

The Positive Argument for Impermissivism

L. Cassell

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ABSTRACT. Epistemic impermissivism is the view that there is never more than one doxastic attitude it is rational to have in response to one’s total evidence. Epistemic permissivism is the denial of this claim. The debate between the permissivist and the impermissivist has proceeded, in large part, by way of “negative” arguments that highlight the unattractiveness of the opposing position. In light of the deadlock that has ensued, this paper has two aims. The first is to introduce the concept of a “positive” argument for impermissivism. The second is to show that this argument faces a dilemma, one that generalizes the problems that famously arise for formal constraints like the Principle of Indifference. The aim of this paper is to strengthen the argument against the impermissivist by showing that no positive argument for impermissivism is likely to succeed.

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1 Introduction

A live question in epistemology is how much “slack” we should ascribe to the relation of evidential support. Can the same body of evidence justify two inconsistent sets of attitudes? Can two individuals with the same evidence, but different beliefs, both be rational?

This question of whether we should be permissivists or impermissivists has been asked and answered in a number of different ways.¹ While there is no shortage of arguments for or against either

¹For some defenses of impermissivism, see, for instance, Feldman [2007], White [2005], Christensen [2007], Horowitz [2014, 2019], Greco and Hedden [2016], Dogramaci and Horowitz [2016]. For some defenses of permissivism, see, for instance, Rosen [2001], Douven [2009], Titelbaum [2010], Ballantyne and Coffman [2011], Kelly [2013], Meacham [2014, 2019], Schoenfield [2014, 2019] and Titelbaum and Kopec [2019]. This is, of course, just a small sample of the enormous literature on this topic.

of these positions, one thing the literature does lack is a narrative about how the different cycles of the debate between the permissivist and the impermissivist are related. This discussion is a partial attempt to provide this sort of story.

Most of the recent debate between the permissivist and the impermissivist has proceeded by way of arguments that highlight the unattractiveness of the opposing position. And there seem to be compelling considerations on both sides, leading our intuitions to waver between them. On the one hand, we tend to think that our evidence ought to lead us towards the truth. This seems to be part and parcel of our very concept of evidence. On the other hand, we also tend to think that reasonable people with the exact same evidence can rationally disagree. Our intuitions about evidence pull in different directions, undermining the permissivist and the impermissivist, in turn.

In addition to the fact that our intuitions tend to waver, impermissivism is often taken to be undermined by an entirely different set of concerns. While contemporary discussions take the evidential support relation to be an epistemic relation, early interest in this relation was as a *formal* relation that could serve as the foundation for our inductive logics. A second, well-known reason for rejecting impermissivism is the failure of formal constraints, like the Principle of Indifference, to provide us with a uniquely rational relation of this kind. In telling us to assign equal probability to a set of possibilities when our total evidence does not favour one over any other, the Principle of Indifference gives rise to inconsistent prescriptions. A natural question to ask is how the formal failure of the Principle of Indifference is related to the failure of arguments for impermissivism that draw upon our intuitions. While it's tempting to think that what distinguishes these two types of arguments is that one makes an appeal to formal considerations, while the other makes an appeal to epistemic considerations, such a distinction fails to explain why some formal constraints, like Lewis [1980]'s Principal Principle and van Fraassen [1984]'s Reflection Principle, don't seem to give rise to the sort of inconsistency we get with the Principle of Indifference.

This paper provides a better explanation for the ways that arguments for impermissivism go wrong by distinguishing two methodological approaches one might pursue in defending it: a positive approach and a negative approach. While a negative argument for impermissivism identifies values that the permissivist cannot accommodate to highlight the unattractiveness of the permissivist's position, a positive argument for impermissivism adopts what might be described as a more

neutral approach. Consequently, while a negative argument for impermissivism fails in virtue of the existence of equally compelling considerations that favor the permissivist, a positive argument for impermissivism can only fail by its very own lights. It fails by giving rise to one of two forms of inconsistency, which are mirror images of one another. On the one hand are positive arguments that give rise to a form of *quantitative* inconsistency, where what we have is a constraint that is too neutral, or too general, to pick out a unique set of values. This is the type of inconsistency we famously get when we appeal to the Principle of Indifference. On the other hand are positive arguments that give rise to a form of *qualitative* inconsistency. This is the novel type of inconsistency this discussion introduces. Instead of a constraint that is too general to pick out a unique set of values, what we have, in the latter case, is a value that is too general to pick out a unique set of constraints. No matter what kind of constraints it invokes, then, an argument for impermissivism that begins from a neutral starting point gives rise to incoherence.

