

The Uniqueness Thesis

Matthew Kopec^{1*} and Michael G. Titelbaum²

¹Charles Sturt University

²University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract

The Uniqueness Thesis holds, roughly speaking, that there is a unique rational response to any particular body of evidence. We first sketch some varieties of Uniqueness that appear in the literature. We then discuss some popular views that conflict with Uniqueness and others that require Uniqueness to be true. We then examine some arguments that have been presented in its favor and discuss why permissivists (i.e., those who deny Uniqueness) find them unconvincing. Last, we present some purported counterexamples that have been raised against Uniqueness and discuss some possible reasons why proponents of Uniqueness might find these similarly unconvincing.

1. Introduction

Say you're serving on the jury for a criminal trial.¹ Over the period of a few days, you and the other jurors are presented with the very same evidence, and form your own judgments concerning whether the suspect is guilty of the charge. But say you come to a different verdict than a fellow juror. Moreover, this juror is just as well-informed, observant, and reflective as you are, so there would be no reason to think that she simply missed some of the evidence or that she reasoned about this evidence in a less reliable way than yourself. Is it possible that both of you are being equally rational in your beliefs about the suspect's guilt?

If you think such rational divergences aren't possible, then you are committed to some version of what has been called the Uniqueness Thesis (hereafter just "Uniqueness"). Uniqueness holds, very roughly speaking, that there is a unique rational response to a given body of evidence. This thesis has recently attracted a great deal of interest among philosophers. For example, among those who argue in favor of the thesis are Feldman (2006, 2007), White (2005, 2007, 2013), Christensen (2007), Matheson (2011), Horowitz (2014), Greco and Hedden (forthcoming), and Dogramaci and Horowitz (forthcoming). Among those who argue against the thesis are Douven (2009), Titelbaum (2010), Brueckner and Bundy (2012), Decker (2012), Rosa (2012), Kelly (2013), Meacham (2014), Peels and Booth (2014), Schoenfield (2014), Kopec (2015), Sharadin (forthcoming), Simpson (ms.), and Titelbaum and Kopec (ms.).²

The recent interest in Uniqueness was originally driven by the literature on the epistemology of disagreement. But the thesis is proving important for a number of other reasons, not least of which is the fact that many versions of the thesis either presuppose or clash with various popular views in epistemology. Moreover, the question of whether Uniqueness is true has many of the trappings of a classic philosophical puzzle. The thesis seems obviously false to many philosophers, and obviously true to many others. The arguments in favor of Uniqueness are at first rather compelling, but a closer inspection reveals various flaws. Nevertheless, those who think Uniqueness is false often find it difficult to devise any counterexamples that are able to convert the Uniqueness defenders. And all the while Uniqueness is actually a vast number of distinct theses masquerading under a single label.

In this article, we'll attempt to lay the kind of conceptual groundwork that will hopefully increase the fruitfulness of future work on Uniqueness. In Section 2, we present the distinct versions of Uniqueness that have been presented in the literature. In Section 3, we sketch the various views in epistemology that either presuppose or conflict with some of the versions of Uniqueness. In Section 4, we sketch some of the arguments presented in favor of Uniqueness, as well as some reasons deniers find these arguments unconvincing. In Section 5, we present some purported counterexamples, and sketch some possible reasons why defenders of Uniqueness might not find these counterexamples convincing. We conclude in Section 6.

2. *Different Forms of Uniqueness*

While the general idea behind Uniqueness was discussed earlier by, for example, Rosen (2001) (who was against it) and Russell (2001) (who was in favor of it), Feldman (2007) is responsible for its current name. He defines it as follows:

This is the idea that a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition. (205)

The first paper to focus entirely on Uniqueness was White (2005). Taking himself to be following Feldman (whose paper had been circulating for some time), White defines it as follows:

Given one's total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition. (455)

In these early baptismal ceremonies, there's already plenty to invite confusion. Feldman actually seems to be discussing two distinct theses, since one conjunct is about bodies of evidence justifying propositions, while the other is about bodies of evidence justifying certain attitudes towards those propositions. White's definition isn't logically equivalent to Feldman's first conjunct, since we could distinguish between the "propositional" and the "doxastic" senses of rational belief (Christensen 2011: 4). White's formulation isn't quite equivalent to Feldman's second conjunct either, since White's is about people taking attitudes, not just the attitudes themselves. But perhaps Feldman assumes that if a body of evidence justifies a certain attitude toward a proposition then anyone with that evidence would be justified in taking that attitude, which would bring it much closer in line with White's thesis.

