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ARTICLE

Epistemic Existentialism

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Abstract

Subjectivist permissivism is a *prima facie* attractive view. That is, it's plausible to think that what's rational for people to believe on the basis of their evidence can vary if they have different frameworks or sets of epistemic standards. In this paper, I introduce an epistemic existentialist form of subjectivist permissivism, which I argue can better address "the arbitrariness objection" to subjectivist permissivism in general. According to the epistemic existentialist, it's not just that what's rational to believe on the basis of evidence can vary according to agents' frameworks, understood as passive aspects of individuals' psychologies. Rather, what's rational to believe on the basis of evidence is sensitive to agents' choices and active commitments (as are frameworks themselves). Here I draw on Chang's work on commitment and voluntarist reasons. The epistemic existentialist maintains that what's rational for us to believe on the basis of evidence is, at least in part, *up to us*. It can vary not only across individuals but for a single individual, over time, as she makes differing epistemic commitments.

Keywords: Permissivism; epistemic subjectivism; arbitrariness objection; hybrid voluntarism; epistemic frameworks

1. Introduction

Intuitively, even people who are fully rational and have the same evidence relevant to judging on some question can disagree about its answer. To borrow an example from Rosen (2001: 71), fully rational paleontologists who have access to all the same evidence relevant to the question 'what killed the dinosaurs?' might have different preferred theories and differing levels of confidence in particular theories. Even philosophers who ultimately reject this intuition admit its initial force.[1] The claim that rational people with the same evidence can disagree is definitive of permissivism.[2]

Here's a slightly stronger but seemingly also intuitive claim: what's rational to believe on the basis of evidence can vary from person to person, according to individuals' epistemic commitments. Perhaps what's rational for me to believe on the basis of certain evidence is *different* than what's rational for you, because of the distinctive ways in which we're each committed to interpreting and evaluating evidence. For example, maybe you put a little more weight on the testimony of certain kinds of "experts",

[1]See, e.g., Horowitz (2014: 46–8).

[2]Roughly, although there are many different versions of permissivism. I will discuss below the distinction between intrapersonal vs. interpersonal permissivism. See Kopec and Titelbaum (2016) for a helpful overview of permissivism; see also Kelly (2014) on this particular distinction.

whereas I am more inclined to lean on first-hand observation. Or you place a bit more weight on the value of avoiding error, whereas I am more concerned to have all the true (interesting) beliefs I can. Colloquially, perhaps we have different "starting points". More common in the literature is talk of different "sets of epistemic standards", or "frameworks". Very broadly, an agent's framework will amount to her deepest commitments as to epistemically good ways of interpreting and evaluating evidence. Some think of frameworks as belief-forming dispositions (in idealized circumstances),[3] weightings of the epistemic values across contexts,[4] or credence functions.[5] Call the general idea that what's rational to believe is somehow sensitive to agents' epistemic commitments, subjectivism.[6]

Subjectivist permissivism is a relatively popular view in the literature, and it's a view that even its opponents typically admit to have significant *prima facie* appeal.[7] In this paper, I introduce and motivate an "epistemic existentialist" form of subjectivist permissivism. According to the epistemic existentialist, it's not just that what's rational to believe on the basis of evidence can vary according to agents' frameworks, understood as passive aspects of individuals' psychologies. Rather, what's rational to believe on the basis of evidence is sensitive to agents' choices and active commitments (as are frameworks themselves). What's rational for us to believe on the basis of evidence is, at least in part, *up to us*. It can vary not only across individuals but for a single individual, over time, as she herself makes differing epistemic commitments. Officially, epistemic existentialists maintain:

> Basic Subjectivist Permissivism: Rational attitudes are always recommended by agents' frameworks, and rational attitudes on the basis of evidence can vary when agents' frameworks vary.[8]
>
> Changing Frameworks: Agents' frameworks can change over time (perhaps in limited ways).
>
> Agency in Change: Agents can change their frameworks, through commitment (perhaps in limited ways).
>
> Source Voluntarism: Such commitments themselves affect which framework is best for an agent, in voluntarist fashion.

To provide initial motivation for epistemic existentialism, I'm going to assume Basic Subjectivist Permissivism is, *prima facie*, an attractive position. I will argue that the best way around a major objection to Basic Subjectivist Permissivism is to additionally

[3]Foley (1987).

[4]Douven (2009: 349–50); Kelly (2014); Willard-Kyle (2017).

[5]Douven (2009: 348); Meacham (2014).

[6]See especially White (2007); see also Foley (1987: 130–45) on more and less subjective construals of rationality. On the related position of epistemic relativism, see e.g., Boghossian (2006), Rosen (2007), Neta (2007), and Pritchard (2009).

[7]The position's appeal is both intuitive and theoretical. On intuitive appeal, see e.g., Rosen (2001: 71), Brueckner and Bundy (2012), Decker (2012), Horowitz (2014: 46–8), Schoenfield (2014: 196–7), and Levinstein (2017: 342–3). On theoretical appeal, see e.g., Titelbaum (2010) for argument that subjectivism is needed to make sense of confirmation theory; see Douven (2009), Kelly (2014), and Schoenfield (2014) on motivation for subjectivism coming from the putative failure of Carnap's search for logical probabilities.

[8]Basic Subjectivist Permissivism is compatible with a distinction between "legitimate" and "illegitimate" frameworks, to be discussed in passing below. One can think there are objective limits on the frameworks that can confer rationality on attitudes. See, e.g., Schoenfield (2014: fn. 16); Callahan (Ms a).