One contribution this paper makes, then, is to strengthen the argument against the impermissivist. This paper develops, and then proceeds to undermine, a strategy the impermissivist might be tempted to pursue, in light of the fact that appeals to intuitions about the evidential support relation are bound to leave us deadlocked. This paper proposes a framework that allows us to better appreciate how formal constraints are problematic by expanding the range of contexts that we take to be formal. The more important contribution this paper makes, however, is to suggest that we've been conflating two different arguments for impermissivism all along. We've been conflating an argument that assumes that impermissivism's constraints are motivated by the negative consequences that follow from denying that they hold with a positive, constructive argument for impermissivism. These two different arguments arise out of two different ways of conceiving of the logical relationship between permissivism, impermissivism, and the evidential support relation.

2 The Positive Approach

Impermissivism (or, 'uniqueness', as it is sometimes called) is the view that there is never more than one attitude it is rational to have in response to one's total evidence. Impermissivists claim that there exists an evidential support relation that, for any ordered pair of evidence proposition and hypothesis proposition, delivers a unique justificatory status—either the evidence justifies the hypothesis,

or else it renders the hypothesis unjustified, or else it lends some numerical degree of support to the hypothesis.² Permissivists deny this. They maintain that there are at least some ordered pairs of evidence propositions and hypothesis propositions for which this relation delivers more than one justificatory status. They hold that the evidential support relation that defines a rational agent's doxastic state includes at least some permissive evidential situations.

Many arguments for impermissivism take as their starting point intuitions about the nature of evidence. Two of the most influential of these are “the truth-guiding” argument and “the flip-flopping” argument.³ On the one hand, impermissivism is often motivated by the thought that our evidence should lead us towards the truth. If we reject impermissivism and allow that the same body of evidence can justify two conflicting attitudes, this feature of evidence looks like it will be impossible to maintain. More fundamental than the idea that giving up on impermissivism means giving up on the truth-guiding function of evidence is the idea that giving up on impermissivism means sacrificing *any* meaningful notion of evidential support. Evidence that is permissive would seem to allow us to flip-flop between views. It would seem to permit us to hold both some view or its negation. It would seem to allow me to believe that the next president of the United States will be a Democrat, while also allowing me to believe that they will be a Republican. Even if we think that evidence does not always lead us to the truth, we shouldn't think that it should be able to lead us in any direction whatsoever.⁴

While the impermissivist takes these arguments to provide strong support for her position, considerations very similar to those that motivate them can quickly be turned into an argument against it. While it might seem wrong to say that the same agent is rationally permitted to hold either of two conflicting views, for many it seems unproblematic that two different agents can do this.⁵ At least this seems true when we are faced with certain types of questions. Whether or not permissivism or impermissivism seems like the more promising view will sometimes depend upon the details of the particular case at hand. Consider the case of a jury reaching its decision. As Rosen [2001, p.71] puts

²See Titelbaum and Kopec [2019] for something very close to this description. As I've already noted, I'll take “impermissivism” to be synonymous with “uniqueness”, though I'll sometimes talk about the evidential support relation being “maximally impermissive” where the emphasis on uniqueness is particularly important.

³I borrow these terms from Meacham [2014].

⁴The flip-flopping objection is also sometimes referred to as the arbitrariness objection. For some descriptions of it, see White [2005], Meacham [2014], Simpson [2017] and Weisberg [2020].

⁵See Kelly [2013] for the distinction between intrapersonal and interpersonal impermissivism.

it:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. 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.

We needn't appeal to *recherche* cases, then, to motivate the thought that rationality sometimes seems to be permissive. While it seems reasonable to maintain a notion of evidential support, according to which our evidence will always lead us towards the truth, it seems equally reasonable to think that our evidence will not always be unequivocal. Agents might reasonably be governed by different epistemic standards.⁶ When we are faced with different hypotheses that exemplify different epistemic virtues relative to some body of evidence—perhaps one is the simpler explanation for this evidence while the other is the more informative—it's natural to think that rationality leaves some room to decide which of these hypotheses we should adopt. If so, rationality cannot be as objective as impermissivists want to claim.

These considerations are just the tip of the iceberg. And, of course, all of them invite responses from the other side. Some have argued that cases where a jury is rationally divided are cases where the agents in question do not share the same total evidence.⁷ Therefore, these aren't counterexamples to impermissivism, but are merely cases that have been underdescribed. As Greco and Hedden [2016, p. 368] point out, however, one thing the previous arguments for and against impermissivism all have in common is that each of them invokes first-order epistemic considerations for their view. And there seem to be compelling considerations on both sides, leading our intuitions to waver between them. Greco and Hedden attempt to break this deadlock by appealing to metaepistemological intuitions about the role that our epistemic evaluations play in helping us to navigate the world. They claim that these intuitions favor the impermissivist.

Like Greco and Hedden, I want to consider the prospects for impermissivism if we move to a different approach to defending it. However, rather than rescue impermissivism, the approach I

⁶For two proponents of this argument, see Schoenfield [2014] and Titelbaum and Kopec [2019].