This leads us to our first distinction (Matheson 2011; Senor ms.). One way to understand Uniqueness is as a thesis about a special relationship that holds simply between bodies of evidence and propositions. We'll call this version "Propositional Uniqueness." Importantly, on this understanding, the way an individual might reason from these bodies of evidence to arrive at her attitudes toward those propositions isn't really relevant, since this thesis isn't about real people reasoning in various ways in the first place. The second way to understand the thesis, which we'll call "Personal Uniqueness," brings agents into the picture. According to Personal Uniqueness, a body of evidence dictates a single attitude that a rational agent must settle upon after she reasons through the question at issue. Neither of these versions, strictly speaking, entails the other (although we find it difficult to see how Personal Uniqueness could be true if Propositional Uniqueness weren't also true).

A second difference between Feldman's and White's formulations is that Feldman takes the thesis to hold that there is "at most one" rational attitude on some body of evidence while White takes it to entail that there "is a unique" one. This seems to make White's thesis more stringent, since it rules out the possibility of rational dilemmas (i.e., cases where there isn't any

rational attitude to hold toward some proposition). We agree with Feldman (2006) and Matheson (2011) that this gives us a reason to focus on the “at most one” formulation when discussing Uniqueness. First, even if rational dilemmas exist, something in the spirit of White’s formulation might still be true. So defenders of Uniqueness should prefer the logically weaker version. Second, there is at least some reason to think that rational dilemmas do in fact exist. Last, those who dislike Uniqueness could contest both versions by attacking the logically weaker one. So we prefer a version of the thesis that doesn’t require there to be a rational attitude for every proposition.

There are many other lingering ambiguities. First, while epistemology has traditionally dealt in the coarse-grained terms of belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment, there has been a recent tendency amongst epistemologists to talk instead in terms of finer-grained attitudes like credences or levels of confidence. The exact relationship between beliefs and credences is rather contentious, and while the credence version of the thesis is usually considered logically more stringent (e.g., White 2005), the relationship might be more complicated than it seems at first glance.

Second, different conceptions of what we mean by an agent’s “total evidence” will yield very different theses. For example, if we were to use the common sense understanding of evidence, where physical objects like fingerprints and traces of DNA can count as evidence – even if they are never found – Uniqueness seems somewhat trivially false. Obviously if two individuals “have” the same evidence, in the sense of having access to the same physical objects, but exactly one of them simply fails to notice a relevant piece of it, then they can rationally form different attitudes. On the other hand, if we were to use a very mentalistic notion of evidence that includes every thought crossing through an agent’s head, we get a thesis that seems trivially true. As soon as one agent judges that P while the other judges that not P, the two agents would have different “evidence”. So what we mean by evidence is going to be rather important to the discussion. In fact, Ballantyne and Coffman (2011) argue that if Uniqueness is true, this greatly limits what one could legitimately mean when deploying the concept of evidence.

Third, there is a quantifier ambiguity in White’s formulation. On one reading, we first look around our world to fix upon some person, and, for that particular person, the thesis holds that there is only one attitude she can rationally hold toward a proposition based on the evidence. Call this reading “Intrapersonal Uniqueness.” This leaves open whether different attitudes are permitted (or required) for *different* individuals on that same body of evidence. On the second reading, which is logically stronger, every person in the world is rationally required to settle upon the very same attitude toward the proposition in question if they have that same body of evidence. Call this “Interpersonal Uniqueness.” This distinction has already attracted attention in the literature, since various authors have argued that some of the early arguments for Uniqueness in White (2005) rely upon an equivocation between these two (Kelly 2013; Meacham 2014; Peels and Booth 2014; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.).