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adopt Changing Frameworks, Agency in Change, and Source Voluntarism. (Actually, Agency in Change is strictly stronger than Changing Frameworks. I list the latter separately for dialectical reasons that will become clear.)

I begin in sections 2–4 with this objection: "the arbitrariness objection" to permissivism.[9] I distinguish two different facets or levels of this objection and argue that standard permissivist responses in the literature struggle with both, for different reasons. In sections 5 and 7, I explain how the epistemic existentialist can deal with both levels of the arbitrariness objection, pausing in between in section 6 to briefly explain Source Voluntarism. Finally, in section 8, I address what I take to be the main objection to the epistemic existentialist response to the arbitrariness objection: namely, that epistemic existentialists themselves embrace problematic arbitrariness.

2. The simple arbitrariness objection to permissivism

The permissivist thinks fully rational people who have the same evidence can sometimes disagree. So, some total bodies of evidence and some propositions admit of multiple, maximally-good-from-the-standpoint-of-epistemic-rationality, responses (e.g., belief, suspension, 0.6 credence, 0.8 credence, etc.). But the permissivist also thinks these people can pick particular responses, or take up particular attitudes, and be fully committed to those. According to the permissivist, even when a 0.6 credence is no better supported than, say, a 0.4 credence, someone could be fully rational in holding 0.6. That is, someone could sincerely and completely inhabit a 0.6 credence, rejecting the (equally recommended by evidence) 0.4 option.

Here's the worry: such picking and committing to one among maximally good options must be 'arbitrary', or at least guided by non-epistemic reasons. For if multiple attitudes are maximally recommended on the basis of epistemic considerations, then a person's having any particular rational attitude rather than another must depend on arbitrary (epistemically arational) features of her assessment of the evidence. But it is implausible – the thought goes – that fully, epistemically rational responses could be so arbitrary or influenced by non-epistemic reasons. We oughtn't, from the standpoint of epistemic rationality, fully inhabit particular attitudes no better than other alternatives. Surely, instead of being 0.6, we ought to be in some more suspended, neutral state recognizing the no-worse merit of being 0.4. But to recommend some unique such suspension state is to give up permissivism.

More precisely, this objection incorporates three premises, which seem jointly inconsistent.

Arbitrariness Triad #1

P1 There are some sets of total evidence and some propositions such that multiple attitudes toward those propositions are rationally recommended given that evidence.

P2 If an agent adopts any particular rationally recommended attitude (with the appropriate basing relation), she thereby comes to hold a rational attitude.

P3 If an agent holds a rational attitude toward a proposition, then that attitude was rationally preferable to or better than all other attitudes toward that proposition (given her evidence) *ex ante*.[10]

[9] As termed in Simpson (2016).

[10] A rough gloss: "before" the particular attitude was adopted, it was better than all alternatives. But this "before" should not be taken strictly temporally. Consider a case in which I irrationally adopt a belief in *p*,

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P1 and P2 apparently entail that agents can "pick" any particular rationally recommended attitude from among a set of such attitudes, though it is no better than alternatives in that set, and thereby come to hold a rational attitude. But P3 claims that a rational attitude cannot have been merely as good as alternatives. It must have been strictly better.

How should a permissivist respond? An epistemic existentialist will reject P2. But I acknowledge that, initially, P2 may seem to be the least objectionable of these premises.

A perhaps more attractive route would be to give up P3. After all, this sounds potentially question-begging against the permissivist. P3 says that a rational attitude must be strictly better than all other possible attitudes toward the proposition in question. Perhaps rationally *recommended* attitudes – i.e., attitudes that *could* be rational for an agent, given her evidence – may be merely maximally good with respect to whatever properties conduce to rationality. But an *actual*, rationally held attitude must have had a maximum of such properties, *ex ante*. This is not only a strong claim but also perhaps a strange one. Why should we think that epistemically rational attitudes must be better than alternatives, while practically rational actions clearly needn't be? Clearly, Buridan's ass can rationally eat from either bale of hay.[11]

Interestingly, however, many actual defenses of permissivism rely instead on the disambiguation of P1. We can distinguish what's called intrapersonal permissivism from a weaker form, interpersonal permissivism. Consider:

> $P1_{Interpersonal}$ There are some sets of total evidence, some propositions, and some agents such that multiple attitudes toward those propositions are rationally recommended for *different* agents, given shared evidence.
>
> $P1_{Intrapersonal}$ There are some sets of total evidence, some propositions, and at least one agent such that multiple attitudes toward those propositions are rationally recommended for *that* agent, given fixed evidence.

$P1_{Intrapersonal}$, together with P2, does apparently entail that at least some agent can "pick" any of multiple rationally recommended attitudes, though they are each no better than alternatives, and thereby come to hold a rational attitude. But $P1_{Interpersonal}$ does not have this implication. If we assume that a permissivist is committed only to interpersonal permissivism (as indeed, is the seemingly more popular position), then she needn't license any individual's picking among multiple, maximally good attitudes. Agents can simply "pick" the attitude that's uniquely rationally recommended *for them* and thereby come to hold a rational attitude. Merely interpersonal permissivists, then, seem to have a straightforward way to wriggle out of this first and simplest version of the arbitrariness objection.[12]

However, two problems linger.