⁷See, for instance, Goldman [2010] and Hedden [2015a].

consider will reveal a different way that it is flawed. In addition to invoking first-order epistemic considerations, what the previous arguments have in common is that they proceed, often implicitly, by identifying values that the other side cannot accommodate.⁸ Impermissivists claim that permissivists cannot account for our intuition that we shouldn't flip-flop, while permissivists claim that impermissivists cannot account for our intuition that reasonable people can rationally disagree. We can generalize on these instances and say that a so-called "negative" argument is one that proceeds by way of a reductio. It appeals to the assumption that permissivism and impermissivism are mutually exclusive and exhaustive views in order to argue that a decisive reason against one of these views constitutes a decisive reason in support of the other. Call an argument that rejects this combative strategy, in favor of a more neutral approach, a "positive" argument.

To begin to get a handle on the positive approach, consider that most take impermissivism to be the view that there is always *exactly one* attitude it is rational to have in response to one's evidence. And most take permissivism to be the view that there is sometimes *more than one* attitude it is rational to have in response to one's evidence. While these views are mutually exclusive, they are only mutually exhaustive on the negative approach if we've ruled out the possibility that there may be *no* attitude it is rational to have in response to one's evidence. This is not the view that it is indeterminate how different epistemic standards ought to be weighted against one another. Nor is it the view that it is indeterminate whether one ought to be a permissivist or an impermissivist, which may have been suggested by my description of a deadlock. While these are both situations that might lead one to claim that there is no attitude it is rational to have in response to one's evidence, I have in mind here the more modest assumption that, *absent* any standards that have been brought to bear on some evidential situation, there is no attitude it is rational to have in this situation. I have in mind the assumption that the evidential support relation is, by default, *undefined*.

To see why the possibility of an undefined support relation seems inconsistent with the negative approach, consider what it would take for the truth-guiding argument to succeed. To infer impermissivism from the claim that permissive evidential situations yield absurdity, in virtue of failing to be truth-guiding, such an argument must assume that there is no third option of an evidential support relation that is undefined, which is consistent both with the value of truth-guidingness, and also

⁸For this strategy made explicit, see Meacham [2014].

with the lack of such a value. Plausibly, what the appeal to the value of truth-guidingness amounts to is the claim that, conditional on our evidence guiding us in *some* direction, it ought to guide us towards the truth, rather than in any direction whatsoever. Since this requirement is trivially satisfied when the antecedent of this conditional fails to hold, we cannot infer impermissivism in the face of this possibility.⁹

I've said that the proponent of a positive argument rejects the previous strategy in favor of a more neutral approach. The first way that it does this is by assuming that the evidential support relation *is* undefined by default. Not only does this preclude an argument by reductio, but it amounts to denying the non-neutral assumption that the evidential support relation is either permissive or impermissive by default. While a positive argument must make certain assumptions its opponent would reject, then, it is defined by its appeal to *epistemic values* or *reasons* its opponent could also hold. To see how such an argument might proceed, consider an impermissivist trying to convince the permissivist that the evidential support relation ought to include Lewis [1980]'s Principal Principle, which says that, absent other relevant information, our degrees of belief should conform to our opinions about the objective chances. Unlike the more general values of being truth-guiding, or non-arbitrary, the value of matching our degrees of belief to the chances is compatible with both impermissivism and permissivism. Since the Principal Principle governs only *particular* evidential situations—situations where we have evidence about the chances—it's compatible with all other evidential situations besides these being impermissive; but it's equally compatible with all other evidential situations besides these being permissive. What makes this type of constraint neutral, in the sense that I intend, then, is that while the Principal Principle isn't compatible with extreme permissivism, endorsing it is compatible with being a permissivist or an impermissivist about the evidential support relation as a whole. It's compatible with the view that there are at least some ordered pairs of evidence propositions and hypothesis propositions for which there is more than one justificatory status.¹⁰

Of course, it may be possible to appeal to the value of truth-guidingness in a way that is also compatible with permissivism. Instead of inferring that *all* evidential situations ought to be truth-

⁹Thanks to Jessica Pfeifer for discussion here.

¹⁰Of course, the impermissivist must do more than *merely* make an appeal to the Principal Principle to establish her view. We'll see how this plays out in §4.

guiding from the absurdity of some situation that lacks this value, we might infer this only for the particular situation from which the intuition is being drawn. Say that there is very strong evidence that a Democrat will win the next presidential election. While a negative argument for impermissivism will generalize from this case to claim that *all* evidential situations require a unique response, a positive argument will interpret the epistemic value of truth-guidingness more narrowly and maintain that a unique response is appropriate only for the particular case at hand. This brings out an important point, which is that while the negative approach and the positive approach are mutually exclusive approaches, the values they appeal to can fall under both of them. The distinction between the positive and negative approach isn't a distinction in subject matter, but a distinction in *method*.