The final clarification is easier to explain as a distinction between different ways one might deny Uniqueness. Positions that deny Uniqueness are typically referred to as versions of “permissivism.” One variety of the view would hold that there exist cases where two agents have the same evidence and rationally come to conflicting assessments, all the while being fully aware of the divergent rational assessments. We’ll call this view “acknowledged permissivism” and refer to any witnessing case of this existential claim an “acknowledged permissive case.” Another form of permissivism might hold that permissive cases exist, but acknowledged permissive cases cannot. Cohen (2013) defends this position, which we’ll call “unacknowledged permissivism.”³ A number of authors have noticed the possible importance of this kind of distinction, although at times only implicitly (White 2005; Ballantyne and Coffman 2012; Cohen 2013; Schoenfield 2014; Levinstein forthcoming; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.).

Many authors in the literature on Uniqueness are far from clear about exactly which thesis they are either defending or disputing. And given all the distinctions just laid out, there are at least 16 different versions of the thesis even before we get down to the *really* hard problem of what “evidence” is supposed to mean. We worry that using the single label “Uniqueness” here disguises a quagmire, which ought to motivate both sides to be clearer about their real targets.

3. *Uniqueness's Relation to Other Views in Epistemology*

In this section, we'll sketch some views whose fates are tied to the Uniqueness debate, starting with views that conflict with Uniqueness. Perhaps the most obvious example of a view that conflicts with Uniqueness is Subjective Bayesianism (Douven 2009; Meacham 2014; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.). Subjective Bayesians hold that agents are rationally required to have credences that obey the standard axioms of probability theory and must update their credences through Bayesian conditionalization upon receiving new information. Some Subjective Bayesians argue for additional constraints, for example, perhaps agents also must abide by Lewis's Principal Principle (Lewis 1980) or van Fraassen's Reflection Principle (van Fraassen 1984).⁴ But even these more restrictive Bayesians believe there is some leniency in which prior probability functions are rationally permissible. This allows that two agents who start out with different (yet equally rational) prior probability functions can rationally land upon different credences in some propositions even if they have been fed exactly the same evidence. Just to reinforce the importance of a distinction we made in the previous section, notice that this kind of view only conflicts with Interpersonal Uniqueness, since two agents are rationally permitted to start with conflicting prior probability functions. Many Subjective Bayesians think an agent is irrational if she just up and switches to a different prior probability function. In other words, any given agent is stuck with a particular prior probability function, and so she must form credences as that function dictates.⁵ Thus such folks deny Interpersonal Uniqueness, while holding that Intrapersonal Uniqueness must be true.

In addition to Subjective Bayesians, White (2005) mentions a few other, more contentious, examples of views that conflict with Uniqueness. First, he argues that Coherentism conflicts with Uniqueness. The thought seems to be that there could be two strictly distinct yet predominately overlapping webs of beliefs that are both nonetheless maximally coherent, and thus some bodies of evidence can yield belief sets that disagree on at least one proposition. While some are willing to follow White here (e.g., Douven 2009: 349; Schoenfield 2014: 197), others have raised questions about whether Coherentism and Uniqueness really do clash (Brueckner and Bundy 2012: 167). White also mentions reflective equilibrium accounts of justified belief and epistemic conservatism as conflicting with Uniqueness. We believe one could also question whether these views necessarily conflict with Uniqueness, although there isn't space to discuss these matters here. (Concerning conservatism, see Jung forthcoming.)

White, in his 2005 article, failed to mention one class of views that conflict with Uniqueness, namely, a collection of views often called “instrumentalist” views in epistemology (Kelly 2003; Lockard 2013). The rough idea behind these views is that the rational beliefs (or credences) for an agent to hold are determined by how well those attitudes promote some set of epistemic goals. Some versions of the view hold that it's up to each individual to determine what epistemic goals she wants to pursue, and it's up to her exactly how to balance how important each goal is. Kelly (2013) discusses one such view in terms of the “Jamesian” goals of believing the truth and avoiding error. Say one agent cares more about believing the truth, while another cares more about avoiding error. If this kind of instrumentalism is on the right track, the first agent will seemingly need less evidence to form certain rational beliefs, while the latter agent will require more evidence to rationally form the very same beliefs. Thus, on such a view, Interpersonal

Uniqueness will be false.⁶ (Whether Intrapersonal Uniqueness would also be false, as in the case of Subjective Bayesianism, would depend on the specific contours of the view.) As Rubin (2015) and Christensen (forthcoming) note, any view that makes rational (or justified) belief dependent upon an agent's particular practical interest, such as Fantl and McGrath (2002), might similarly have to deny (Interpersonal) Uniqueness.⁷