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against my evidence, at t1. By t2, my evidence for *p* has improved, and I have also come to base my belief in *p* on this new, better evidence. At t2, I take it, my belief is rational. Moreover, at t2, my belief may still be preferable to alternatives "*ex ante*" in the sense of being preferable in abstraction from the fact that I have the belief.

[11]*Pace*. Aristotle (1939: II 13, 295b34): 'the man who is violently but equally hungry and thirsty, and stands at an equal distance from food and drink … must remain where he is.' See Berker (2018) for recent discussion of a deep dissimilarity between the practical and epistemic domains, with respect to equally balanced options.

[12]This is similar to the solution to the simple arbitrariness objection suggested in Kelly (2014) and Schoenfield (2014), discussed in Simpson (2016).

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3. Lingering problem #1: intrapersonal permissivism

The first problem is that, arguably, subjectivism pushes us not just to interpersonal permissivism but to intrapersonal permissivism.

Why? Subjectivists are committed to thinking that rational attitudes are determined by agents' frameworks. (Many would specify: rational attitudes are determined by agents' *legitimate* or *permissible* frameworks. Even subjectivists may want objective constraints on the kinds of frameworks that are rationality-conferring.[13]) But since these frameworks are grounded in an agent's psychology,[14] there seems to be no reason to suppose they are complete (in the sense of weighing in on all possible evidential scenarios and propositions) and free from internal tension.

Say an agent finds herself in a novel evidential scenario. Perhaps she is confronted for the first time with conflicting testimony from two sources she simply recognizes as "really trustworthy", or perhaps she is just considering a proposition very foreign to everyday affairs, where her evidence is of little weight.[15] She may be genuinely torn and at a loss as to what her evidence supports, even according to her own best lights. Her phenomenology may be of trying on different ways of thinking about the issue, different policies to use to settle the matter, without any option seeming superior.

The subjectivist's normative elevation of agents' psychologically grounded frameworks, together with the potential for tension or incompleteness in the recommendations of psychologically grounded frameworks, should push the subjectivist toward intrapersonal permissivism. For if a person's framework is genuinely unable to decide between, e.g., suspension and belief, it seems the subjectivist cannot say either is uniquely rational for that person.

This argument is clearly too quick; I discuss these issues in greater detail elsewhere.[16] My claim here is weak: there *seems* be an argument that subjectivists should not stop at interpersonal permissivism but rather should endorse the stronger, intrapersonal version of P1. And if this is so, the standard permissivist response to the arbitrariness objection will not work.

4. Lingering problem #2: framework arbitrariness

Even if one maintains a merely interpersonal version of permissivism, however, the standard permissivist response can seem only to have pushed the worry "back a step" (Feldman 2007: 206). The standard permissivist response, again, says that we each simply ought to have the (unique!) attitude recommended by our individual frameworks. But whose framework is *better*, from the standpoint of rationality? If there is no good answer to this question, as permissivists claim there is not, then the very frameworks with which we find ourselves might seem problematically arbitrary. White (2005: 452) seems to have something similar in mind, where in the following quote he uses "epistemic standards" much as I use "framework":

> How have I come to hold the epistemic standards which lead me from my evidence to conclude that P? According to this permissivist it was not by virtue of being rational, since it is consistent with my being rational that I adhere to rather

[13]Horowitz (2014) thinks such moderate forms of permissivism face a special challenge; I defend objectively constrained versions of permissivism in Callahan (Ms *a*).

[14]To say they are grounded in an agent's psychology is not to say they are mental states. They may be commitments that are best understood, following Chang (2013*b*: 92), as activity of the will.

[15]"Weight" here understood following Joyce (2005).

[16]See Callahan (Ms *b*).

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different standards that would have me believe not-P instead. But then it seems that my applying the correct standards and hence arriving at the right conclusion is just a matter of dumb luck, much like popping a pill.

We might formalize this higher-order worry in a parallel structure, with three seemingly jointly inconsistent theses.

Arbitrariness Triad #2[17]

P4 Permissivists believe that there are some legitimate (i.e., rational recommendation-conferring) frameworks that are no better than other legitimate frameworks.

P5 Permissivists themselves, as epistemic agents, may have particular, legitimate frameworks from among the frameworks described in P4.

P6 If an agent has a particular, legitimate framework, she is committed to its being preferable to or better than all other frameworks.

How might the permissivist respond? First, notice that, whereas the original arbitrariness worry (Arbitrariness Triad #1) relied on the impossibility of having a rational attitude no better than alternatives (P3), this version relies on the supposed impossibility of having rationality-conferring frameworks one is *not committed to seeing as* better than alternatives (P6). In part because of this feature, perhaps the permissivist will protest that P6 is less plausible than P3. Do we really think that one must take one's framework to be best? After all, the permissivist may at this point wish to appeal to the inevitability of relying on one's own framework, regardless of how arbitrary we may admit it to be on reflection.[18] Perhaps, contrary to P6, we can employ our frameworks simply because we're stuck with them, while acknowledging that there's no reason for preferring our own to others.

But even if we grant the permissivist the relevant sort of inevitability – even if we grant that we are "stuck" with our frameworks – this seems less than satisfactory; necessity is cold comfort. Indeed, this response seems merely to deny that we *have* pills that could swap out legitimate frameworks for other legitimate frameworks – not that we would do just as well by taking them were they available.

