A Permissive Account of What’s Permissible to Belief

Abstract: In this paper I offer a new account of when it’s permissible to believe P. The account always permits one to believe P when so believing is in accordance with one’s evidence, but it also, under certain limited circumstances, permits one to believe P out of accordance with one’s evidence (i.e. in a situation with a predomination of either under-supportive or contrary evidence in regards to P). The key on this account is that believing out of accordance with the evidence is only permissible in situations where one has sufficient evidence about the likely benefit that believing P will bring about (along with sufficient evidence that offsetting harm is unlikely). In this paper I deal with some of the epistemological (and to a lesser extent ethical) difficulties that arise in fleshing out such an account and seek to motivate this type of account by arguing that such an account can be used to create an intuitive dividing line for when we can and cannot believe out of accordance with our evidence.

There are two main ideas motivating this paper. The first is that when believing a proposition P is likely to benefit a subject S (or those whom S comes in contact with), that, in some circumstances, this can play a role in making P all-thing-considered permissible for S to believe.\(^1\) The second is that it is all-things-considered permissible for S to believe P because of the likely benefit believing P will provide S or others only when S has good evidence that the benefits are likely to actually occur.\(^2\) The goal of this paper is to take these ideas to motivate a framework for when it is permissible for S to believe (or adopt any doxastic attitude towards) P.\(^3\) This paper addresses similar issues to the contemporary work done on epistemic and practical reasons for belief, but I’ve chosen to frame this paper in terms of what it is permissible to believe, because I think this framing allows me more clearly to get at the heart of the particular issues I care about.

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1 I say “can play a role” because other things such as P’s being true, P being well-supported by evidence, or P being the result of a virtuous process of belief formation can contribute to a belief being all-things-considered permissible to hold, apart from the connection these features of a belief may or may not have to the likelihood of providing benefit to the believer or others.

2 From here on out the phrase “all-things-considered” will be dropped from talk of permissibility and impermissibility, but should be considered implied unless otherwise stated.

3 For ease of exposition, in most places I’ve couched this paper in terms of belief, but I take what I say here about believing to apply equally to any doxastic attitude.
This paper is the first in a two-paper project. In this paper I provide a framework for a plausible version of what I call a limited permissibility account (LPA). I provide the framework here instead of a fully-detailed account because this framework is compatible with a number of different views in ethics, and I think it’s useful to see the value of the framework itself, without the risk of the account looking implausible because of additional commitments that are non-essential to the general project. Thus, this first paper focuses on conveying the general framework and motivation of LPAs. In the second paper I seek to identify the best more fine-grained ethical commitments to saturate the LPA framework with to give a complete account of when a belief is permissible to hold. An unintended upshot of this way of proceeding is that the epistemic issues play a more prominent role in this paper and the ethical issues a more prominent role in the companion paper—although both papers are fundamentally concerned with both ethics and epistemology (in part because many of the relevant questions in this discussion are fundamentally both epistemic and ethical in nature).

I take it for granted that, generally but not always, beliefs that are supported by the evidence benefit us more than beliefs that are not. I also take it for granted that there are some beliefs that are permissible for us to hold, and others that are impermissible for us to hold. But I deny that for any proposition P and set of evidence E, there is but a single doxastic attitude that it is permissible to hold. Instead, I argue that there are some circumstances in which more than one doxastic attitude is permissible for S to adopt with respect to P, given her evidence.