Building on this suggestion, and on the contrast we are attempting to draw, the positive approach might be likened to certain forms of constructivism. Just as mathematical and logical constructivists deny that there is some pre-existing mathematical or logical reality with respect to which we might come to discover that some fact either holds or fails to hold, the proponent of the positive approach denies that there is some pre-existing evidential support relation, governing every evidential situation, which we might come to discover is either permissive or impermissive. On an approach that takes the evidential support relation to be, by default, undefined, there is no "domain" of evidential constraints that precedes the reasons we have for upholding them. The positive approach adopts the perspective of one aiming to construct the evidential support relation, one constraint at a time, rather than the perspective of one trying to determine what an already existing function recommends. Conversely, it's because the negative approach adopts the perspective of one trying to determine whether an already existing function is permissive or impermissive that it isn't concerned with the process by which this function is brought about.

We've seen already that where a negative argument assumes the possibility of an undefined support relation as a third option alongside permissivism and impermissivism, it undermines itself. Moreover, since a negative argument appeals to general features that either permissivism or impermissivism lacks, rather than to reasons to think that particular evidential situations are permissive or impermissive, the assumption that individual evidential situations are, by default, undefined seems unmotivated on the approach. By contrast, it is in virtue of this assumption that the positive approach is able to preserve the intuition that permissivism and impermissivism are mutually exclu-

sive and exhaustive views, while denying that every evidential situation must be either permissive or impermissive. On the positive approach, impermissivism is the view that every evidential situation, for which the support relation is defined, has a unique justificatory status. Permissivism is the denial of this claim.

While the failure of the negative approach provides some motivation for the positive approach, the positive approach is also independently attractive. In beginning from a position of neutrality, it is arguably a stronger argument than a negative argument. In what follows, however, I'll argue that the positive argument for impermissivism faces a dilemma. Since a positive argument does not appeal to epistemic considerations that are inconsistent with its opponent's position, its success will not depend upon whether or not these considerations can be outweighed by compelling considerations on the other side. Instead, a positive argument can only fail or succeed by its very own lights. It succeeds to the extent that it is able to show that its position follows from a set of values that are neutral in the way just described. And it fails to the extent that the attempt to do this yields some form of inconsistency. The rest of this paper will argue that any way of providing a positive argument for impermissivism will yield such inconsistency. In appealing to values that are weak enough to be consistent with the denial of impermissivism to defend impermissivism, the positive approach tries to get too much out of too little. But the alternative is an approach that leads to a deadlock.

3 Formality, Neutrality, and Inconsistency

This section will argue that the way formal constraints on the evidential support relation famously give rise to inconsistency can be interpreted as the failure of a positive argument for impermissivism. The next section will generalize the features of this failure to show that *all* constraints on the evidential support relation give rise to inconsistency on the positive approach. The result of these sections is a more unified explanation for one way that arguments for impermissivism can go wrong.

Arguments for impermissivism go all the way back to Hempel [1945] and Carnap [1950/1962], both of whom believed that a uniquely rational evidential support relation, one that would deliver a numerical degree of support for each hypothesis and evidence pairing that it included, could be constructed using formal or logical methods alone. Very roughly, Carnap believed that we could generate a set of descriptions that ought to be assigned the same degree of support by applying or

withholding every predicate in a given language to all of the different permutations of the constants in that language, in a way that would account for every possible way the world could be. In ascribing, or withholding, any property we are capable of entertaining to all of the objects in the world that we are capable of entertaining, we can generate a set of states that ought to be treated symmetrically—that ought to be assigned the same initial probability. The evidential support relation that results from Carnap’s account is one that we have no empirical reason to endorse. Instead, its justification relies entirely on a principle of symmetry that is grounded in principles of language and of syntax.

While there are different ways of describing what goes wrong with Carnap’s account, Goodman [1955] illustrates why any attempt along the lines he pursued is bound to fail. Goodman showed that for any lawlike principle formulated using certain predicates, we can formulate a different principle with different predicates, which is equally well-supported by the same body of evidence, but which generates different relations of evidential support. Famously, he demonstrates that if the hypothesis “all emeralds are green” is confirmed by the evidence one has at a given time, then the hypothesis “all emeralds are grue” is equally confirmed, despite the fact that “grue” is defined in a way that ensures that the latter hypothesis will encode different future predictions. Since Goodman’s method of generating this inconsistency can be applied no matter what we take the content of our evidence and hypotheses to be, it looks like the problem must lie with the formal methods he uses to define the relations he assumes. Goodman’s objection, then, impugns accounts like Carnap’s that are entirely grounded in such methods.