A different response, one given in Simpson (2016), again relies on disambiguating between intra- and inter-personal forms of a kind of permissivism – this time, a higher-order permissivism about frameworks. Simpson argues that an agent may see her framework as best *for her*, given her cognitive abilities, while acknowledging that different frameworks may be better for others, given their different cognitive abilities. So, on this view, P4 is only true in a qualified, interpersonal sense:

$P4_{Interpersonal}$ Permissivists believe that there are some legitimate (i.e., rational recommendation-conferring) frameworks that are no better *for some agents* than other legitimate frameworks are *for other agents*.

[17]Though this version of the objection is pressing even for merely interpersonal permissivists, notice that *intrapersonal* permissivism may also exacerbate this problem. The intrapersonal permissivist may think not only that there are multiple legitimate frameworks different individuals might hold, but also that there are multiple legitimate frameworks she herself might come to hold – i.e., multiple refinements or precisifications of her somewhat indeterminate framework – each of which is no better than alternatives.

[18]See, e.g., Schoenfield (2014). This imagined response faces the additional challenge of tension with Lewis's (1971) Immodesty. See Horowitz (2014) and Greco and Hedden (2016) for discussion.

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Given this version of P4, Simpson could reinterpret P6 intrapersonally and avoid tension:

> $P6_{Intrapersonal}$ If an agent has a particular, legitimate framework, she is committed to its being preferable to or better than all other frameworks, *for her*.

Sure, the thought would go, other people's frameworks might be just as good *for them* as mine is *for me*, but mine really is best for me, given my cognitive abilities. This is an interesting proposal, and it does seem to fit the bill of explaining the non-arbitrariness of an agent's framework. Simpson can say that an agent has (or perhaps should have) the particular framework she does because that is the framework best suited to her cognitive abilities.

My principal worry for Simpson's approach, which echoes section 3 above, is that we should doubt that an agent with certain cognitive abilities will always be best served by one, unique framework. For at least some agents, multiple frameworks – pretty clearly, multiple precisifications or refinements of those agents' standing frameworks – may do maximally well, even once we hold fixed their cognitive abilities.[19]

To summarize: permissivists have a standard answer to the arbitrariness objection (Abritrariness Triad #1) appealing to subjective frameworks, but that standard response is inadequate if a subjectivist embraces intrapersonal permissivism (as I briefly suggested she should, in section 3). Moreover, we may worry that the standard response just pushes the problem back a step (Arbitrariness Triad #2).

Truly attractive versions of permissivism would not only satisfactorily answer the simple arbitrariness objection in a way that is compatible with intrapersonal permissivism but also somehow make it no arbitrary matter which framework an individual has.

5. An epistemic existentialist response to the simple arbitrariness objection

Let us revisit the premises of the simple arbitrariness objection, this time using the problematic, $P1_{Intrapersonal}$ explicitly, in light of section 3:

> $P1_{Intrapersonal}$ There are some sets of total evidence, some propositions, and at least one agent such that multiple attitudes toward those propositions are rationally recommended for that agent, given fixed evidence.
>
> P2 If an agent adopts any particular rationally recommended attitude (with the appropriate basing relation), she thereby comes to hold a rational attitude.
>
> P3 If an agent holds a rational attitude toward a proposition, then that attitude was rationally preferable to or better than all other attitudes toward that proposition (given her evidence) *ex ante*.

The typical permissivist response, i.e. disambiguating the original P1 and committing only to the interpersonal version of permissivism, is no longer available. Let's consider the responses that remain. First, we might reconsider P3. If P3 is true, then agents in the kinds of confusing cases we imagined in section 3 (call these intrapersonally permissive cases) cannot hold rational attitudes simply by taking up some particular rationally recommended attitude. For P3 requires that rational attitudes be *ex ante* preferable to

[19]There is the additional complication that, presumably, agents' cognitive abilities change over time. Frameworks are typically assumed to be static.

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all other attitudes. And agents in intrapersonally permissive cases face only attitudes that are no better than some alternatives.

One might reject P3 on this basis. One could argue that, since (i) agents in intrapersonally permissive cases can presumably come to hold rational attitudes,[20] and (ii) (arbitrarily) picking among attitudes unpreferenced by reason would seem to be the *only* way that an agent could arrive at a particular attitude in an intrapersonally permissive case, such picking must not prohibit rationality. P3 must be too strong.[21]

However, first, rejecting P3 should be considered a substantial cost. The appeal of P3 seems to be a tacit point of *agreement* between uniqueness theorists and permissivists. The standard permissivist way of avoiding the arbitrariness objection isn't to deny that it even matters whether rational attitudes are strictly better than alternatives. Rather, permissivists often simply distance themselves from $P1_{Intrapersonal}$ as opposed to $P1_{Interpersonal}$. Rejecting P3 seems to amount to accepting a deep arbitrariness about the particular attitudes we hold, even when we are rational.

Second – as I shall argue in the remainder of this section – (ii) is false. Arbitrary attitude picking isn't the only possible response to intrapersonally permissive cases. I suggest the following, alternative possibility: agents' frameworks may *change* in the fact of intrapersonally permissive cases – they may be extended or precisified – such that they subsequently recommend a particular, unique attitude. If we accept this possibility, then we may say that when such changes occur (and only when they occur), agents may rationally adopt an attitude. So, I claim, P2 is false. It is not the case that if an agent simply adopts any particular rationally recommended attitude (with the appropriate basing relation), she thereby comes to hold a rational attitude. Rather, agents may only take up a rationally recommended attitude and come to hold a rational attitude *if* (or *once*) the attitude is uniquely rationally recommended.