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4 Whether this constitutes a denial of the uniqueness thesis (e.g. White 2005; Ballantyne and Coffman 2012) depends on which formulation of the uniqueness thesis is considered, and the relationship between permissibility and rationality. Standard formulations of the uniqueness thesis are couched in terms of which doxastic attitudes are rational as opposed to which doxastic attitudes are permissible to hold. That said, I generally take my proposal to go against the spirit of uniqueness theses in two ways. First, in certain limited circumstances, my proposal sanctions the adoption of more than one doxastic attitude towards P given a set of evidence about P. Second, my proposal looks to factors beyond merely the evidence for P in determining when a doxastic attitude about P is permissible.
I don’t argue for this permissivism about doxastic attitudes on the grounds that our evidence (or other epistemic considerations) allows for more than one rationale doxastic attitude about P. Rather, I argue that there are limited circumstances in which considerations beyond the evidence (or any other epistemic considerations) for P, can make it permissible for S to believe P. Thus, for those who take having a reason to believe P to be a necessary condition for being permitted to believe that P, my view entails a form of non-evidentialism, where ‘evidentialism’ refers to the view that all reasons for belief are epistemic. Because the view I defend here is one on which practical considerations play a role in making certain beliefs permissible to hold, I consider the view I defend here a limited form of pragmatism, in the sense of permitting beliefs due to the belief’s practical benefits as opposed to epistemic considerations for the belief.

The account I offer here is one in which it is always permissible to believe in accord with one’s evidence, but sometimes also permissible to believe beyond (or even despite) one’s evidence when certain practical circumstances obtain. Thus, it is a model on which evidentialism is the default, but pragmatism is appropriate in certain circumstances.

Before laying out the account itself, two guiding forces for the structure of the account are worth identifying. First, my account seeks to track common intuitions about plausible cases for it being permissible to believe beyond what the evidence supports. Examples of such cases

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5 I remain neutral on this question for purposes of this paper.

6 The specifics of what constitutes a sufficient evidential/epistemic basis for making it permissible to believe P is not part of my concern here. I want to remain neutral on this subject. The account I sketch here about when a belief is permissible on pragmatic grounds is compatible with a large number of different views on what counts as a sufficient evidential basis for permission to believe. All that I assume is that there is some such true account. I encourage the reader to fill in their own preferred view for what counts as sufficient evidential support for a belief. Furthermore, while I often use words like “evidence” and “evidential” as the placeholder terms for whatever these epistemic considerations are, I don’t mean to be taking a view on whether the requisite epistemic sufficiency conditions are evidentialist in the sense of, e.g., Conee and Feldman 2004. Rather, I am merely employing familiar locutions to refer to the category of epistemic grounds contra practical grounds.

7 See, for example, Shah 2006, 482.

8 See, for example, Reisner 2008, 17-18.
include believing that one will survive cancer, despite a grim prognosis, when such a belief meaningfully increases one’s chance of survival, or (perhaps more controversially) someone’s faith in a higher power that provides the inspiration or courage they would otherwise lack to do great good in the world. On the account I’ll offer, beliefs like these are often permissible.

The other aspect of the intuition-tracking goal is providing an account on which beliefs for practical reasons that most find intuitively problematic are still considered impermissible. Examples of such beliefs include believing that God doesn’t approve of your child’s same-sex marriage on the basis of faith or that it’s okay to spend all your emergency savings on lottery tickets because of your gut instinct that you’ll win big. My goal is to provide a principled explanation of why beliefs like the former examples are permissible, while beliefs like the latter examples are impermissible. Thus, my project employs a somewhat particularist strategy.9

The second guiding force for the account is a view about what the underlying factor is that makes beliefs like the former permissible and beliefs like the latter impermissible. This factor, I suggest, deals with the nature of one’s grounds for thinking that a particular non-evidentially supported belief will benefit them or others. The principle, generally, is that the belief that S’s holding the primary belief will benefit the believer (or others) must itself be sufficiently evidentially supported. This is because without evidence that the belief will be beneficial, the connection is severed between holding the non-evidentially supported belief and a likelihood that the belief will in fact be beneficial.10

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10 In this paper, I use probabilistic terms like ‘likely,’ ‘likelihood,’ and ‘probably’ in relatively non-technical senses. They are meant to pick out what they do in common parlance.
With this notion in mind, I offer below a starting account of when it is permissible to believe P. I call this type of account a limited permissibility account (LPA). I don’t ultimately endorse this particular LPA, but it serves as a useful starting point.