The failure of Carnap’s attempt is closely linked to another failed attempt to defend impermissivism. Indifference principles say that where we have no sufficient reason to favor one hypothesis over another, these hypotheses ought to be held with equal probability.¹¹ In addition to “The Principle of Indifference”, these principles are also varyingly referred to as “The Maximum Entropy Principle”, “Jeffrey’s Rule” and “The Principle of Insufficient Reason”.¹² Like Carnap’s attempt to derive a uniquely rational support relation, such principles were again famously shown to generate inconsistent prescriptions. Since a probability space can be measured in any number of different ways, there will be different sets of values that are consistent with our commitment to not support

¹¹See Laplace [1814] and Jaynes [1957] for some early accounts of this principles.

¹²See Howson and Urbach [2005] for discussion.

some hypothesis over another without sufficient reason.¹³ Given the same body of total evidence, different interpretations of indifference will yield different support relations. Since this objection, again, holds no matter what we take our hypotheses or our evidence to be, it looks, again, like it is the formal methods used to get us these constraints that are at fault.

It should be obvious that the principle of symmetry that underwrites Carnap's account is closely related to the Principle of Indifference and its troubles. It's widely believed that the failure of these attempts suggests that no other formal argument for impermissivism is likely to succeed. Since it is in virtue of their formality that these principles fail, it might be thought that to understand these failures, we need to better understand what makes some principle formal in the first place.

A modest proposal is that for a constraint to be formal is for no reference to be made in it to the meaning of the symbols, "but simply and solely to the kinds and orders of the symbols from which [these constraints] are constructed" (Carnap 1937, 1). This 'syntactic' understanding of formality can make sense of the failures described above. It's precisely because the constraints in question can be motivated without reference to their meaning that we can contrive of different predicates, or measures of indifference, that give rise to different constraints consistent with the same body of evidence. Others have distinguished formality as the sort of generality or content-independence (*cf.* Frege [1893, 1897/1979]) that is also implied by the previous arguments and accounts. Still others have tried to distill the meaning of formal and non-formal constraints by appealing to the distinction between narrow-scope and wide-scope requirements (*cf.* Broome [1999]). This proliferation of options have led MacFarlane [2000] and Dutilh Novaes [2011] to suggest that we ought to take formality to be a cluster concept: a concept that is defined by a weighted list of criteria, such that no one of these criteria is either necessary or sufficient for membership.¹⁴ The cluster view can explain why the properties just described have the same general flavor. They are features that exhibit some loosely related similarities that some formal rules will have, and that will be more salient for some of the rules that have them than they are for others.

I want to suggest that the neutrality of the positive approach is a different cluster of the concept of formality, and that it offers us a different perspective on why formal constraints fail. We noted

¹³For an illustration of the problem, see van Fraassen [1989].

¹⁴Of course, the notion of a cluster concept originates in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (see [I 66]).

earlier that the distinguishing feature of the positive approach is that it does not rely on normative assumptions that the other side could not equally hold. One way of beginning from a position of neutrality is to appeal to impermissive constraints that don't govern all evidential situations, so that they can be endorsed by both the permissivist and the impermissivist. A different way of beginning from a position of neutrality is to appeal to *neutral* constraints that *do* entail that all evidential situations are governed, so that they can be endorsed by both the permissivist and the impermissivist. A good candidate for such constraints are those described above, which appeal to principles of symmetry that one ought to be committed to regardless of one's normative views about evidential support. It's because such principles are neutral enough to be compatible with any normative view about the evidential support relation as a whole that they are neutral enough to be consistent with the different measures and values that give rise to inconsistency.

One might object to the distinction I am drawing between a neutral constraint and a non-neutral constraint given that *any* constraint defended by the impermissivist will entail an impermissive support relation. The principle of symmetry described above is what ultimately underwrites the idea that we ought to assign equal probability to hypotheses that we have equal reason to favor. Presumably, this idea, which entails that there exists a unique response in all evidential situations, is not one the permissivist could consistently hold. While the principle of symmetry may, then, be a neutral constraint when taken on its own or in certain epistemic contexts, it is not a neutral constraint in the contexts described above.

But the fact that the features that underwrite a neutral constraint can be deployed in a way that generates a conflict with permissivism is no problem for my argument. Recall we noted earlier that while the positive and negative approach are two mutually exclusive approaches, the considerations they appeal to can sometimes fall under both of them. It's no objection to my argument, then, that certain considerations can be part of *both* a negative argument and a positive argument. The principle of symmetry that is consistent with both permissivism and impermissivism is the principle that we can use syntactic considerations, or measures on a probability space, to construct a symmetrical set of states. It's these properties that give rise to inconsistency. But recognizing this is consistent with acknowledging that this symmetrical set of states figures, in a more general way, in the justification of a negative argument by structuring the substantive, impermissive value to assign equal

probability to hypotheses that we have equal reason to favor. Just as we saw that the value of truth-guidingness can be appealed to in both a narrower and a broader sense, symmetry considerations can also be appealed to in both a narrower and a broader sense. We can better appreciate these senses by considering the different ways that arguments that appeal to them may be defeated.