Frameworks are, after all, glossed as the guiding epistemic principles, values, or expectations to which we are committed. Such commitments seem to be the kind of thing that can change – indeed, the kind of thing *we*, as agents, can shape over time. I will say a bit more in the next subsections about why we might positively expect to be able to alter our frameworks, but first I want to make clear the resolution of the arbitrariness worry that this possibility enables.

This solution is compatible with permissivism because the epistemic existentialist thinks agents really do face situations in which multiple attitudes are rationally recommended, i.e. multiple attitudes really *could* be rational – if the agent were to adopt subtly

[20]Why think this? Consider the rough examples above: weighing conflicting testimonies, arriving at a position on the basis of bewildering evidence. These are common, if difficult, situations, not typically thought to render us ineligible for rationality.

[21]Moss (2015) also advocates an interesting proposal that seems to commit her to a rejection of P3. Moss claims that agents with imprecise credence functions may choose (arbitrarily) to operate with various precise representors. She further claims that these agents retain the flexibility to flip to a different representor within that set. I don't mean to suggest that being in an imprecise credal state is the same as being in a situation where one's framework recommends multiple doxastic attitudes. But, given the way *Moss* is thinking about imprecise states, as leaving open multiple rationally adoptable credences, there are interesting similarities. Accepting the parallel, Moss would seem to take the route of championing an agent's prerogative to choose 'randomly' among recommended attitudes (and the additional prerogative to change her mind for no particular reason). I object to the arbitrariness of this picture; epistemic existentialism attempts to champion an agent's prerogative for choice while also casting that choice as non-arbitrary – see section 8.

My proposal expressly requires diachronic commitment to an underlying principle and rules out the flipping back and forth Moss wants to license. However, I do in theory wish to be open to rather odd diachronic commitments. One might *commit* to *oscillation* of some kind. (Kierkegaard's Don Juan in *Either/Or* (Kierkegaard 1971) is "authentically" chameleon-like.)

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different and more determinate frameworks that recommended those attitudes uniquely. However, the solution relies on there being an important distinction between cases in which some attitude is recommended alongside other attitudes, and cases in which that attitude is uniquely recommended. Only in the latter case, the epistemic existentialist claims, can an agent actually rationally adopt the attitude in question. This appeal to the importance of unique recommendation allows the epistemic existentialist's solution to the arbitrariness objection to also accept deep intuitions underlying uniqueness. In this way, the solution may hope for broad appeal.

Yet it also requires an unorthodox view of frameworks. One thesis to which this resolution is already obviously committed:

CHANGING FRAMEWORKS: Agents' frameworks can change over time.

The other two definitional claims of epistemic existentialism will be needed, in answering the framework arbitrariness objection, Arbitrariness Triad #2.

6. An interlude: Source Voluntarism

One of those claims however, SOURCE VOLUNTARISM, requires some unpacking before we can put it to use. Recall the remaining tenets of epistemic existentialism:

AGENCY IN CHANGE: Agents can change their frameworks, through commitment (perhaps in limited ways).

SOURCE VOLUNTARISM: Such commitments themselves affect which framework is best for an agent, in voluntarist fashion.

Here I will clarify what this "voluntarist fashion" is meant to signify.

First, it is *not* a reference to anything like "doxastic voluntarism", or the claim that we can believe at will. SOURCE VOLUNTARISM is entirely orthogonal to doxastic voluntarism and so is not hostage to the latter's (im)plausibility.

Rather, I mean to invoke the use of voluntarism common among certain ethicists and theorists of practical normativity. In particular, I am interested in the version of voluntarism developed by Ruth Chang (2002, 2013*a*, 2013*b*), which she calls hybrid voluntarism. Chang's hybrid voluntarism is a view about the "source" [22] of a reason's normative oomph, or what it is in virtue of which something counts as a (normative) reason.

To understand the question that voluntarism attempts to answer, start with the thought that reasons/rationality are normative: if you have reason (or most reason) to do/believe/have/want something, then there is some sense in which you ought to do/believe/have/want it. Now where does that ought, that normative pressure, come from?

You might think it comes from us, in the sense of coming from our (idealized) desires and dispositions (call this view "source internalism"). Or you might think it comes from outside of us, from objective values or norms or brute reason facts (call this view "source externalism"). Voluntarists, on the other hand, think (at least some of) this normative pressure comes from the *will*. The will and willing are, of course, variously understood. Voluntarists don't have to think this normative pressure always comes from our consciously deciding or intending things. As Chang (2013*a*: 169)

[22] Korsgaard's (1996) metaphor.

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puts it, willing is sometimes "understood not as a conscious, deliberate decision to do something but as the activity of (rational) agency as such".

Kant famously thought all normativity and all reasons ultimately derive their normativity from the will, from what rational agents are constrained to will.[23] But Chang paints a different, more complex picture. After critiquing standard versions of source internalism, source externalism, and voluntarism, she proposes her own "hybrid voluntarism":

> Unlike the traditional views about source, hybrid voluntarism maintains that there is no univocal answer to the question, What metaphysically makes a fact have the normativity of a reason? Sometimes the fact that a consideration is a reason is given to us and sometimes it is of our own making.
>
> The hybrid view crucially turns on a distinction between two kinds of reasons: 'given' reasons, on the one hand, and 'will-based', or 'voluntarist', ones, on the other. 'Given' reasons are considerations that are reasons in virtue of something that is not a matter of our own making. They are given to us and not created by us and thus are a matter of recognition or discovery of something independent of our own volition or agency. Both source externalism and source internalism might best be understood as accounts of our given reasons: our given reasons might be 'value-based' or 'desire-based': that in virtue of which they are reasons is either a normative fact or some relation to our desires or dispositions. … 'Will-based' reasons, by contrast, are considerations that are reasons in virtue of some act of will; they are a matter of our creation. They are voluntarist in their normative source. In short, we create will-based reasons and receive given ones. (Chang 2013*a*: 177)