There are two main classes of views that require some form of Uniqueness to be true. First, in stark contrast to the Subjective Bayesians, most Objective Bayesians hold that there is only one rational prior probability function that one could start out with. One classic example of such a view is the early confirmation theory of Carnap (1950), and a more recent defender is Williamson (2010). (For further discussion of these views, see Horowitz's 2014 discussion of "impermissivism" and Meacham's 2014 discussion of "Impermissible Bayesianism.")

But there is another kind of view that requires Uniqueness but that isn't directly tied to the Subjective/Objective Bayesianism dispute, namely, a very stringent variety of Evidentialism. Evidentialism is often stated as a supervenience thesis, which holds that there can't be a difference in which beliefs agents are justified in holding without there being a difference in the evidence they each have (Conee and Feldman 2004). In earlier work, Feldman and Conee (1985) described it slightly differently, as the view that agents are justified in holding an attitude toward a proposition if and only if that attitude fits the evidence. Neither of these formulations requires Uniqueness, since the former leaves open the possibility that two agents with the same evidence could both be justified in holding a belief in P or a belief in not P, and the latter for slightly trickier reasons (Matheson 2011; cf. Ballantyne and Coffinan 2011). But at times Evidentialist leaning philosophers in the tradition of Clifford (see Chignell 2010) seem drawn toward a strictly stronger supervenience thesis:

Strong Evidentialism: The doxastic attitudes of all rational agents supervene on their total evidence – there can be no difference between two rational agents' doxastic attitudes without there being a difference in their evidence.

To the extent that Evidentialists are tempted by this stronger thesis, they will need Uniqueness to be true. (The two theses are very close to being logically equivalent.)

Uniqueness also has implications in a number of more localized debates. Many have claimed that the truth or falsity of Uniqueness has serious implications for various views in the epistemology of disagreement. For example, Feldman (2007), Kelly (2010), Ballantyne and Coffinan (2012), Cohen (2013), and Schoenfield (2014), among others, have argued that there are tight relationships between various versions of Uniqueness and conciliatory views about disagreement. But others (e.g., Christensen 2009, forthcoming; Lee 2013; Peels and Booth 2014; Levinstein forthcoming; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.) have made the case that the relationship between Uniqueness and conciliatory views is much more complicated. And outside of the epistemology of disagreement, Uniqueness is proving to have implications for topics as far ranging as the epistemology of trust and friendship (Hawley 2014), diachronic rationality (Hedden 2015a), and the epistemic value of deliberation (Peter 2013).

4. *Arguments in Favor of Uniqueness*

Although a number of arguments for Uniqueness have been presented in the literature, in the interest of space, we'll just sketch the two that have attracted the most interest and one newcomer to the debate.⁸ The first argument is what White (2005) calls his "quick-and-dirty" argument (cf. Schoenfield 2014: 199–200). Given that he later revised the argument in light of some criticism, we'll present the revised version of the argument from White (2013: 314, original emphasis):

- (1) Necessarily, it is rational for S to believe that P iff S's total evidence supports P.
- (2) If E supports P then necessarily E supports P.
- (3) It cannot be that E supports P and E supports not P.
- (4) Therefore, if an agent whose total evidence is E is rational in believing P, then it is impossible for an agent with total evidence E to rationally believe not P.

White (2005: 447) provides an example to offer support for the prototypes of #1 and #3. Say White is on a jury tasked with judging whether Smith is guilty of some crime. Obviously, it would be irrational for White to judge Smith as guilty (or innocent) before looking at any evidence. And if White does eventually judge Smith to be guilty, let's say, then this is only a rational judgment if the evidence supports the proposition that Smith is guilty. And it seems impossible for the total body of evidence he has at the time to support both that Smith is guilty and also that Smith is innocent. This is all rather intuitive, so those two premises seem plausible. Since #2 is also plausible, and since the argument is valid, this looks like a rather strong challenge to the permissivist.