Consider, again, an impermissivist trying to convince the permissivist of her view—this time, by appealing to the Principle of Indifference. One way the permissivist might respond is to note the existence of more important considerations, such as the fact that reasonable people can rationally disagree, which the impermissivist is unable to accommodate. But a different way the permissivist might respond is to note that the formal features that underwrite this value give rise to inconsistency. She could, of course, offer both of these responses. But the point is that these are responses to two different sets of epistemic considerations that motivate the Principle of Indifference: to substantive, value-based considerations, on the one hand, and to neutral, syntactic considerations, on the other. The fact that the value to assign equal probability to hypotheses that we have equal reason to favor yields inconsistency is irrelevant from the perspective of one aiming to show that this very plausible impermissive value can be outweighed by certain equally plausible permissive values. Conversely, to the extent that we focus on the inconsistency this impermissive value yields, we abandon the concern with providing an equally weighty permissive value to counterbalance it and respond to the argument as a positive argument.

Summing up, the proponent of an argument for impermissivism will either offer a justification that appeals to certain values or reasons the permissivist could accept or else she won't. In the latter case, her argument fails by being outweighed, or counterbalanced, by values that favor the permissivist. In the former case, her argument fails because the value it advances yields inconsistency in virtue of its formality—in virtue of its neutrality. In this last case, the argument fails in virtue of being a positive argument.

4 Qualitative Inconsistency

I've argued that formal constraints, like the Principle of Indifference, can be interpreted as a kind of neutral constraint. However, the idea that the Principle of Indifference is both formal and neutral gives rise to a puzzle. Consider, again, the Principal Principle, which says that our credences should

match our beliefs about the objective chances. Consider, in addition to this, van Fraassen [1984]’s Reflection Principle, which tells us that our current credences should line up with what we expect our future credences to recommend. Both of these principles are neutral, in virtue of governing only particular evidential situations, so that they can be endorsed by both the permissivist and the impermissivist. Both of these principles also exemplify the more orthodox formal feature of being partly content-independent. They tell us to conform our current credences to our opinions about the chances and our future credences, respectively, no matter what we take these opinions to be. But neither of these principles, alone or in combination, give rise to the inconsistency we get with the Principle of Indifference. If it’s the formality and neutrality of the Principle of Indifference that gives rise to its troubles, this seems difficult to explain.

This section will argue that ‘local’ constraints that govern particular evidential situations, like the Principal Principle and the Reflection Principle, give rise to a form of inconsistency that mirrors the inconsistency we get with ‘global’ constraints like the Principle of Indifference. While the formality of the Principal Principle and the Reflection Principle yield this inconsistency by *entailing* the positive approach, I’ll show that this inconsistency generalizes to *all* sets of constraints when we begin by *assuming* the positive approach. In beginning from a position of neutrality, the positive approach creates a context that formalizes all sets of local constraints.

To start to see this, recall that the positive approach denies that every evidential situation must be either permissive or impermissive. Instead, it assumes that the evidential support relation is, by default, undefined. And, thus, cases where we lack some reason for thinking that there is some attitude the agent is required to hold are cases where the evidential support relation fails to say anything at all.

Why is this a problem for the impermissivist? The view that I’ve just described has the consequence that an evidential support relation is *always* entirely constrained by whatever constraints it encodes. Consider an evidential support relation that only includes the Principal Principle. While such a relation would fail to impose constraints on most of the evidential situations an agent might find herself in, every part of it would still be maximally constrained. For every part of the evidential support relation—which would, in this case, only include situations where we have evidence about the objective chances—there would be *exactly one* attitude it is rational to have in response to one’s

evidence. And, thus, a support relation that encodes only the Principal Principle will be *just as impermissible* as one that encodes *both* the Principal Principle *and* the Reflection Principle. And both of these support relations will be just as impermissible as an evidential support relation that encodes “all of the constraints”. In denying that the evidential support relation is permissive in those places where it isn’t impermissible—in maintaining instead that this relation is undefined in those places—the positive approach loses the ability to distinguish different degrees of impermissiveness. Instead, it entails that any two evidential support relations that impose a different number of constraints are *equally* impermissible and are, indeed, both *maximally* impermissible. In this different way, the positive approach once again gives rise to inconsistency.