**Basic Limited Permissibility Account (BLPA): S is permitted to believe P (in the broad sense that everything that is not impermissible is permissible) when:**

1) **S’s evidence sufficiently supports P, or**

2) **S’s evidence sufficiently supports that S’s believing P will likely bring about more benefit than harm to S and others.**

Clause 1) serves the role of including a standard view of permissibility for beliefs that are properly supported by evidence. Because this paper isn’t about what counts as a sufficient evidentiary or epistemic basis for belief I’ve used the placeholder phrase “evidence sufficiently supports” to refer to whatever the correct standard is. Clause 2) is our focus. Clause 2) can be broken into three components: a sufficient evidence standard, a probability of anticipated consequences standard, and a benefit standard.

The sufficient evidence standard—“evidence sufficiently supports”—is the same placeholder in clause 2) as found in clause 1). Thus, whatever kind of evidentiary support is required for S to be permitted, on epistemic grounds, to believe P, is the same kind of evidentiary support required for S’s belief that P will be beneficial.

The “probability of anticipated consequences” standard refers to how probable the evidence make the occurrence of the benefits or harms, given the belief. On the very permissive end of the spectrum one could offer a principle in which so long as the evidence makes it possible that the total benefits outweigh the harms, then the belief is permitted. But such a lax standard would clearly lead to problematic results. If the probability that the benefits will outweigh the harms if S believed P is only .01 (meaning that there is a .99 chance that either the
benefits and harms would be equal or the harms would outweigh the benefits), it would be a very broken theory that would permit S to believe P on the grounds of the positive balance of benefits over harms that might arise. At the most restrictive point on the spectrum, one could insist that S must be entitled to (and have) epistemic certainty that the benefits outweigh the harms before believing P. However, given how difficult epistemically entitled certainty is to come by, this would rob the account of real force. There likely isn’t an exact number on the scale of 0 to 1 that represents an acceptable probability. The standard of ‘likely’ in BLPA means significantly higher than .5, but this standard could be traded out for a different or more specific standard.

Just as one probability of anticipated consequences standard can be traded out for another, so too can one benefit standard be traded out for another. In BLPA above, a simplistic benefit standard is used—requiring only more benefit than harm to S or others. Let’s call this the benefit-over-harm standard. This particular benefit standard is of secondary importance compared to the following claim: the benefit standard in an LPA must conform with ethical standards. The question of what benefit standard is appropriate is an ethical question. The primary epistemic point is that believing for practical reasons is limited to circumstances in which the evidence supports a high likelihood of desirable outcomes from the belief. My primary goal is to argue for this epistemic point, but in doing so it will be useful to consider what I take to be a more ethically plausible benefit standard than the benefit-over-harm standard.

The benefit-over-harm standard is a simple comparative standard on which the total benefit to S or others must outweigh the harm to the same set of individuals.\(^\text{11}\) The first step in moving towards a more plausible benefits standard is to see what the problem with the benefit-

\(^{11}\) ‘Others’ should be read such that it refers to all those whom the reader thinks morally matter. The examples I give focus on human persons, but that by no means is meant to limit who can matter to such persons.
over-harm standard is. The problem can be shown with an example.\textsuperscript{12} Take an agent A who decides economic policy for a large nation. A chooses economic policy based on what he believes about economics. There is a proposition P about economics. A has no evidence that P is true, but excellent evidence that his believing P will influence his decisions on economic policy such that the aggregated benefits will outweigh the harms. A forms the belief that P as a result. The problem becomes clear if A also has excellent evidence that believing P results in overall benefit over harm because the policies he’ll implement on the basis of believing A will contribute slightly more to the well-being and happiness of the already well-cared for and happy top 10% of incomer earners in the nation than it will to the detriment of the oppressed and poorly-cared for bottom 10% of income earners. Yet BLPA permits A to believe P. There is something morally amiss about adopting P in furtherance of such ends. And the problem becomes even greater if A is in the top 10% of earners. This example identifies a general problem with the benefit-over-harm standard—namely, benefit-over-harm permits one to engage in (self-interested) believing against the evidence to the significant detriment of others (which is doubly problematic when those others are the poor and oppressed). Thus, benefit-over-harm won’t do as the benefits standard.\textsuperscript{13}

In response to the weakness of benefit-over-harm in BLPA, here’s an improved LPA.