We expect the permissivist won't find this argument compelling for two reasons. First, as Kelly (2013) aptly points out, a number of permissivists simply deny that the evidential favoring relation is a two-place relation. Various authors hold that E favors P only relative to some third relatum. For example, Decker (2012) argues that a body of evidence doesn't point one way or the other until it is interpreted, and so the interpretation of the evidence is a third relatum that must be specified. In addition, Titelbaum (2010) argues that evidential support is relative to a preferred set of predicates, Subjective Bayesians will argue that it's relative to a prior probability function (Meacham 2014), and other permissivists will argue it's relative to the agent's epistemic goals (cf. Kelly 2013) or epistemic standards (Schoenfield 2014). These permissivists would deny the first three premises in White's argument, since E won't support P on its own, but only relative to whatever that third relatum happens to be. If the premises were rewritten to appease these permissivists, then the conclusion wouldn't follow, since it could be that E supports P if we set that third relatum one way but E supports not P if we set it a different way. Second, as a number of authors have pointed out (e.g., Kelly 2013; Meacham 2014; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.), White's argument seems to conflate Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Uniqueness. The premises are most naturally read as applying to a single agent while the conclusion is clearly supposed to hold for agents generally. So the permissivist is unlikely to be convinced by this argument.

The second argument also traces back to White (2005).⁹ Although the original is rather complex, here is the basic idea. Let's resurrect the jury case from before, but this time the juror realizes she's in a permissive case, meaning that either belief in Smith's guilt or belief in Smith's innocence would be rationally permissible attitudes given her evidence. The juror is now in a rather awkward situation. Is there really any point in her taking the time to carefully weigh the evidence? After all, she knows ahead of time that either judgment she makes would be rational. It seems as though she'd do just as well if instead of carefully reasoning through the evidence she simply flips a coin and believes Smith guilty if it lands on heads and innocent otherwise. But flipping a coin to determine whether to believe that Smith is guilty seems like a classic case of irrationality – the coin flipper has *no good reason* to believe in accord with the outcome of the flip. So it would appear that, in a permissive case, the agent similarly has no good reason to form her beliefs by examining the evidence. As White (2013) puts it, "But this is absurd. Surely it is always wiser to let the evidence guide us in inquiry" (315). Since the same reasoning will hold generally (i.e., not just with respect to Smith's guilt), this suggests that permissive cases in general cannot exist.

A number of authors have spotted flaws in this kind of argument (e.g., Brueckner and Bundy 2012; Meacham 2014; Titelbaum and Kopec ms.). White himself noted that this argument

would really only show the impossibility of what we've called *acknowledged* permissive cases, as opposed to permissive cases in general (White 2005: 450–451). But setting this aside, we believe the permissivist will most likely deny White's assumption that if one is in a permissive case then rationally weighing the evidence puts one in no better position than flipping a coin. There are a number of ways the permissivist could push back on this natural thought – depending on what attracts her to permissivism – including appeals to natural or cultural selection or other features that might whittle down the range of prior probability functions, epistemic goals, or epistemic standards one might have. For example, one kind of Subjective Bayesian might argue that the range of naturally occurring prior probability functions has been whittled down by natural selection, since agents with the kind of cognitive machinery best modeled by the bizarre functions (e.g., counter-inductivists) simply didn't survive. If that's the case, an agent might do much better than 50–50 by arbitrarily selecting one of these priors that has survived the selection process. Or the permissivist could cook up cases where the assumption is simply false (e.g., Titelbaum and Kopec's "Reasoning Room," discussed in the next section).

Recently, a number of authors have been pressing versions of the final argument we'll sketch, which uses a very different strategy. Among them are Dogramaci and Horowitz (forthcoming), Greco and Hedden (forthcoming), and related arguments in Dogramaci (2012) and Horowitz (2014). The basic idea is this. Rationality assessments play the crucial role in our epistemic practices of helping us cultivate and pick out "epistemic surrogates," in Dogramaci's (2012: 524) turn of phrase. Or, as Greco and Hedden say, "If agent S1 judges that S2's belief in P is rational and that S1 does not have relevant evidence that S2 lacks, then S1 defers to S2's belief that P" (forthcoming: §1). Greco and Hedden and Horowitz and Dogramaci then argue that the permissivists would find it very difficult to explain how rationality assessments could possibly play the functional role that they do in a world where Uniqueness is false.