It should be clear how this problem mirrors the inconsistency we get with the Principle of Indifference. To really appreciate the symmetry, notice that there are two different measures of the strength of a constraint. On the one hand, a constraint might be strong in virtue of governing a maximal number of *evidential situations*. This is what makes global constraints like the Principle of Indifference strong constraints. On the other hand, a constraint might be strong in virtue of assigning hypotheses a unique or maximally constraining *value* in whatever evidential situations that it governs. This is what makes local constraints like the Principal Principle and the Reflection Principle strong constraints. Both of these measures of impermissiveness give rise to inconsistency on the positive approach. Where we attempt to constrain a maximal number of evidential situations, as with the Principle of Indifference, the values we assign our hypotheses will be inconsistent. And, thus, we get a type of *quantitative* inconsistency in the set of evidential support relations that are deemed to be maximally impermissible. By contrast, where we attempt to maximally constrain individual evidential situations with local constraints, the set of evidential situations that are maximally constrained in this way will be inconsistent. And, thus, we get a type of *qualitative* inconsistency in the set of evidential support relations that are deemed to be maximally impermissible.

This result shouldn’t be surprising. It’s precisely because local constraints are neutral enough to be compatible with both permissivism and impermissivism that they are neutral enough to be compatible with different, and so inconsistent, evidential support relations. Just as before, all of this is compatible with the thought that, from the perspective of the negative approach, this inconsistency is unproblematic. Just as inconsistent measures of indifference nevertheless instantiate values that

make impermissivism attractive—values that the permissivist cannot accommodate and so must counterbalance with her own—so too do inconsistent impermissive evidential support relations. This last point helps to diffuse what might seem like an obvious objection to the argument—one that mirrors a worry from before—which is that while the Principal Principle may be a neutral constraint in certain contexts, it does not seem like a neutral constraint where it governs the *only* place where the evidential support relation is defined. For, in this case, where the evidential support relation has no permissive parts, it entails impermissivism. More generally, any number of impermissive constraints that we ascribe to the evidential support relation will only entail impermissivism, on the additional assumption that these represent the only places where the evidential support relation is defined. And this last assumption is one that the permissivist would reject.

However, though this last assumption is one that the permissivist would reject, notice that these cases don't appeal to any *epistemic values* the permissivist could not also hold. To the extent that the justification for an evidential support relation that includes only the Principal Principle is the value of deference to the objective chances, the only epistemic value in question is one that is consistent with permissivism about the evidential support relation in general. This remains true even if the *particular* evidential support relation being assumed includes no permissive evidential situations. And, thus, a positive argument is being offered. To the extent that we feel as though an epistemic support relation that includes only the Principal Principle—or any number of constraints—*does* encode a value the permissivist could not accept, I want to suggest that we are responding to the values of truth-guidingness or non-arbitrariness that define the negative approach. We are responding to the argument that the evidential support relation is constrained by the Principal Principle because it *ought* to be entirely constrained, rather than to the positive argument that the evidential support relation is entirely constrained because it *ought* to be constrained by the Principal Principle.

One might object that just as it's possible to plump for some particular measure of indifference as being the uniquely correct one, it also seems possible to plump for an evidential support relation with a particular set of contents as being the uniquely correct one. Indeed, one might think that the choice in the latter case is obvious: we should adopt the evidential support relation that is defined over the greatest number of evidential situations. However, if I've established a version of the problem that we get with the Principle of Indifference, I will have taken myself to have established

enough. It's true that, in both cases, additional considerations could perhaps be brought to bear to adjudicate the inconsistency. Our intuitions clearly tell us that it's implausible that a relation that includes only the Principal Principle ought to be regarded as maximally impermissive given that we, intuitively, take a relation that is maximally impermissive to be a relation that encodes "all of the constraints". The point is that the positive approach gets things wrong by yielding this result.

Finally, while the aim of this section has been to explain how a different set of formal constraints gives rise to inconsistency, we could have run the previous argument on *any* set of constraints, not merely ones that are putatively formal. And, yet, I still want to insist that it is the formality and neutrality of these constraints that gives rise to their troubles. How can this be? We've seen that some considerations, like truth-guidingness and symmetry, can be invoked by both a positive and a negative argument. By contrast, since the Principal Principle and the Reflection Principle individuate particular evidential situations, and so exclude other evidential situations by their very nature, they cannot be invoked by a negative argument for impermissivism. They *entail* the positive approach. Because of this, such constraints will always give rise to inconsistency in the way described above. But this is consistent with thinking that where we begin by *assuming* the positive approach, *any* set of constraints will give rise to inconsistency. In making the value of being maximally impermissive consistent with evidential support relations defined over different evidential situations, the positive approach makes the *value of being maximally impermissive* content-independent. The value of being maximally impermissive is realized by evidential support relations with different contents, in the same way that the value of indifference is realized by evidential support relations with different values.