\textit{Nuanced Limited Permissibility Account (NLPA): }S is permitted to believe P (in the broad sense that everything that is not impermissible is permissible) when:

\begin{enumerate}
\item S’s evidence sufficiently supports P, or
\end{enumerate}
2) *S’s evidence sufficiently supports that S’s believing P will likely provide some significant benefit to S or others;*¹⁴ and *S’s evidence sufficiently supports that S’s believing P is unlikely to cause harm to S or anyone else at a proportionately significant level.*

In NLPA the evidence support standard remains the same, and the probability of anticipated consequences standard is altered only in the sense that the bifurcation of conditions in clause 2) requires mention of an unlikelihood of harm analogous to the likelihood of benefit. In NLPA ‘likely’ retains the meaning of significantly higher than .5, and unlikely means significantly lower than .5. The key difference between the two proposals is the benefit standard. While BLPA had an aggregate benefit standard, NLPA’s standard is much more atomistic. On NLPA, even if the overall benefit outweigh the harm, if someone experiences a proportionately significant harm from S’s belief to another’s benefit gained by S’s belief, then the belief becomes impermissible.

Something needs to be said about what’s meant both by ‘significant’ and by ‘proportionately’. The exact thresholds for significance and proportionality are variable depending on one’s ethical commitments. By ‘significant value’ I mean more than minimal value. For example, if believing against the evidence results in a 20% higher chance that one will avoid a small papercut, this probably isn’t a significant reason to deviate from believing in accordance with one’s evidence. At what point something crosses over into the significant is something that, from the epistemic vantage point, can remain debatable.

The proportionality requirement is even less fixed because, as I am using ‘proportionality,’ the proportions between the benefits and harms need not be equal (although they could be). One might fill out the NLPA such that so long as the harm to the most harmed individual is not greater than the benefit to the individual most greatly benefited, then the belief is permissible. Someone else might flesh out the proportionality requirement such that if there is

¹⁴ ‘Benefit’ is meant broadly, counting both situations that provide positive benefit and situations that reduce harm.
a harm to someone even half as bad as the benefit to someone else, that the belief becomes impermissible, citing as a rationale that because one is flouting the good of believing in accordance with the evidence that the benefit must be twice as great as the harm in order to justify the deviation from believing in accordance with the evidence. One can also vary the proportionality rules depending on whether the benefit or harm is to oneself or another. One might argue that to accrue a significant benefit for oneself by deviating from the good of believing in accordance of the evidence at the expense of the (much) lesser harm to another is unacceptable, so set up a steep proportionality requirement for when the benefit is to self and the harm to another.

There are many important details that need to be worked out for a fully-formed LPA, and NLPA is flawed, but due to constraints on space, adding details and making fixes to NLPA needs to be left for another time. In what remains, I want to show how NLPA, imperfect as it is, treats instances of potential practical belief in a way that generates plausible and intuitive outcomes. My point in this exercise is to motivate the idea that by attending to the evidence that we have about the consequences our beliefs are likely to bring, this serves as a well-motivated dividing line for when we can and cannot permissibly believe contrary to our evidence.