We think permissivists would likely reply to this kind of argument in one of two ways. First, the permissivist could simply deny that deference to the beliefs of others is a central role that rationality assessments have come to play. One way to support their denial would be to present other more central roles that rationality assessments play – ones where Uniqueness isn't required to do any explanatory work. Or the permissivist could deny that she's really in a worse position to explain how rationality assessments could play the deference role. But since the deference/surrogacy argument is so new to the literature, it's hard to tell if either of these strategies would make for a compelling reply.

5. Purported Counterexamples

In this section, we'll present some purported counterexamples to Uniqueness from the literature. The first is due to Rosen (2001), who writes:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same 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. (71)

The idea here is that the lawyers will present every member of a jury with the very same evidence, and yet we have a strong intuition that there can be rational divergence in the judgments of some members of the jury. To the extent that this intuition is reliable, this suggests that Uniqueness is false.

The second purported counterexample comes from Schoenfield (2014). (We should admit from the outset that she simply assumes the case to be a permissive case in the paper, as opposed to providing a full defense that it is one.) Here is the case:

COMMUNITY: You have grown up in a religious community and believe in the existence of God. You have been given all sorts of arguments and reasons for this belief which you have thought about at great length. You then learn that you only have the religious beliefs that you do, and only find the reasoning that you engaged in convincing, because of the influence of this community. If you had grown up elsewhere, you would have, on the basis of the same body of evidence, rejected those arguments and become an atheist. (205)

Schoenfield then argues that the protagonist in the case is rationally justified in holding onto her beliefs. So, let *P* be the proposition “God exists.” In this case, the protagonist rationally believes *P*, but other agents outside of the community who have the same evidence rationally believe not *P*. So this would be a permissive case. Notice that since we are now talking about *different* agents, this case would only speak against Interpersonal Uniqueness. Since the case doesn’t rule out the possibility that every member of that community with the same body of evidence is rationally required to believe *P*, Intrapersonal Uniqueness could still be true.

The third purported counterexample comes from Decker (2012). Paraphrasing somewhat, suppose two initially identical agents spontaneously materialize, one on Earth and the other on Twin Earth. Both agents encounter perceptually identical worlds, and therefore are guaranteed to have all the same evidence. But further suppose that while the Earthling comes to form a strong conviction in a mind independent world composed of material objects, the Twin Earthling becomes convinced of a Berkelean world composed entirely of either minds or ideas in minds. So let *P* be the proposition that “The world is composed of physical objects.” The Earthling believes *P*, while the Twin Earthling believes not *P*, and both have the very same evidence. Decker takes this to be a permissive case. As he puts it, “You and your Berklean twin can both be rational in holding your beliefs. You can’t both be *right*, but you can both be *rational*” (779, original emphasis). Decker’s case is clearly intended to bring interpersonal Uniqueness into question, but it’s hard to tell whether intrapersonal Uniqueness is also a target. For example, does Decker believe that the Earthling can one day rationally flip to believing in a Berkelean world? That’s unclear.

The fourth purported counterexample is from Titelbaum and Kopec (ms.). Dubbed the “Reasoning Room,” it goes like this:

You are standing in a room with nine other people. Over time the group will be given a sequence of hypotheses to evaluate. Each person in the room currently possesses the same total evidence relevant to those hypotheses. But each person has different ways of reasoning about that evidence (and therefore different evidential standards). When you are given a hypothesis, you will reason about it in light of your evidence, and your reasoning will suggest either that the evidence supports belief in the hypothesis, or that the evidence supports belief in its negation. Each other person in the room will also engage in reasoning that will yield exactly one of these two results. This group has a well-established track record, and its judgments always fall in a very particular pattern: For each hypothesis, 9 people reach the same conclusion about which belief the evidence supports, while the remaining person concludes the opposite. Moreover, the majority opinion is always accurate, in the sense that whatever belief the majority takes to be supported always turns out to be true. Despite this precise coordination, it’s unpredictable who will be the odd person out for any given hypothesis. The identity of the outlier jumps around the room, so that in the long run each agent is odd-person-out exactly 10% of the time. This means that each person in the room takes the evidence to support a belief that turns out to be true 90% of the time.

