot always infer from the fact that a bunch of her standards are *truth conducive*, that some other cluster of standards is truth conducive. This is because, on the permissivist's view there, is no *capacity* which explains why, of the variety of rational standards she might adopt, she has adopted standards that are truth conducive. The permissivist will think that what led her to adopt standards that are truth conducive rather than some alternative set of rational standards is sheer luck. For this reason, she cannot infer future successes from past successes. But far from being an objection, the claim that there is no capacity which can explain why an agent's standards are truth conducive, is at the very heart of what the permissivist wants to assert! As mentioned earlier, part of the motivation for permissivism is the thought that it is implausible that there is some kind of capacity which will determine a unique appropriate attitude to adopt given any body of evidence. Rationality can only narrow down the set of possible standards, so far. Beyond that, the people that end up with standards that lead them to have more true beliefs are just lucky. So although there may be *some* sense in which the non-permissivist can justify her standards and the permissivist cannot, the possibility of such a justification is exactly what the permissivist *wants* to deny. It is therefore dialectically ineffective to point out that the permissivist cannot justify her standards in this particular way as an argument against permissivism.

²² Adam Elga has defended this point in his paper “Lucky to Be Rational” (ms).

²³ Ekaterina Vavova (ms) has explicitly endorsed this view, but it is implicit in many of the arguments that favor reducing confidence in IF cases.

²⁴ When I say that my opponent thinks that you should reduce confidence in *all* irrelevant influence cases, I don't mean to be suggesting that my opponent thinks that, whenever an agent learns that some chancy event leads her to form a particular belief, she should reduce confidence in that belief. For suppose that a chancy event leads me to eat at some particular restaurant. The chanciness of my going to this restaurant doesn't mean that I should reduce confidence in my subsequent beliefs about the restaurant! This case highlights the difficulty in explaining exactly what sorts of causal stories make for what I am calling “an irrelevant influence case.” In the following section I explain what underpins the worry about irrelevant influence cases. The account I give should explain why, even people who worry about irrelevant influences in general, don't worry about irrelevant influences in the restaurant case I described here. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

²⁵ This case is based on a case described by David Christensen (2010).

²⁶ Weatherson (ms) and perhaps also White (2010^b) think that, even in a case like DRUG, you need not reduce confidence in p upon learning about the irrelevant influence, provided that your belief was correct to begin with (My own view is that there is a sense in which it is rational to reduce confidence and a sense in which it is not. I elaborate on this in Schoenfield (ms^a)). If Weatherson and White are right, then one *never* needs to worry about being in an IF case, permissive or not. What I am aiming to do, in this paper, however, is show that, even if we ought to decrease confidence in cases like DRUG, we definitely ought not decrease confidence in permissive irrelevant influence cases. So for the remainder of the paper I will be setting aside the view according to which learning that one is in an IF case never gives one reason to reduce confidence.

²⁷ Here, and elsewhere where I discuss this hypothesis, it is important to note that the worry raised is one about the rationality of the belief *prior* to learning about the irrelevant influence. More precisely, if E is your evidence before you learn about the drug, and E* is your evidence after you learn about the drug, this hypothesis says that the reason to be worried is that, upon learning about the drug, you realize that E might not support your belief.

²⁸ Principles along the lines of RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE and TRUTH INDEPENDENCE have been suggested by David Christensen (2007), Adam Elga (2007) and Ekaterina Vavova (ms). Although there are known difficulties with extracting a portion of our beliefs, the claim that *sometimes* it is unclear how exactly to set aside one's reasoning about p does not make such principles useless. In fact, in many cases, it is quite straightforward how to set aside one's reasoning about p, especially when one can simply refer to one's attitude at an earlier time (before the reasoning took place). Since in all of the cases that are relevant to the purpose of this paper there are no special difficulties that arise in setting aside one's reasoning about p, it is not necessary to appeal to some general solution to the extraction problem. We could just as well use a version of this principle which was restricted to those cases in which it *is* possible to set aside one's reasoning about p.

²⁹ Two notes about these principles: first, although I stated them in terms of belief, for simplicity, at least the first principle could be translated straightforwardly into a principle in terms of degrees of belief. Second, there is a worry that both of these principles lead to widespread skepticism. To avoid skeptical results, some bells and whistles need to be added which are discussed in Christensen (2007), Elga (2007) and Vavova (ms). Since, for my purposes, it does not matter whether we use these principles, or the fancier ones, I am going to use the simple principles for convenience, though nothing about what follows rests on the particular version of the principle I will be using.

³⁰ There is another independence principle which that has been suggested by Adam Elga (ms). Elga's principle says, roughly, this: if S rationally has doxastic attitude A towards p, it must be true that, independently of S's reasoning about p, S judges that A accords with her standards of reasoning. While this proposal bears some similarities to RATIONAL INDEPENDENCE, I have argued elsewhere (Schoenfield (ms^b) that this principle provides neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for when you should decrease confidence in IF cases. For this reason, I will not be talking much about this principle here.

³¹ You may be able to get around this argument if you think that, although permissivism is true, one can never know that one is in a permissive case. This, however, is a very implausible view and accepting it requires giving up on some of the considerations that motivate permissivism in the first place.

³² Since the reasoning, in this case, is the same as the reasoning in COMMUNITY, my opponent must grant that setting aside the relevant reasoning, in this case, results in a neutral perspective to get the result that setting aside one's reasoning, in COMMUNITY, results in a neutral perspective. Note that part of what will have to be set aside in permissive cases like COMMUNITY are the standards of reasoning that are in question. (Since we are assuming that, in permissive cases, what explains disagreement is a difference in standards, obtaining a neutral perspective will require setting aside the contentious standards).

³³ Although earlier I suggested that cases like this might *not* be permissive since you may, unbeknownst to you, be violating your own standards of reasoning, I will be supposing here that this *is* a permissive case. I can assume this unproblematically since this case is supposed to raise a problem for my view, and the problem requires cases like this to exist.

³⁴ This is assuming that there is *some* version of REFLECTION that the permissivist should accept. The version I state below gets around some of the standard counterexamples that have been used against van Fraassen's original Reflection principle. The right version of this principle would also need to include a restriction to de dicto propositions which I have omitted here, for brevity's sake. For a nice catalogue of counterexamples to the original Reflection principle and a neat response see Briggs (2009).

³⁵ For a discussion in a somewhat similar spirit to the one in this section see Kelly (2011).

³⁶ See, for example, Kelly (2005), Elga (2007), Christensen (2007) and Feldman (2007).

³⁷ Conciliatory views have been defended by Elga (2007), Christensen (2007) and Feldman (2007).

³⁸ Such a view was defended in Kelly (2005).

³⁹ This case is first described in Christensen (2007).

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