For Chang, then, some of our reasons are given – they are reasons in virtue of the kinds of explanations that source internalists or source externalists might give – and some are based in our wills or agency. She claims these two kinds of reasons interact in a highly structured way:

> [G]iven reasons operate as metaphysical constraints on voluntarist ones; we cannot bring voluntarist reasons into existence unless our given reasons fail fully to determine what we should do. Given reasons have, as it were, 'first dibs' in determining what we should do. As I will put it, we can create will-based reasons only when our given reasons have 'run out'. (Chang 2013*a*: 178)

For Chang, then, will-based or voluntarist reasons "show up" only in hard cases, where all one's given reasons fail to settle an option as best. Such cases might include, e.g., the choice to pursue a career as a lawyer vs. a philosopher (Chang 2002: 668); the opportunity to commit in a partner relationship (Chang 2013*b*: 105); or the choice between a cup of tea and a cup of coffee (Chang 2002: 669). If we fill in the details suitably, it does seem an agent's standing reasons and preferences might not settle which option is better. But in such situations, according to Chang, one's committing to an option – one's putting one's very agency behind the considerations that make that option more valuable – gives one most reason to choose it.

At one point, perhaps, I had no more reason to be a philosopher than to be a lawyer. But now I've decided to put my will behind, to champion, or to be *for*, the kinds of

[23]Divine command theorists, too, may be understood as thinking all reasons have their source in the (divine) will.

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freedom and intellectual goods that accompany philosopher-hood. Being a philosopher is right for me. Similarly, at one point I might not have committed to my particular partner; I might plausibly have committed to someone else or not committed at all. But now I do have reason to be in a committed relationship with my particular partner – and to care for him in the particular ways I ought – in virtue of my commitment.[24]

Now Chang's view is far from uncontroversial, and I can't possibly evaluate its prospects thoroughly here. I am trying merely to explain what will-based or voluntarist reasons are, sketch how they might interact with given reasons, and make the briefest gesture at why we should believe they exist. My interest lies in the return to epistemology and SOURCE VOLUNTARISM – what does this claim amount to? It says that at least some reasons for having particular frameworks have their source in the will. In particular, if we ever *commit* to a particular legitimate framework – e.g., a particular extension or refinement of our own standing framework – we can give ourselves extra reason to have that framework, directly in virtue of that commitment. We can give ourselves extra reason to be, e.g., a more cautious or trusting intellectual agent, by willing or committing to be such.

Now, one might be tempted to extend this even further and claim that *all* reasons for having particular frameworks are voluntarist. SOURCE VOLUNTARISM is not so ambitious. The more ambitious, explicitly non-hybrid view would face challenges that are familiar from the practical realm. Surely the *only* reason for me to have my particular framework isn't just that I'm committed to it. (My commitment to my partner isn't my *only* reason for loving him, either – he's a great person!) Presumably there are some "given" reasons for having certain frameworks – the legitimate ones – rather than others. One has reason not to have a framework, e.g., that licenses the gambler's fallacy, or that celebrates the kind of solipsistic insistence on perceptual evidence that can undergird flat earth conspiracies. One presumably even has some given reasons stemming from one's standing framework; one may have reason to adopt extensions or refinements of that framework, rather than wholesale revisions.

Compatibly with all this, one's given reasons for having particular frameworks may *run out*. They may not settle which particular framework one should have going forward. And – at least when they do run out in this way – the voluntarist claims we can nonetheless have most reason to have some particular framework, through committing to it.

SOURCE VOLUNTARISM, as I'll explain below, is a crucial part of the epistemic existentialist's response to the second and more challenging level of the arbitrariness objection to permissivism.

7. An epistemic existentialist response to the framework arbitrariness objection

Recall that the epistemic existentialist's response to the simple arbitrariness objection simply required accepting something like CHANGING FRAMEWORKS. In principle, one could accept CHANGING FRAMEWORKS, together with any of a number of stories about how exactly such changes in frameworks occur. Perhaps in intrapersonally permissive cases, our frameworks spontaneously morph to make unique recommendations in ways that have nothing to do with agency, commitment, or choice.[25] However, in

[24]Of course, I have also acquired *given* reasons to be a philosopher or care for my partner, as is typical upon committing. Now that one has built out an academic CV, or legally merged assets, or whatever, switching to lawyerhood or another partner may be much more costly. Chang's claim is that commitment gives us a reason *additional* to those.

[25]Miriam Schoenfield has suggested such a view, in conversation.

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part for the sake of a better resolution to the full scope of the arbitrariness objection (including Arbitrariness Triad #2), I claim that the epistemic existentialist should also accept Agency in Change and Source Voluntarism.