Now, let’s suppose that in this context a 90% success rate is enough to justify a belief – if 90% isn’t high enough, one could just fiddle with the numbers – and say the folks in the Reasoning

Room are individually tasked with deciding whether some proposition *P* is true. Given the details of the case, there is at least one agent in the Reasoning Room who rationally believes *P*, and at least one who rationally believes not *P*, all based on the same evidence. Importantly, if the Reasoning Room is a permissive case, it can also count as an acknowledged permissive case, which even some authors with permissivist leanings seem willing to accept as impossible (e.g., Kelly 2005; Cohen 2013). Like the previous cases, the Reasoning Room is intended as a counterexample to Interpersonal Uniqueness, leaving the issue of Intrapersonal Uniqueness as an open question.

The Uniqueness defender might respond in similar ways to these four counterexamples. In Rosen's Jury, Schoenfield's COMMUNITY, Decker's Twin Earth, and Titelbaum and Kopec's Reasoning Room, the Uniqueness defender could attempt to argue that the relevant agents actually have relevantly different evidence, in which case they wouldn't work as counterexamples to Uniqueness. For example, the members of Rosen's Jury that disagree surely have substantial bodies of private evidence that are relevant to the matter at issue. (In other words, the 'evidence' Rosen refers to doesn't exhaust what epistemologists would typically mean when they talk about a juror's total evidence, since the latter will include other beliefs not presented during the case.) In Schoenfield's COMMUNITY, the agent in the religious community surely bases her belief that God exists upon many other religious beliefs that the agent in the non-religious community lacks. If these beliefs are doing justificatory work, then it seems like they should count as part of the evidence, and, if so, the two agents have different evidence. Decker's Twin Earth has many similar features, since the Earthling will base her belief in material objects on many more foundational beliefs, like the existence of at least some mind independent things, and the Twin Earthling surely lacks those beliefs. And in Titelbaum and Kopec's Reasoning Room, one agent knows that her reasoning process spat out *P* while the other knows that her reasoning process spat out not *P*. The Uniqueness defender could then try to argue that this difference entails that the two agents have relevantly different evidence. Leaving the final judgments to the reader, we'll simply point out that which notion of evidence one employs is going to do a great deal of work.

The final objection, roughly in the spirit of a counterexample in Kopec (2015),¹⁰ would aim to show that even Intrapersonal Uniqueness is false. God appears to you, and (rationally) convinces you of her omnipotence and omniscience. For example, she's able to read your mind perfectly, predict all of your actions, grant all your wishes, and change the weather at will. One day, God makes the following proposal: If you believe that it will rain in Canberra tomorrow, then she will make sure it rains in Canberra tomorrow. But if you believe it won't rain tomorrow, then she'll make sure it doesn't. She doesn't say what will happen if you suspend judgment on the matter (maybe she'll flip a coin?). Assume that before she made the proposal, you hadn't even considered whether it would rain. Supposing you rationally believe she'll deliver on the proposal, it seems like you're now in a permissive case. If you believe that it will rain in Canberra, then it certainly will rain, so that belief is surely justified. If you believe it won't, it certainly won't, so that belief is surely also justified. Uncertainty only creeps in if you suspend judgment. So if we let *P* be the proposition that "It will rain in Canberra tomorrow," then it's rationally permissible for you to form either a belief in *P* or, instead, a belief in not *P*. And since this is true of the very same person on the very same evidence, this suggests Intrapersonal Uniqueness is false. That, in turn, would entail that Interpersonal Uniqueness is also false.

It would be difficult for the Uniqueness defender to argue that there are different bodies of evidence in this kind of self-fulfilling case. After all, there aren't even two distinct agents to have different bodies of evidence. But there may be a different sort of reply, related to some discussion in Greco and Hedden (forthcoming). According to Greco and Hedden, defenders of Uniqueness like them "are not committed to the claim that from any starting point there is a

uniquely rational state to transition into.” Rather, they hold that, “given a situation... there is a uniquely rational state to be in right then” (§3). So, they could claim that in the case above it’s rationally permissible for you to change from agnosticism at one time into believing P at a later time, and also rationally permissible for you to change into believing not P at that later time. But they could claim this doesn’t entail that *right now* it’s rational for you to believe either P or not P. Up until the point at which you form one of those beliefs, it’s not rational to form one of those beliefs. While this reply has an air of paradox about it, we’ll leave final judgments to the reader.