Let’s start with the case of S who learns that she has cancer and that, statistically, there’s a .2 chance she’ll survive. S has strong evidence that she can increase her chance of survival to .4 if she believes that she’ll survive. S considers it a significant benefit if she can raise her chance of survival from .2 to .4, and S’s evidence supports that no harm will come about from her believing that she’ll survive (e.g. her continued life would bring more good than harm to others, and if she dies having believed falsely that she’d survive they’ll be no negative consequences due to the belief). Thus, on NLPA, S is permitted to believe that she’ll survive, despite this going
against her evidence.\textsuperscript{15} I take this to be a good outcome, because for those who have the intuition that there can sometimes be cases in which one believes P contrary to one’s evidence about P, the intuition is usually that practical belief is permitted in such a case.

Let’s now consider an identical case, except S is the mother of two children and knows that if she truly believes she will survive cancer that she will eagerly work to reassure her children that she will survive her cancer. She also knows that if she reassures her children in this way and does not survive that her children will experience much greater harmful psychological effects from her death than if she hadn’t reassured them. In this case it is far less clear whether NLPA permits S to believe she will survive. The answer depends on how beneficial the increased chance of survival is and how harmful the effects caused by S’s acting on her belief should she will survive would be (when weighted according to likelihood). It also depends on the proportionality ratio used for benefits versus harms. I take this outcome to weigh in favor of NLPA too, because it strikes me that this case is a close call, where what makes the difference is the degrees of benefit and harm and how cautiously one’s ethical theory renders avoiding harm to others in service of a possible benefit (in this case, to both oneself and others).

Let’s turn to a second line of cases. T believes that God exists and wants T to be good to others. T doesn’t have any evidence for or against the existence of God. T’s evidence for what constitutes being good to others is evidentially supported and largely accurate. T consistently has the second-order desire to be good towards others, but often fails. T knows that if he believes that God exists he will do a much better job being good to others than if he does not believe that

\textsuperscript{15} Note that NLPA also permits S to believe that she will die, because NLPA always allows one to believe in accordance with one’s evidence. For those who wonder why it should always be permissible to belief in accordance with the evidence, my response is that there is good reason to think that at least some people cannot help but believe in accordance with the evidence, so a principle on which believing in accordance with the evidence is not permitted makes it such that some people are not permitted to do what they can’t help but do. I take it that a good theory avoids this situation. This reason, in conjunction with the seeming inherent good of believing in accordance with the evidence, are, in my mind, sufficient reasons to make it always permissible to believe in accordance with evidence.
God exists, and knows that otherwise his actions will remain the same whether or not he believes (resulting in T having evidence that his belief in God is unlikely to cause harm). On NLPA, T is permitted to believe that God exists. I think that religious belief in a case like this is indeed permissible, so I take this outcome to work in NLPA’s favor.

Let’s consider a different case of religious belief. In this case T believes that God exists and that God has commanded that people should show open disapproval of those in same-sex romantic relationships. T’s only evidence for these beliefs comes from an ancient set of documents, which can plausible be read as making both of those claims. T doesn’t have evidence concerning the veracity of the ancient documents’ claims, so T does not have sufficient evidential support for his beliefs that God exists and has commanded certain behavior towards those in same-sex relationships. Furthermore, T has no other evidence that same-sex relationships should be disapproved of. T’s belief that God exists and has given certain commands greatly increases T’s happiness and peace of mind, which are significant benefits to T. T has a gay son who is married to another man. Because of T’s religious beliefs T openly expresses his disapproval of his son’s marriage and refuses to speak to his son. This causes T’s son a great deal of anguish and unhappiness. Thus, T’s beliefs cause his son significant harm. Assuming that the harm brought to T’s son is proportionate (on any reasonable ratio of proportionality chosen) to T’s benefit, T is not permitted to believe the conjunction that God exists and has commanded people to show disapproval of same-sex relationships. This once again seems like the intuitively correct outcome, and speaks in favor of NLPA. Even though T benefits from his non-evidentially supported religious belief, the harms that his unsupported religious belief causes his son makes it impermissible for T to believe without evidence.16

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16 For someone who may disagree with this case because they believe the same-sex relationships should in fact be disapproved of and that their religious beliefs are a source of evidence for this claim, note that in the situation above
As stated at the outset, this is just the first part of a two-part project. The goal here is to provide the general motivation and framework for an LPA. The goal in the second part is to fill in the specific commitments using a Kamm-style approach of testing multiple cases with slight variations against an LPA of choice to allow for continued tweaking of the account to best line up the account with moral intuitions.