Via Agency in Change, the epistemic existentialist claims that framework alterations of the sort that enable individuals to be rational in the face of intrapersonally permissive cases can be due to the agent herself, her commitment. My framework needn't just morph spontaneously to recommend an attitude uniquely in such a case. Rather, I myself can *come down* on how best to interpret and evaluate tricky or novel evidence. I can, for example, place a bit more weight on this person's testimony rather than that person's (or weight them equally, or adopt a policy of deferring to some further third party, etc.). I can decide that on some particular kind of question avoiding error matters more than believing truly, or maintaining systematic understanding is not worth some particular sacrifice of expected accuracy. These words: "come down", "choose", and "decide", are admittedly psychologically unrealistic exaggerations. These 'choices' needn't rise to the level of consciousness. But they may be attributable doings nonetheless – doings that show up immediately in the particular judgment at hand and subsequently in our enacting these epistemic policies going forward.[26] Each time I face an intrapersonally permissive case I choose – or else abnegate my ability to choose – a more specific set of epistemic commitments.

This triggers the important consequence claimed in Source Voluntarism. Source Voluntarism, again, claims that such choices or commitments actually generate voluntarist reason to prefer the particular framework chosen. Sure, there is still *some* sense in which multiple competing frameworks are no better than each other. To use the terminology reviewed above, multiple frameworks may be no better than alternatives with respect to one's *given* reasons. An agent herself may perhaps recognize this. However, once one actually commits to a particular framework, one has some additional reason to have it, in virtue of that very commitment.

We are now ready to return to Arbitrariness Triad #2:

> P4 Permissivists believe that there are some legitimate (i.e., rational recommendation-conferring) frameworks that are no better than other legitimate frameworks.
>
> P5 Permissivists themselves, as epistemic agents, may have particular, legitimate frameworks from among the frameworks described in P4.
>
> P6 If an agent has a particular, legitimate framework, she is committed to its being preferable to or better than all other frameworks.

In response, the epistemic existentialist permissivist will insist on a disambiguation of P4:

> $P4_{\text{Given reasons}}$: Permissivists believe that there are some legitimate (i.e., rational recommendation-conferring) frameworks that are no better than other legitimate frameworks, *when considering only given reasons*.
>
> $P4_{\text{All reasons}}$: Permissivists believe that there are some legitimate (i.e., rational recommendation-conferring) frameworks that are no better than other legitimate frameworks, *taking both voluntarist and given reasons into account*.

Moreover, while she will accept $P4_{\text{Given reasons}}$, she will reject $P4_{\text{All reasons}}$. $P4_{\text{Given reasons}}$ is compatible with P5 and P6, since we should take "preferability" in P6 to draw on all

[26]On subconscious "doings", see especially Sosa (2007, 2015); see also Chang quote above, on "willing".

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reasons, both given and voluntarist. The epistemic existentialist claims that particular, legitimate frameworks can be preferred over others in virtue of having been chosen.

In the following section, I take up the main objection to this epistemic existentialist resolution to the arbitrariness problem: namely, that it too simply pushes the worry "back a step". How exactly do agents choose which frameworks to commit to? Won't such choices themselves ultimately be arbitrary?

8. Arbitrariness in committing to frameworks?

Let's consider the position of a person whose current framework (F1) is currently amenable to change in two different ways that would result in either of two different frameworks (F2, F3). I am assuming that this "amenability" entails that this person has no more *given* reason to have F2 than F3, and vice versa. If it were "already", for given reasons, better for her to have F2 than F3, for example, then F3 would not be on the table.

So, there is certainly a way of characterizing "arbitrariness" in which this person's choice is doomed to be arbitrary: we might just define any choice of framework as arbitrary that is not dictated by given reasons.

But this is not a good characterization of the kind of arbitrariness that is to be avoided at the level of choosing frameworks. First, it is not at all clear why we should insist, for non-arbitrariness, on a framework's being privileged by given reasons in particular. That is, if we accept that there are such things as voluntarist or will-based reasons, why wouldn't a framework's being privileged by those be sufficient to make it non-arbitrarily chosen?

Second, choices among frameworks should not be as easily labeled as problematically arbitrary as choices among doxastic attitudes. The arbitrariness objection outlined in sections 2 and 4 posits two levels of arbitrariness to be avoided. Arbitrariness Triad #1 concerns arbitrariness in the particular attitudes we hold, when we hold epistemically rational attitudes, and Arbitrariness Triad #2 concerns arbitrariness in the particular frameworks we have when we have legitimate frameworks. I have accepted that the only attractive ways out of Arbitrariness Triad #1 will retain P3. I.e., evidence together with a legitimate framework must fully determine a particular rationally recommended attitude, if an agent is to adopt it and count as rational. But there is no plausible analogue of P3 at the level of Arbitrariness Triad #2. There is no prohibition on adopting a policy or set of commitments that is no better than some alternatives, because reasons bearing on which policy to adopt are not sensitive only to strictly "epistemic" reasons.

Epistemic reasons are commonly understood simply as those that bear on (probable) truth of propositions or what one should believe. Talking about "epistemic reasons" for having/adopting *frameworks*, then, must invoke an extended sense of the term. Granted – sometimes such an extended sense of the term is used, to suggest that there are epistemic reasons to organize scientific organizations in certain inquiry-conducive ways or to institute various true-belief-promoting social policies.[27] Perhaps in this extended sense we do have epistemic reasons to have legitimate, rather than illegitimate, frameworks. We have epistemic reasons to have frameworks that sufficiently respect or promote true belief and knowledge, for creatures like us. But once we are working with this extended sense of epistemic reasons, they are clearly also amenable to weighing *together* with other kinds of reasons – moral reasons, economic reasons – to determine the best organization or policy overall. They seem far less austerely exclusive than epistemic reasons for belief are typically thought to be.[28] As with

[27]See, e.g., Fleisher (2018).