6. Conclusions

The debates over Uniqueness raise a number of very puzzling issues. In our experience, the thesis seems so obviously true to some philosophers, and so obviously false to others, that many don’t believe the issue is worth arguing over. But if the fact of the matter is so obvious, then why is it so very difficult for Uniqueness defenders to devise an argument that can convince the permissivists to accept Uniqueness? And, similarly, why is it so very difficult for permissivists to devise a counterexample that can convince Uniqueness defenders to abandon it?

What might account for the impasse? We have a hunch that much of it traces back to more basic differences in our views about the nature of rationality and how best to understand the concepts employed in the debate. For example, is Uniqueness supposed to apply to everyday agents? Or is it instead a thesis about ideal rationality? And it’s very unclear what most writers even mean when they invoke the concept of ‘evidence’ – a highly contentious topic that hasn’t attracted the kind of careful attention it deserves. A wealth of unsettled issues lurks below, which should motivate those engaging in the Uniqueness debate to be very careful with the assumptions they make and to be very clear with the concepts they invoke.¹¹

Short Biographies

Matthew Kopec received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2012 and is now a research fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics in Canberra. His articles in journals such as *Episteme*, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *Philosophy of Science*, and *Ratio* make the case that our social world is much more perplexing than philosophers and scientists tend to think. So he would not be surprised if the Epistemology Oracle told him Uniqueness is false.

Michael G. Titelbaum received his PhD from the University of California–Berkeley in 2008 and is now an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He wishes the Uniqueness Thesis were true but cannot bring himself to believe that it is.

Notes

* Correspondence: Charles Sturt University Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics Locked Bag 119, Kingston Australian Capital Territory 2604, Australia. Email: matthewckopec@gmail.com

¹ This case traces back to Rosen (2001), which we will discuss in more detail in Section 5.

² One outlier: Conee (2010) argues against what he calls “Rational Uniqueness.” But since his framing of the thesis is relevantly different from what has become standard in the literature, we feel it would be misleading to lump him in with the others that argue against Uniqueness.

³ Put in his terminology, he holds that “Uniqueness” is false, but “Doxastic Uniqueness” is true. We feel our terminology is preferable, given the already well-established, but seemingly unrelated, use of “doxastic justification” or “doxastic rationality” in the literature. In addition, ours parallels the talk of “acknowledged epistemic peers” in the disagreement literature.

⁴ Very roughly, the Principal Principle states that an agent’s credences ought to match what she knows about the objective chances, and the Reflection Principle states that an agent’s credences ought to match what she knows about her future credences.

⁵ Some versions of Subjective Bayesianism suppose there are moments at which an agent's prior probability function is not entirely set. If so, then Intrapersonal Uniqueness does not apply to those agents at those moments. But once the prior probability is selected, the agent is rationally bound from that point forward. Thanks to Christopher Meacham for suggesting this clarification.

⁶ See Kopec (ms.), who further develops a version of this view, and see Horowitz (forthcoming) for further critique of this kind of view in the context of Uniqueness. Some discussion in Simpson (ms.) is also relevant here, since some instrumentalist views could be sensitive to the cognitive limitations of particular agents, and Simpson uses these kinds of limitations in his defense of permissivism (although he uses the limitations to justify differing epistemic standards). Thanks to Brian Hedden for pressing the latter point.

⁷ Much of the discussion in this paragraph is based on the assumption that nothing akin to Uniqueness holds in the practical realm, meaning that two rational agents can rationally make distinct choices in the very same circumstances so long as they have different preferences. While many philosophers take this assumption for granted, some have started to challenge it (e.g., Hedden 2015b: Ch8 §2; Greco and Hedden forthcoming).

⁸ Additional arguments targeting various versions of Uniqueness, and presented in varying levels of detail, can be found in Feldman (2006, 2007), Horowitz (2014), Matheson (2011), and White (2005, 2007, 2013).

⁹ See also White (2013: 315–317) and more nuanced reconstructions in Horowitz (2014) and Simpson (ms.).

¹⁰ See also Raleigh (2015).

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