In short, since the content-independence of the Principal Principle and the Reflection Principle entails that they are local constraints, they are formal and neutral in any context. And, thus, they dramatize the inconsistency this section has described. However, this discussion yields the surprising result that the positive approach has the effect of formalizing all sets of local constraints, even those that don't have the traditional hallmarks of formal norms. An impermissivist attempting to convince the permissivist of her view can appeal to jury cases where the evidence is unequivocal. She can appeal to the scientist with decisive evidence. She can appeal, one by one, to the different circumstances in which one gets evidence and write in by hand what one ought to believe. But she

can only adopt this approach at the cost of inconsistency.

Where does that leave us? One might insist that for my argument to tip the scales in favor of the permissivist, it would need to be shown that there is a positive argument for permissivism that does not give rise to similar problems. We've said that a positive argument for impermissivism aims to construct an impermissive support relation by appealing to neutral constraints. A positive argument for permissivism would, then, be one that aims to construct a permissive support relation by appealing to neutral constraints. It should be obvious that the latter argument will be impossible to provide by appealing to local constraints. Consider that any reason that we have to deem that some particular evidential situation is permissive will be one that the impermissivist is unable to accept, given that a single permissive evidential situation entails that the relation as a whole is not impermissive.

This obstacle for the permissivist is one that we should have anticipated. The inconsistency generated by the positive argument for impermissivism is a consequence of the asymmetry between permissivism and impermissivism that makes the former consistent with the existence of *many* evidential situations that mandate an impermissive response, while making the latter inconsistent with *any* evidential situation that mandates a permissive response. One might wonder whether this undermines the significance of my argument. Why care that the impermissivist cannot provide a successful positive argument for her position if the permissivist is not able to come up with one either?¹⁵

But the fact that the permissivist cannot appeal to the positive approach does not undermine the significance of my criticism of this approach—any more than the fact that the permissivist cannot appeal to the Principle of Indifference undermines the significance of criticisms of this principle. While the permissivist has, for good reason, never herself pursued the positive approach, part of the aim of this discussion has been to show how an extension of this strategy, which the impermissivist *has* famously pursued, is doomed to fail. What's perhaps most significant about this result is that it has long been assumed that pursuing this strategy would be the impermissivist's salvation. It's often been suggested that defending impermissivism will ultimately require appealing to numerous sub-

¹⁵Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to address this objection.

stantive, i.e., non-formal, constraints.¹⁶ But, on the positive approach, even seemingly substantive constraints are formal, in the sense of being neutral and giving rise to inconsistency. Though it may not be surprising that appealing to neutral constraints isn't going to be sufficient to vindicate impermissivism, what these neutral constraints turn out to be, on my account, is a bit of a surprise. While my argument does not directly tip the scales in favor of the permissivist, then, it establishes that her opponent is in a much worse position moving forward than we had previously assumed.

It's worth emphasizing again that an equally important aim of this discussion has been to provide a more adequate mapping of the landscape of this debate. To better appreciate the value of the resource we now have, I want close with an example of how the distinction between the negative and positive approach might be put to further use. We noted earlier that one way that Greco and Hedden attempt to break the deadlock between the permissivist and the impermissivist is by appealing to metaepistemological intuitions about the value of rationality that favor the impermissivist. In a similar way, Dogramaci and Horowitz [2016] propose that impermissivism can be defended by considering the connection between our epistemic practices and the value of rationality. Dogramaci and Horowitz argue that impermissivism provides the best explanation for the value of our social practice of epistemically evaluating one another. What's especially noteworthy about this discussion is the authors' description of their account, in passing and without further elaboration, as a "positive" argument that provides an alternative to, among others, "...arguments aimed at exposing absurdities that follow from permissivism". [p.131]

An argument that centers the value of rationality may indeed be the best remaining option for the impermissivist. But if this is right, the lesson of this discussion is that we need to be careful not to conflate this type of argument with a positive argument, which is distinguished by its method rather than by its subject matter. While it goes beyond this discussion to evaluate the metaepistemological argument for impermissivism, in all of its instantiations, there is reason to think that, insofar as it advances the type of positive argument this paper has considered, it will be vulnerable to a version of the objection that this paper has raised. We've seen throughout this discussion that the distinction between the positive and negative approach crosscuts the distinction in first-order epistemic values. Both approaches can appeal to the values of truth-guidingness, symmetry, etc. Given this, it seems

¹⁶See, for instance, Hedden [2015b, p.134] for this idea.

reasonable to think that the distinction between the positive and negative approach also crosscuts the distinction between epistemic and metaepistemic values, in a way that would allow us to ascribe arguments that appeal to these values the very same problem. While this thought might still feel a bit obscure, I hope the discussion of this paper has helped make it a bit clearer.¹⁷

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