[28]See Berker (2018) for recent defense of the austerity of epistemic reasons; see Rinard (2017) for dissent.

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other questions that are (partly) practical, we should be perfectly able to make rational choices in the face of ties or parity.

Now we might *like* the epistemic values or whatever epistemic reasons there are (in an extended sense) to uniquely fix the frameworks we should have at all times, such that no other reasons would be needed and no choices would remain. But this seems not to be the case. Rather, just as there seem to be lots of permissible sets of practical values and preferences, there seem to be a number of permissible ways of being committed to interpreting evidence. Rational people who love the truth can become slightly more or less trusting, more or less moved by the values of believing truly vs. avoiding error, etc.

So what is a better characterization of the arbitrariness to be avoided in one's framework, in Arbitrariness Triad #2? I've suggested it isn't merely the "arbitrariness" of not being fully determined by given reasons or epistemic reasons. I think rather the claim to be avoided is this: there is no reason at all an agent has the particular framework she has; she just happens to have it. *This* is the kind of arbitrariness that is tacitly accepted in standard forms of subjectivist permissivism. This is the kind of arbitrariness that makes it seem we should be indifferent between employing our own (legitimate) framework and taking a pill to change to a different (legitimate) one.

And this is the kind of arbitrariness the epistemic existentialist avoids. According to the epistemic existentialist, agents have the frameworks they have because of the choices they've made about *who to be* – about the values, methods, and expectations they shall employ as inquirers and opinion-formers. An agent's framework is thus hers in a deeper sense than merely being the framework she happens to hold or the framework associated with her. One's framework at any point in time is partly a function of one's choices; it is an intellectual aspect of the self one is shaping.

Such choices about who-to-be are in general difficult to understand and to model, for they are choices that have the potential to generate the very preferences and values that – in neat, tidy decision-making scenarios – *guide* decision.[29] And yet, somehow, we often take such choices seriously. This potential for seriousness is a further sense in which the epistemic existentialist can claim choice among legitimate frameworks is "non-arbitrary". We can commit to particular ways of judging deliberately, and not by tossing coins. Thus, as reluctant as we may be to do so, carving out space for importantly non-arbitrary choice among options unpreferenced by given reasons (e.g., F2 and F3) seems to be a necessary condition on carving out space for beings like us.

In short, while the epistemic existentialist can admit that picking randomly from among rationally recommended doxastic *attitudes* would be worryingly arbitrary, she should insist that becoming the sort of person one is – including the sort of intellectual agent one is – is a different matter. Though we may not always have given reasons to go on, we can make choices about who to be in a perfectly good way – with some appreciation of their gravity and in good faith.

9. Conclusion

Epistemic existentialism is a package of three rather radical theses about frameworks, which go beyond the (already contentious) commitment to Basic Subjectivist Permissivism. These theses are attractive, I've suggested, because together they suggest a resolution to the arbitrariness objection at both its levels. But this collection of theses is perhaps also more independently attractive than its novelty would suggest.

[29]See Chang (2015) for discussion of choices that are "transformative" in that they re-shape our reasons in the face of choices between options on a par.

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In particular, notice that the epistemic existentialist has a natural way of explaining how we may be *responsible* for what it's rational for us to believe, on the basis of our evidence. For according to the epistemic existentialist, we have some agency in shaping our frameworks. The general idea that we're on the hook for our beliefs – not just on the hook for believing rationally or as-seems-best-to-us, but on the hook for the very content of our beliefs relative to our evidence – is increasingly popular[30] and, to my mind, deeply intuitive. But if we are non-epistemic existentialist subjectivists, we may find it difficult to explain how people are accountable for what they believe. For if being rational entails believing in accordance with the framework one happens to have, over which one has no control, then people may be doomed to either problematic beliefs or irrationality.

Relatedly, the epistemic existentialist seems potentially able to avoid certain worries in the disagreement debate.[31] Subjectivist permissivists in general have been accused of licensing extreme steadfasting. Say we find out we disagree about some issue, despite having shared evidence. If we are standard subjectivist permissivists, we may chalk this up to differing frameworks and think we should both simply stick to our guns. The epistemic existentialist will also think the difference may be due to differing frameworks. But notice that once we've introduced the possibility of *changing* one's framework, the recommendation to stick to one's guns is not automatic. Perhaps instead when we find out we disagree, we are each bound to consider whether we want to have (or ought to have, perhaps for social reasons) a framework *more like each other's*.

I close by admitting the obvious: this paper is very far from a compelling argument for epistemic existentialism. One not sympathetic to voluntarist views in metanormativity generally will worry that Source Voluntarism is confused or false. One might accept that epistemic existentialism provides a superior answer to the arbitrariness objection to permissivism (or to one of its triads) and yet think the package of epistemic existentialist theories is simply too high a cost; one might judge this is *really* an argument for uniqueness, or for shrugging off the arbitrariness objection (perhaps by rejecting P3). I have not at all addressed concerns of "Dutch-bookability" associated with changing one's framework,[32] nor have I tried to explain how the epistemic existentialist can answer other major objections to permissivism. In my defense, it is in the facticity of a single paper to leave many things undone.[33]

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[30]See, e.g., Basu (2018).

[31]On permissivism/uniqueness and disagreement, see, e.g., Feldman (2007), Christensen (2016), and White (2014).

[32]See Moss (2015) for related discussion.

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