While more work needs to be done, the ability of even a rough and ready LPA to find a principled dividing line between cases that line us with intuitively plausible outcomes suggests that the standards underlying NLPA may get at the heart of when it’s permissible and impermissible to believe contrary to the evidence. In a quick bit of preview, here are two examples of the sorts of details that need to be worked out in that second paper. First, various forms of underdetermination in the language of NLPA’s benefit standard needs to be addressed. For example, it’s unclear whether the standard is such if the greatest amount of benefit to any individual is not proportionately greater than the harm to any single individual, that the belief is impermissible, or whether the benefits of multiple individuals can be aggregated in comparing it to the harm of the most harmed individual. I think there’s a lot to say and think about here, but the decisions one reaches will likely largely depend on ethical commitments beyond the scope of ethics of belief or epistemology.

Second, NLPA gives rights to what I call “superiority issues”—i.e. instances where one belief that is permissible according to an LPA is clearly superior to one or more other beliefs that are permissible according to an LPA. A fully detailed account of NLPA needs to have a method for adjudication here. Should all the beliefs remain permissible, or should there be a corollary (or

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it is stipulated that T lacks evidence that the ancient documents he bases his beliefs on contain truth. This, of course, would be a departure from an instance where one has evidence for the truth of the claims in a scriptural source. Thus, it is worth examining whether an intuition that this case is mistaken is grounded in a flaw with NLPA, versus an over-layering of one’s beliefs about a particular religious text and its moral authority onto this scenario.
more than one corollary) principle(s) to help determine which subset of beliefs remains permissible in these circumstances? On my view, superiority issues can only arise by within domain comparisons—e.g. we can use the better evidence we have for a belief as grounds for a superiority issue claim (as we often do), or we can use the superior benefits-without-harms to raise a superiority claim as well, but we cannot derive a superiority issue by suggesting that the strength of the evidence we have for P is superior to the benefits-without-harm that we have evidence will likely occur if we believe ~P. Even with that limitation, determining the rules for domain-specific-superiority itself is no easy task. Thus, it is something that is taken up in the companion paper.

This discussion about specific issues that remain unaddressed takes the focus away from the central points of the current paper—namely, to get an understanding of the general framework of LPAs and the motivation for them. In that spirit, I’ll close with a quick point about one of the most famous and ardent of evidentialists, W. K. Clifford. In Clifford’s seminal essay *The Ethics of Belief*, the most famous narrative we’re given as to why “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” is one in which the epistemically ill-supported belief of a ship owner results in significant harm to others that was reasonably foreseeable by the ship owner. While this story does support that it can be damaging to believe without evidence, one need not derive a conclusion any stronger than the types of conclusions drawn in NLPA about when it is permissible to believe in order to avoid the tragedy the story tells. For if the shipowner has been following NLPA, he surely would not have risked the likelihood of significant harm to the many passengers by acting on his epistemically

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17 Clifford 1877 [1999]
unsupported belief. Thus, the difficulties of fleshing out a detailed LPA seem worth the investment, given that LPAs seem capable of addressing concerns about believing against the evidence, while allowing more room for a wider variety of beliefs in response to one’s values.

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18 The other LPA-favorable response to Clifford is to argue that in fact when one believes according to clause 2) of NLPA (or the practical beliefs clause of any reasonable LPA) one is believing “upon sufficient evidence” because the belief is still built upon one’s evidence that the belief is likely to cause significant benefit and unlikely to cause proportionately significant harm.
References:


