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IN DEFENSE OF CONDITIONAL UNIQUENESS

Abstract

The Uniqueness Thesis (U), defended by the uniquer and rejected by the permissivist, asserts that, necessarily, there is at most one rational doxastic attitude one can take towards a proposition, given a particular body of evidence. U faces a well-known, paralyzing objection from the permissivist, which I call “the simplicity objection,” which rests on the idea that evidence is not the sole determinant of rationality. In this paper, after maintaining that the ongoing dialectic between the uniquer and the permissivist has led to an exaggeration of differences, I bring into focus another, non-equivalent yet substantive (non-trivial) thesis in the vicinity, which I call “the Conditional Uniqueness Thesis” (U*), according to which if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then U is true. The hope is to achieve a rapprochement between the uniquer and the permissivist by showing that U* is true. To this end, I examine the argument Roger White offers in favor of U, which I call “the argument from evidential support” (AES), and argue that it is both unpersuasive for the defender of the simplicity objection and unnecessarily strong for establishing its own conclusion. I then offer a sufficiently weakened version of AES, which I call AES*, and argue that AES* is sound, if interpreted as an argument for U*.

Keywords: rationality, evidence, uniqueness, permissivism, rational belief, evidential support, Roger White

1. UNIQUENESS AND THE SIMPLICITY OBJECTION

An interesting question that has recently attracted a good deal of attention in epistemology concerns the stringency of the constraints evidence puts on rational belief.¹ An instructive way to introduce the question starts with

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¹ I will follow a common practice in the uniqueness literature and be using “rational,” “justified,” “reasonable,” and “rationality,” “justification,” and “reasonableness” interchangeably.

considering two subjects who happen to have the same body of evidence pertaining to some matter P (and are independent inquirers unaware of each other's opinions).² Now the question is: Is it possible that these two subjects take different but equally rational doxastic attitudes regarding P? For instance, is it possible that one of these subjects believes that P while the other disbelieves that P or suspends judgment about whether P, while they are equally rational in these doxastic attitudes? Does the evidence leave us with some leeway as to what to believe?

According to the Uniqueness Thesis (U), there is no slack whatsoever between the evidence and what it is rational to believe given the evidence:

UNIQUENESS (U): Necessarily, there is at most one rational doxastic attitude one can take towards a proposition P, given a particular body of evidence E.³

A number of clarificatory remarks about how U is to be conceived are in order. I will adopt the maximally coarse-grained, all-or-nothing conception of doxastic attitude, according to which there are only three different doxastic attitudes a subject might take towards a proposition: namely, believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment.⁴ Furthermore, the notion of rationality deployed in the formulation of U is epistemic (rather than, say, practical or moral).⁵ And, U is a thesis about how bodies of evidence are related to doxas-

² The point of the qualification about "independence" in parentheses is to distinguish the debate about uniqueness from a different, but related, debate about (peer) disagreement.

³ This version of the Uniqueness Thesis differs from the one given by White (2005), according to which there is *exactly* one rational doxastic attitude, given a body of evidence. It has been observed by various philosophers that the "exactly" version is unnecessarily strong in that it is open to some objections that have little to do with what is at stake in the relevant debate. See, for instance, Feldman (2006) and Matheson (2011: 361).

⁴ A central reason for this is that I agree with Thomas Kelly's claim that "uniqueness seems most plausible when we think about belief in a maximally coarse-grained way, so that there are only three options with respect to a given proposition that one has considered" (2014: 300). Kelly rejects U.

⁵ A traditional way of motivating the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons for belief (and thereby between epistemically and practically rational beliefs) appeals to Pascal's Wager concerning the existence of God. An epistemic reason for believing that God exists might involve such considerations as the Design Argument or the Cosmological Argument, considerations in favor of believing that the proposition that God exists is *true*. And, this contrasts sharply with Pascal's argument for the rationality of believing in the existence of God, which rests on the claim that the *consequences* of believing are much more favorable than the consequences of disbelieving: if God exists, belief will be enormously rewarded and disbelief horribly punished; if God does not exist, the consequences of either attitude will be very negligible by comparison. The reason offered by Pascal for believing that God exists rests on an assessment of the relative advantages of believing in

tic attitudes towards propositions, whether those attitudes be actual or merely possible, and as such it is a thesis about *propositional* justification rather than doxastic justification.⁶ Finally, according to U, the rational doxastic attitude that one can take towards P is determined by a body of evidence E in virtue of some abstract relation that holds between E and P, commonly called “evidential support” (or “evidential favoring”), and as such it abstracts away from the person’s cognitive capacities, from what a given subject is cognitively capable of doing.

Permissivism is the denial of U. According to permissivism, there are some possible cases in which there is more than one rational doxastic attitude that one can take towards a proposition, given the same body of evidence. *Strong* permissivism holds that there are some possible cases in which both believing P and disbelieving P are rational doxastic attitudes, given E. *Weak* permissivism holds that there are some possible cases in which both believing P and suspending judgment on P are rational doxastic attitudes, given E.⁷

An influential charge against U voiced by permissivists is that U can only be true if a simplistic picture of how rationality is determined by evidence is taken for granted. According to what I call *the simplicity objection*, rationality is determined only *partially* by evidence, while U can only be true if it is determined *fully* by evidence.⁸ The main tenet of this objection is that “the evidence all by itself leaves underdetermined whether it is rational for you to believe one or the other (proposition)” (Douven 2009: 352) (or, effectively equivalently, that “beliefs simply do not enjoy support from the evidence *tout court*” (Douven 2009: 354)). The simplicity objection rests on the idea that *if* there is a factor other than evidence that is a determinant of rationality, *then* there might be more than one rational doxastic attitude one might take to-

view of one’s interests, and it thus might aptly be called a *practical* reason. Whatever the final account of the distinction between epistemic and practical rationality turns out to be (and I don’t assume that it is going to be simple and tidy), it is undeniable that there is a distinction to be made here; and, I hold that the sort of rationality deployed in the formulation of U is the former but not the latter.

⁶ See Matheson (2011) and Kopec, Titelbaum (2016).

⁷ Strong and weak permissivism do not exhaust all the different, logically possible ways of being a permissivist. For instance, the thesis that there are some possible cases in which believing P, disbelieving P, *and* suspending judgment on P are all rational, given E is not equivalent to either of the two versions of permissivism specified. However, it is rather clear that it is hard to conceive scenarios in which strong permissivism holds but in which suspending judgment on P is not rational. I hold that strong and weak permissivism are the two *dialectically central* ways of being a permissivist.

⁸ Endorsing U commits one, as Nathan Ballantyne and E. J. Coffman correctly note, to the thesis that “whatever fixes your rational attitudes can do so only by fixing what evidence you have” (2011: 1).

wards a proposition given the same evidence, and a defender of the simplicity objection holds that the antecedent of this conditional is true.

What might those extra factors be in addition to evidence that determine what is rational to believe for a subject? A natural candidate derives from subjective Bayesianism, according to which:

Subjective Bayesianism: A given piece of evidence can determine what a rational doxastic attitude towards a proposition is for a given subject only relative to the background of the subject's prior probability distributions (and there is no such thing as a uniquely correct prior probability distribution).⁹

Even though the simplicity objection against U is frequently accompanied in the uniqueness literature with subjective Bayesianism, there is a host of other ways of cashing out the basic idea that evidence can only partially, but never fully, determine epistemic rationality. Here are a few:

Interpretationism: Evidence supports a proposition, not simpliciter, but rather relative to an interpretation (and there is no such thing as a uniquely correct interpretation) (see Decker 2012).

Contextualism: What is rational for a subject to believe depends on certain "contextual" factors like her social environment as well as her evidence (see Annis 1978, Meeker 2004).

Impurism: What is rational for a subject to believe does not merely depend on her evidence but also on her "practical interests" or on "pragmatic factors," broadly understood.¹⁰

Language-Dependence View: A body of evidence can determine what is rational to believe only "in concert with something (a preferred language, a property list, etc.) that does the work of privileging some properties over others" (Titelbaum 2011: 484).

Relativism: A given piece of evidence can determine what is rational to believe only relative to the subject's epistemic stan-

⁹ Michael Titelbaum notes: "Subjective Bayesianism models an agent as assigning an initial numerical distribution over propositions (called a "prior") *that is not determined by his total evidence*" (2011: 498, emphasis mine).

¹⁰ Jason Stanley's "interest-relative invariantism" (2005), John Hawthorne's "subject-sensitive invariantism" (2004), Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath's "pragmatic encroachment" account (2002) are some currently available versions of impurism.

dards (and there is no such thing as the uniquely correct set of epistemic standards).¹¹

Even though they do not exhaust all the possible ways of developing the simplicity objection, these six theses give a fair sample of the options available to a defender of that objection.

An instructive way to better understand the main point of the simplicity objection is to formulate it in terms of the evidential support relation. Given the uncontroversial assumption that a given piece of evidence determines which doxastic attitude is rational towards a given proposition in virtue of the *support* it provides to that proposition, then to say that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality is to say that evidential support is a relation that *only* a piece of evidence bears to a proposition — that evidential support is a two-place relation (“E supports P *simpliciter*”). So, the intended moral of the simplicity objection is that evidential support is to be understood as a three-or-more-place relation (for example, “E supports P *relative to* the agent’s probability distribution”).

In this paper, I will not attempt to give an account of the nature of evidential support. The observation that the notion of evidential support that is *relevant* to our discussion is intimately tied to the notion of rational belief must suffice for the purposes of this paper. More specifically, the following is true of the relevant notion of evidential support: if a piece of evidence E supports a proposition P, then if a subject S has E and believes that P on the basis of E, then S’s belief that P is rational.

2. CONDITIONAL UNIQUENESS

It is clear that the uniquer must argue, in response to the simplicity objection, that there is no extra factor, any factor other than evidence, which contributes to the determination of what it is rational to believe — that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. However, interestingly, what we typically find in works that attempt to defend U is not an argument for the thesis that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality but an argument for the thesis that *assuming that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality*, U is true. Here is a case in point, a passage from the opening paragraph of

¹¹ Subjective Bayesianism is an instance of relativism thus understood, if, as Brian Hedden notes, “we can think of a set of evidential standards as being represented by a prior probability function” (2015: 718).

Roger White's (2005) seminal paper the main advertised aim of which is to defend U:¹²

A rational person doesn't believe just anything. There are limits on what it is rational to believe. How wide are these limits? That's the main question that interests me. But a second question immediately arises: What factors impose these limits? A first stab is to say that one's *evidence* determines what it is epistemically permissible for one to believe. Many will claim that there are further, non-evidentiary factors relevant to the epistemic rationality of belief. I will be ignoring the details of alternative answers in order to focus on the question of what kind of rational constraints one's evidence puts on belief. (2005: 445)

Given these remarks, it is plausible to take the main question White raises as this: How wide are the limits on what it is rational to believe given the evidence, on the assumption that evidence is the sole factor that determines those limits?

There are two different questions that might be of interest here. One is whether U is true (*the uniqueness question*), and the other is whether assuming that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, U is true (*the conditional question*). The permissivist answers the uniqueness question in the negative, and the uniquer effectively argues for an affirmative answer to the conditional question. It is clear, however, that this *by itself* does not mean that there is any disagreement between the uniquer and the permissivist. The permissivist can consistently agree that an answer to the conditional question is a "yes," and a commitment to a "yes" answer to the conditional question does not entail any commitment with regard to the uniqueness question.

The following seems to me a fair description of some portion of the current dialectic.¹³ The uniquer's main aim is to give an affirmative answer to the uniqueness question but he has not been as clear as he could have been in signaling the fact that that answer requires a defense of the thesis that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. Rather, the uniquer typically moves directly to a defense of an affirmative answer to the conditional question, without an explicit indication that that answer falls short as an answer to the uniqueness question. The permissivist, on the other hand, gives a negative answer to the uniqueness question by arguing that evidence is not the sole determinant of rationality. However, the permissivist has not been as clear as he could have been in signaling the fact that a negative answer to the uniqueness question does not entail any commitment with regard to the conditional question, which is what the uniquer attempts *in effect* to answer

¹² Kopec and Titelbaum notes that White's (2005) is "the first paper to focus entirely on Uniqueness" (2016; 190). See fn. 3 above for a qualification.

¹³ For more on this, see Demircioğlu (forthcoming).

anyway. Given this, a natural suspicion is that the ongoing dialectic has led to an exaggeration of differences and given rise to a good deal of talking past each other.¹⁴

My central aim in this paper is to achieve a rapprochement between the uniquer and the permissivist by showing that the answer to the conditional question is a “yes” — that is, argue that *if* evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then U is true (that is, that if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then necessarily, there is at most one rational doxastic attitude one can take towards a proposition P, given a particular body of evidence E). Let me call this thesis, the *Conditional Uniqueness Thesis* or, simply, *U**.¹⁵ The *uniquer** holds U*, and the *permissivist** denies U*. The strong permissivist* holds that (even) if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, there are some possible cases in which both believing P and disbelieving P are rational doxastic attitudes, given E. And, the weak permissivist* holds that (even) if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, there are some possible cases in which both believing P and suspending judgment on P are rational doxastic attitudes, given E.

In what follows, my main aim is to argue that permissivism* is false. The uniquer holds that both permissivism and permissivism* are false. The permissivist holds that U is false but takes no stance with regard to permissivism*. However, as I will argue, permissivism should deny permissivism*. That — that permissivism* is false — is the common ground I intend to provide between the permissivist and the uniquer.

¹⁴ Here is a case in point. Ballantyne and Coffman offer a “general recipe” for constructing counter-examples to U, the first step of which is this: “Begin with a possible thinker, who accepts an approach to rationality that allows something other than one’s evidence all by itself to help determine which attitudes are rational for one” (2011: 12). Ballantyne and Coffman also claim that this appeal to “extra-evidential features” (2011: 12) relevant to rationality undermines White’s defense of uniqueness. It must now be clear that this latter claim rests on overlooking passages from White like the one quoted above and is false.

¹⁵ One might perhaps think that U* is vacuously true (and hence uninteresting) because its antecedent is obviously false. However, this is mistaken because it is not obviously false that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. As a matter of fact, I believe just the contrary is the case: the idea that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality captures the “default” way in which many epistemologists conceive rationality. The conception I have in mind is nicely expressed by the following words of Fantl and McGrath: “If evidence for p, construed broadly, just is a matter of what serves our truth-related goals in respect of p, then epistemic justification will be a matter of evidence and nothing more” (2002: 69).

3. THE NON-TRIVIALITY OF U*

If what is rational to believe given the evidence is determined by the evidence (and the evidence alone), how can there be any slack between the evidence and what it is rational to believe given the evidence? For instance, if a rational doxastic attitude toward P determined by a body of evidence E is believing that P, how can it also be the case that disbelieving that P (or suspending judgment about whether P) is rational given E, assuming that E is the only determinant of rationality? In short, is not U* trivially true?

In order to see that if U* is true, then it is not trivially true, it is instructive to compare U* with another thesis in the neighborhood, *evidentialism*:

Doxastic attitude *D* toward proposition *p* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* if and only if having *D* fits the evidence *S* has at *t*. (Feldman, Conee 1985: 15)

According to evidentialism, “the epistemic justification of a belief is *determined* by the quality of the believer’s evidence” (Feldman, Conee 1985: 15, emphasis mine). Evidentialism might be thought of as a combination of two distinct theses: evidence is the sole determinant of the rationality of a belief and the rationality thus determined is the properly epistemic one. The former thesis is crucial for our purposes: evidentialism entails U *if* U* is trivially true, on account of the fact that evidentialism holds that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. Assume that U* is trivially true: that is, it straightforwardly follows from the putative fact that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, that U is true. If this assumption is true, then it straightforwardly follows from evidentialism that U is true because evidentialism holds that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. So, if evidentialism is compatible with the falsity of U, then it follows that U* is not trivially true.

And, several philosophers have observed that evidentialism is compatible with the falsity of U:

Evidentialism is compatible with the view that there’s a body of evidence such that more than one attitude toward *p* fits that evidence. (Ballantyne, Coffman 2011: 2)

Matheson is more explicit on the issue:

Even if which doxastic attitude is justified for an individual at a time is entirely determined by that individual’s evidence at that time (as evidentialism claims), it needn’t be that there is no more than one competitor doxastic attitude which is so justified . . . It could be that my evidence justifies a set of options such as the disjunctive option belief or suspension of judgment, where either of these attitudes would be justified for me. (2011: 363)

I agree with these remarks about evidentialism. If they are correct, then the worry about the significance of U^* is undermined. The worry is, recall, that it appears to be trivially true that if rationality is determined by evidence and only by evidence, then there can be at most one rational attitude given the evidence. However, evidentialism is compatible with there being more than one rational attitude given the evidence, despite the fact that it holds that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. So, the thesis that there is at most one rational attitude given the evidence is non-trivial: evidentialism entails U if U^* is trivially true; however, evidentialism does not entail U ; therefore, U^* is not trivially true.

Given that U^* is a non-trivial thesis, let us see now how we can defend it — let us assess, in other words, an argument for U , assuming that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality.

4. THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIDENTIAL SUPPORT WEAKENED

White (2014: 314) offers the following argument — which I call “the argument from evidential support” (AES) — on behalf of U :

- (1) Necessarily, it is rational for S to believe P if and only if 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 notes that “the argument [AES] is valid” (2014: 314) but, unfortunately, does not provide a proof. This is understandable given that how a proof might go is intuitively clear. Assume for conditional proof that S whose total evidence is E is rational in believing P . It follows from premise (1) that E supports P , and from premise (2), that E necessarily supports P . Since E necessarily supports P , it follows from premise (3) that it is impossible that E supports not- P . But if it is impossible that E supports not- P , then given premise (1), it is impossible for S' (possibly different from S) with E to be rational in believing not- P . QED.

AES is an argument against strong permissivism, the thesis that there are some possible cases in which both believing P and disbelieving P are rational

doxastic attitudes, given E. As such, its conclusion is consistent with weak permissivism, the thesis that there are some possible cases in which both believing P and suspending judgment on P are rational doxastic attitudes, given E. So, even assuming that it is sound, AES does not establish U. However, it is rather straightforward to come up with another argument, similar in structure and spirit to AES, against weak permissivism, which goes as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, it is rational for S to believe P if and only if S's total evidence supports P.
- (1') Necessarily, it is rational for S to suspend judgment on P if and only if S's total evidence neither supports P nor supports not-P.
- (2) If E supports P, then necessarily E supports P.
- (3') It cannot be that E supports P and E neither supports P nor 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 suspend judgment on P.

Call this argument AES₂. AES and AES₂ taken together exclude strong and weak permissivism and therefore, if sound, establish U.

AES is more problematic than AES₂ because (3) in AES is more problematic than (3') in AES₂. And, this in turn is because (3') is, and (3) is not, an instance of the law of non-contradiction, the thesis that it cannot be that P (is true) and not-P (is true). Since the other premises in the arguments are either identical or relevantly similar, a defense of AES₂ is straightforward if we have a defense of AES, but not vice versa. So, I set aside AES₂ in what follows.

Now, I want to make two observations about AES. First, without the background assumption that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality (or, equivalently, the assumption that evidential support is a two-place relation), AES falls prey to the simplicity objection. As Kelly notes, the argument "relies on the assumption that the relation of evidential support should be understood as a two place relation ("E supports P")" and that subjective Bayesians, for instance, "will insist that the relation of support should be understood as a three place relation, inasmuch as whether E supports P . . . will depend on the agent's prior probability distribution" (2014: 308). And, as Kelly persuasively argues, once the premises of AES are rewritten, say, to reflect the subjective Bayesian point, the conclusion that follows "falls well short of the original conclusion (4)" (2014: 308). I think this point must be granted, that AES is not persuasive for the defenders of the simplicity objection. However,

this need not be the end of the dialectic about AES: that AES does not work if it is not assumed that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality has no bearing on the question of whether AES works if it is assumed that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, on the question of whether AES is a sound argument for U^* .

Second, even if conceived as an argument for U^* , AES is unnecessarily strong as it stands because premise (3) is unnecessarily strong. The argument would proceed as smoothly as before if (3) were replaced by (3*):

(3*) It cannot be that E supports P and E supports not-P while E preserves its rationalizing power regarding P.

If E supports P, then E has a rationalizing power regarding P in the sense that if a subject believes that P on the basis of E, then her belief that P is rational. Now, (3*) is weaker than (3) because for all (3*) claims, E might support P and not-P. What (3*) claims is that E cannot support P and not-P while preserving its rationalizing power regarding P. In other words, (3*) is true but (3) might still be false, if the following is true: necessarily, if E supports P and not-P, E loses whatever rationalizing power it has regarding P. Furthermore, the conclusion of AES would still follow if (3) were replaced by (3*). In that case, the proof would go like this. Assume for conditional proof that S whose total evidence is E is rational in believing P. It follows from (1) that E supports P, and from (2), that E necessarily supports P. Since E necessarily supports P, it follows from (3*) that it is impossible that E supports not-P while preserving its rationalizing power regarding P. But if it is impossible that E supports not-P while preserving its rationalizing power regarding P, then given (1), it is impossible for S' (possibly different from S) with E to be rational in believing not-P. QED.

Let me call the argument for U^* that we obtain by replacing (3) in AES by (3*) *AES**. The key premises of *AES** are (2), which I call *the Necessity Thesis*, and (3*), which I call *the Impossibility Thesis*. Given that *AES** is valid, its defense requires a defense of its premises, which is what I will offer in the remainder of this paper.

5. THE PREMISES OF *AES** DEFENDED

Let me start with the least controversial premise (on the assumption that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality) in the argument, viz. premise (1): Necessarily, it is rational for S to believe P given S's total evidence E if and

only if E supports P. To see that (1) is true given that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, we first need to note that if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then necessarily, evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. The claim that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality is a claim about the *nature* of rationality,¹⁶ and so, if true, it is necessarily true. Furthermore, if necessarily, evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then necessarily, it is rational for S to believe P given E if and only if E determines (believing) P (as an appropriate doxastic attitude). And, on the uncontroversial assumption that E determines P (or determines believing P as an appropriate doxastic attitude) by virtue of the support it provides to P (i.e., that E determines P if and only if E supports P), it follows that necessarily, it is rational for S to believe P given E if and only if E supports P. So, (1) is true.

5.1. PREMISE (2): THE NECESSITY THESIS

Let us move to the Necessity Thesis, which claims that if E supports P, then necessarily E supports P (or that evidential support is a necessary relation). It is clear that entailment is a necessary relation, and if evidential support were solely a matter of entailment (i.e., if it were the case that E supports P just in case E entails P), as, for instance, a Cartesian foundationalist is inclined to think, then the Necessity Thesis would require no defense and be evidently true. However, it is now widely believed that identifying evidential support with entailment is unnecessarily restrictive and that evidential support might be *defeasible*: E might support P despite the fact that the falsity of P is compatible with E. A tricky question here is whether defeasible evidential support is a necessary relation. The Necessity Thesis is purported to be true of evidential support as such, whether it be defeasible or not, and what is not obvious is that if E defeasibly supports P, then necessarily E defeasibly supports P. In what follows, I will argue that the Necessity Thesis is true and the cogency of my argument is independent of whether evidential support is defeasible or not.

Before proceeding further, there are two claims that I believe are worth making. First, the Necessity Thesis is not entailed by our background assumption that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. In other words, that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality is consistent with it being the case that evidential support is a contingent relation. The assumption that

¹⁶ A claim about the nature of a certain thing can be definitional (conceptual) or metaphysical. So, for instance, that bachelors are unmarried is a definitional (conceptual) claim about bachelors, and that water is H₂O is a metaphysical claim about the nature of water. I take no stance here about whether the claim that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality is a definitional or metaphysical claim about the nature of rationality.

whether it is rational to believe P on E is determined only by E (or only by the support E lends to P) is consistent with the thesis that E supports P in some worlds but not in others. Second, the Necessity Thesis is similar in form to Kripke's thesis about natural kind terms (for instance, that if water is (actually) H₂O, then water is necessarily H₂O), which raises the question: can the Necessity Thesis be defended in the way Kripke's thesis is standardly defended? A standard defense of Kripke's thesis appeals to our intuitions about the way we use natural kind terms: it seems that we would not call the stuff that superficially resembles water but is not H₂O "water." However, I suspect that our linguistic intuitions about the evidential support relation (and the Necessity Thesis) are not as strong as our linguistic intuitions about natural kind terms (and Kripke's thesis). More specifically, I, for one, do not find within myself any pre-theoretical immediate inclination either to say that (defeasible) evidential support is a necessary relation or to say that it is contingent. The Necessity Thesis needs an argumentative defense, which I aim to give in the remainder of this section.

5.1.1. THE KNOWABILITY ARGUMENT

What I call the Knowability Argument for the Necessity Thesis rests on the observation that the following is an inconsistent quartet:

- (i) The Contingency Thesis (i.e., the thesis that evidential support is a contingent relation) is true.
- (ii) Evidential support truths (i.e., truths of the form "E supports P") are knowable (by human beings).¹⁷
- (iii) If the Contingency Thesis is true, then evidential support truths are *a posteriori*.
- (iv) If evidential support truths are *a posteriori*, then they are not knowable (by human beings).

From the inconsistency of (i)-(iv), the Knowability Argument derives the conclusion that (i) is false, and hence that the Necessity Thesis is true. I will argue in this section that (ii), (iii), and (iv) are true and in the next section that what might initially appear to be good reasons for holding (i) turn out to be invalid on closer inspection. Hence, (i) is the thesis to be dropped and the Necessity Thesis is true.

¹⁷ I will ignore the interesting question whether there are truths that are unknowable by human beings but knowable by some other (e.g., cognitively superior) beings. By "knowable," I will mean knowable by human beings.

Let me start with (ii). As I take it, (ii) is to be read as claiming that some evidential support truths are such that they are knowable by us: (ii) is true just in case there is at least one evidential support truth that we can know (cf. the claim that we can discover new galaxies is true just in case there is at least one new galaxy that we can discover). Thus understood, (ii) leaves open the possibility of there being some evidential truths that are not knowable by us and it is thus a weak claim about the possibility of knowledge regarding evidential support truths. Now, we can safely set aside global skepticism for the purposes of this paper, and I don't see any convincing reason to think that local skepticism about evidential support truths might be correct. I take it that (ii) is intuitively plausible enough not to require any extensive defense.

Let me now move to (iii), the thesis that if the Contingency Thesis is true, then evidential support truths are *a posteriori*. To affirm (iii) is to affirm that evidential support truths are not contingent *a priori*, which I take is highly plausible. If the Contingency Thesis is true, evidential support truths are contingent. And, if evidential support truths are contingent, they cannot be known *a priori* because, with the possible exception of highly specific cases (more on this below), contingent truths about the world cannot be known *a priori*. A contingent truth about this world is a truth that obtains in it but not in every possible world, and to say that it is *a priori* knowable is to say that one can tell this world from other possible worlds merely through reflection (or, as is sometimes called, "rational insight"). However, this is not acceptable: mere reflection cannot tell what contingently obtains in this world (for one thing, if it could, observation would be superfluous; but observation is not superfluous). The intuitive resistance I (and I assume many others) feel against the idea of contingent *a priori* truths is nicely captured by Wesley Salmon's following remarks:

How could we conceivably establish by pure thought that some logically consistent picture of the real world is false? How could we, without any aid of experience whatever, find out anything about our world in contradistinction to other possible worlds? Given a logically *contingent* formula — one that admits of true as well as false interpretations — how could we hope to decide on a completely *a priori* basis which of its interpretations are true and which false? (1967: 39)

So, if the Contingency Thesis is true, then evidential support truths are *a posteriori*.

It might be objected that, as Kripke (1980) shows, there are contingent truths that can be known *a priori* after all. Then, why exactly not take evidential support truths to be contingent but still knowable *a priori*? There are three points I would like to make in response to this query. First, it is a matter of an ongoing controversy whether Kripke succeeds in providing persuasive

examples of contingent *a priori* truths. A famous example Kripke offers of contingent *a priori* truths is the one expressed by the sentence “The length of S at t_0 is one meter,” by the use of which the term “meter” is first introduced into the language as naming the length of S. According to Kripke, the subject uttering this sentence is in a position to know *a priori* the contingent truth expressed by it. Some philosophers argue, however, that rather than showing that there are contingent *a priori* truths, Kripke’s cases are to be conceived as a *reductio* of his theory of proper names and direct reference on which those cases rest (e.g., Dummett 1973). Secondly, and relatedly, another line of resistance to Kripke’s thesis is to grant that there is a (rather trivial) sense in which Kripke’s cases exemplify contingent *a priori* truths but to argue either that they are not genuinely contingent (e.g., Donnellan 1977, Evans 1979) or that they are not genuinely *a priori* (e.g., Soames 2003, Salmon 1986). Thirdly, even if it is granted that Kripke’s cases exemplify genuinely contingent *a priori* truths, it must be clear that they are to be treated with great care, as special cases that concern the introduction of certain terms into our languages. It would be an unwarranted and ad hoc move to claim that truths about evidential support *must* be relevantly similar to Kripke’s “baptism” cases.

The final thesis that needs a defense is (iv) (viz. if evidential support truths are *a posteriori*, they are not knowable by human beings), to which I now turn. Suppose that S entertains P and wants to form an opinion with regard to P. S has various beliefs and experiences, and so on, all of which we might reasonably suppose constitute S’s current total evidence E at t . S wants to know whether E supports P, supports not-P, or is neutral between P and not-P. Given the assumption that evidential support truths are *a posteriori*, S cannot tell through reflection alone what E supports with regard to P. So, S needs to collect further evidence, pieces of information that have a bearing on the proposition (P') that E supports P. Now suppose that S engages in the process of collecting evidence from t to t' , and she comes to acquire new beliefs and have new experiences, all of which we might suppose constitute S’s new evidence E' at t' (E' is the total evidence S collects from t to t'). S originally wonders whether E supports P; and now, after collecting E', the question that arises for her is whether E' supports P'. Now, once again however, if whether E' supports P' is an *a posteriori* truth, S cannot tell through reflection alone whether E' supports P'. Furthermore, it must be clear that extra searches for additional evidence result in a similar predicament and do not help in S’s quest of figuring out what her evidence tells her about P. So, if evidential support truths are *a posteriori*, then they are not knowable by human beings.¹⁸

¹⁸ One significant worry relevant here is that there appears to be some clear examples of

To affirm (iv) is to affirm that evidential support truths are not knowable *a posteriori*, that they are only knowable *a priori* (if at all) — that if there are such knowable truths, they are *a priori*. If evidential support truths are knowable *a priori*, then they can be known through reflection alone, without the subject being engaged in the activity of collecting further evidence. The argument just stated is intended to demonstrate the unhappy situation one finds oneself in if one wants to know evidential support truths but takes them to be *a posteriori*. The argument shows that taking evidential support truths as *a posteriori* results in an infinite, and hence unsatisfiable, regress. A piece of evidence must be such that what it supports with respect to a proposition must be ascertainable, if it is ascertainable at all, without there arising the need to collect further evidence. If a need for further evidence arises, then a need for infinite evidence arises, and the latter need is not satisfiable. If evidential support truths are *a posteriori*, then they are knowable by us if we can complete an infinitely long procedure of evidence collecting; and since we cannot complete such a procedure, evidential truths cannot be *a posteriori* if they are knowable by us.

Let me call the regress in question that ensues from the assumption that evidential support truths are *a posteriori* knowable *the evidential regress*. The evidential regress is not metaphysical but thoroughly epistemic in character. It is not a regress that is based on an observation about the *nature* of the evidential support relation. The evidential regress is not initiated, for instance, with the thesis that can be plausibly considered as a starting point of its venerable cousin, the regress problem in traditional epistemology, viz. the thesis that in order for a piece of evidence to support a proposition, that piece of evidence itself must be supported, which expresses a condition to be satisfied if the evidential support relation is to obtain. Rather, the evidential regress is a regress of searches for additional evidence that one must engage in if one wants to figure out what one's current evidence supports, and as such the question whether the evidential regress ensues is independent of whether the traditional ("epistemological") regress ensues. If a piece of evidence supports a proposition even if that piece of evidence stands unsupported, then the traditional regress is blocked but the evidential regress is not. The evidential regress is not blocked because if evidential support truths are knowable *a posteriori*, then the need for extra searches for further evidence arises irrespective of whether the evidential support relation obtains between a

a posteriori evidential support truths (for example, that the litmus paper turns red in a solution supports that the solution is acidic). This worry will be addressed in the next section.

piece of evidence and a proposition only on the condition that the evidence itself is supported.

Why exactly does the evidential regress occur? The key assumption that is responsible for the evidential regress is that evidential support truths are knowable *a posteriori*. However, while this assumption gives rise to the regress, there is a clear sense in which it does not *explain* it because a similar regress does not follow in every case in which one mistakes an *a priori* truth for an *a posteriori* one. Take the proposition that no red objects are black, which is a plausible candidate for an *a priori* truth. Suppose that I mistake it for an *a posteriori* truth and, accordingly, proceed to figure out whether it is true by empirical inquiry. I start to observe the red objects around me, I note that none of those objects are black, and on the basis of a relatively large stock of similar observations, I conclude that no red objects are black. In this case, while the reason why I engage in an empirical inquiry is that I mistake an *a priori* truth for an *a posteriori* truth, there is no obvious regress that threatens that inquiry. Why does mistaking an *a priori* truth for a *a posteriori* one give rise to a regress in one case but not in the other? In both cases, I gather new pieces of empirical evidence; however, in the “color” case, the evidence that I gather (which is of the form “this red object is not black”) does not give rise to a question that is similar in form to the original question (“is it the case that no red objects are black?”), while in the “support” case, it does. In the color case, I can appreciate that *this* particular red object is not black without there arising the need to make further empirical inquiry, a need arising from the (mistaken) original assumption that it is an *a posteriori* truth that no red objects are black. However, in the support case, the original assumption that evidential support truths are *a posteriori* permeates, as it were, through all the subsequent stages of inquiry because each new stage brings new evidence, accompanied by a new question (of the form “does *this* new evidence support the proposition targeted at the previous step?”).

This completes my defense of (ii), (iii), and (iv). However, the fact that we have good reasons to think that these three theses are true is not by itself sufficient to derive the conclusion that (i) (viz. that the Contingency Thesis is true) is false. The Knowability Argument against (i) is an argument by elimination; and thus, if there are good reasons to think that (i) is true (or if the reasons for (i) are as good as the reasons for one of the other three theses), then the conclusion drawn by the Knowability Argument (viz. that (i) is false) is illegitimate and, given the inconsistency of the set (i)-(iv), we are left with a paradox. The Knowability Argument succeeds only on the condition that it is demonstrated that there are no good reasons to think that (i) is true (or that the reasons for (i) are not as good as the reasons for one of the other three theses).

5.1.2. THE CONTINGENCY THESIS UNDERMINED

It seems to me that there are two considerations that might appear to support the Contingency Thesis. In this subsection, my aim is to show that neither survives closer examination.

The first consideration I want to focus on starts with an appeal to what may be called “reliability truths” — truths of the form “such-and-such reliably indicates so-and-so.” For instance, that the litmus paper turns red in a solution reliably indicates that the solution is acidic, or that there are six rings inside the tree reliably indicates that the tree is three years old. Reliability truths are contingent truths: that a litmus paper turns red in a solution reliably indicates in this world but not necessarily in other possible worlds that the solution is acidic. The next move is to argue that evidential support truths are reliability truths. The following claim appears to express an evidential support truth: (T) that a litmus paper turns red in a solution supports that the solution is acidic. What it is that explains why (T) is an evidential support truth is, plausibly, the corresponding reliability truth, and what it is that explains why the corresponding reliability truth explains why (T) is an evidential support truth is, plausibly, that evidential support truths are reliability truths.

There are two replies to this consideration. The first one concerns whether the idea that evidential support truths are reliability truths is consistent with our background assumption that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality. As I have argued in section 1, our assumption entails that evidential support is a two-place relation, a relation that holds between, and only between, a piece of evidence and a proposition. Now, reliability truths are world-dependent, they change from one world to another. So, the claim that evidential support truths are reliability truths appears to entail that evidential support is at least a three-place relation (“E supports P *relative to* a world”). Since the consideration at hand is not consistent with our assumption, it can be safely set aside: given the assumption that evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, evidential support truths cannot be reliability truths.

However, I don’t endorse this reply because I think it is mistaken. Consider the relation of being taller, which is plausibly a two-place relation. Whether I am taller than my brother concerns only my and my brother’s heights, but this is consistent with the fact that I am taller than my brother in some worlds but not in others. For similar reasons, that evidential support is a two-place relation is consistent with the fact that a piece of evidence supports a proposition in some worlds but not in others.

The second reply, which I take to be more promising and endorse, directly targets the idea that evidential support truths are reliability truths. As I have

maintained above, the *relevant* notion of evidential support is essentially tied to the notion of rationality in the sense that if E supports P, then if S has E and believes P on the basis of E, then S's belief that P is rational. Now, the essential connection between evidential support and rationality is severed if evidential support is taken to be reliable indication. And, this is because it is not true that if E reliably indicates P, then if S has E and believes P on the basis of E, then S's belief is rational. That a litmus paper turns red in a solution reliably indicates in this world that the solution is acidic, but if I know that the litmus paper turned red in this solution and believe that the solution is acidic on this basis, then it does not follow that my belief is rational. If, for instance, I have no idea whatsoever whether that a litmus paper turns red in a solution reliably indicates in this world that the solution is acidic, then my belief that the solution is acidic is as irrational as a belief that is not backed by any consideration. So, evidential support truths are not reliability truths.

The second consideration I want to examine rests on the claim that only the Contingency Thesis is consistent with the fact that there are what John L. Pollock (1986) calls "undercutting defeaters" as well as "rebutting defeaters." Rebutting and undercutting defeaters are rationality defeaters: if a subject acquires a rebutting or an undercutting defeater for her belief, then the belief is no longer rational for her (or is no longer as rational for her as before). A rebutting defeater for the rationality of a belief that P is a reason for believing the negation of P. Here is a typical case of rebutting defeat. Suppose that it visually appears to me as if the apple before me is red, and suppose further that this appearance (defeasibly) supports the proposition that the apple is red. However, a credible friend tells me that there is no red apple in the vicinity. I have thereby acquired a reason to think that the apple is not red. It seems that the belief that the apple is red is no longer rational for me because I now have a reason to think that it is false. An undercutting defeater for the rationality of a belief that P, on the other hand, is a reason for abandoning the belief without being a reason for believing the negation of P. More specifically, an undercutting defeater for the rationality of a belief that P "neutralizes the connection" between P and the evidence the subject already has for P. Here is a typical case of undercutting defeat, obtained by a slight revision of the previous scenario. Rather than saying that there is no red apple in the vicinity, my credible friend tells me that the apple is being irradiated by red light. In this case, I have not acquired a reason to think that the apple is not red, but it seems that it is no longer rational for me to believe that the apple is red. My friend's testimony gives me a reason for abandoning my belief that the apple is red without giving me a reason for believing that it is not red by neutralizing the connection between my original evidence for the belief and the belief.

Rebutting defeaters do not pose a threat for the Necessity Thesis. The thesis that evidential support is a necessary relation is consistent with the idea that if I have a piece of evidence E that supports P, and if I acquire another piece of evidence E' that supports not-P, then the belief that P is no longer rational for me given that E and E' together do not support P. That is, the fact that E supports P but (E and E') does not support P is compatible with the thesis that if E supports P then necessarily E supports P.

However, it is not clear that the Necessity Thesis is compatible with the fact that there are undercutting defeaters. How *exactly* are we to account for the fact that when one acquires an undercutting defeater for a belief that P, one acquires a reason for abandoning the belief without acquiring a reason for believing the negation of P? How exactly are we to understand the “neutralizing the connection” metaphor? It seems that, in the case described, the undercutting defeater that the apple is being irradiated by red light provides a reason for abandoning the belief that the apple is red by *removing* the evidential connection between my initial reason for the belief (its appearing to me as if the apple is red) and the belief itself. It seems that my acquisition of the undercutting defeater makes it the case that my initial reason *loses* its power to support the belief in question: it is no longer rational for me to believe that the apple is red because my initial reason no longer supports it. But if it is possible for a piece of evidence to lose its power to support a belief, then evidential support is not a necessary relation and hence the Necessity Thesis is false. Let us call this *the removing interpretation*, according to which an undercutting defeater neutralizes the connection between a piece of evidence E and a proposition P by removing the support E provides to P.

I grant that the removing interpretation gives us a coherent way of unpacking the “neutralizing the connection” metaphor, and I also grant that, under this interpretation, the Necessity Thesis is false. However, the removal interpretation is not mandatory, and there is an alternative interpretation according to which an undercutting defeater neutralizes the connection between a piece of evidence E and a proposition P by *masking* the support E provides to P. When a fragile glass is carefully protected by a packing material, its fragility is not lost or removed but is masked: it is still fragile but it wouldn't break if struck thanks to the work of the packing material. Similarly, we can say that an undercutting defeater for a belief that P masks the supports E provides to P: the support is still there but believing that P on the basis of E would not be rational thanks to the work of the defeater. Under the removing interpretation, the support undercut is the support removed: it no longer exists. Under the masking interpretation, the support undercut is the support masked: it still exists but it does not preserve its rationalizing function due to being masked.

Furthermore, under the masking interpretation of undercutting defeat, the Necessity Thesis need not be false. The fact that the support E provides to P is masked by an undercutting defeater is consistent with the thesis that E necessarily supports P (cf. the fact that the fragility of a glass is masked by a packing material is consistent with the thesis that the glass is necessarily fragile).

In this subsection, I have examined two considerations that might appear to support the Contingency Thesis and I have found both wanting. Absent any further consideration, it is fair to conclude that the Knowability Argument legitimately derives the conclusion that the inconsistency of (i)-(iv) is to be resolved by dropping (i) and, accordingly, that the Necessity Thesis is true. This completes my defense of the Necessity Thesis.

5.2. PREMISE (3): THE IMPOSSIBILITY THESIS

Let me now turn to the Impossibility Thesis, which claims that it cannot be that E supports P and E supports not-P while E preserves its rationalizing power with respect to P. Having distinguished above the Impossibility Thesis from (3) (namely, that it cannot be that E supports P and E supports not-P), I have argued that the Impossibility Thesis is weaker than (3) but strong enough for the argument for U* to proceed. Replacing (3) by the Impossibility Thesis is a critical move because it seems to me that an adequate (argumentative) defense of (3) is much harder to achieve than an adequate (argumentative) defense of the Impossibility Thesis.¹⁹

Once the foregoing observations are in place, the rest is pretty much plain sailing. The argument I wish to propose for the Impossibility Thesis is straightforward. I aim to show that if a piece of evidence E supports P and not-P, then it does not preserve its rationalizing power regarding P. So, let us assume that there is a piece of evidence, E, that supports P and not-P. If E supports P and not-P, then it is evident that the support E provides to P is defeated or neutralized by the support E provides to not-P, and vice versa — that E is a *self-defeater*. A piece of self-defeating evidence is such that the

¹⁹ White offers a *reductio* consideration in defense of (3), namely that the “absurdity” that one can rationally believe P and not-P follows from the falsity of (3) (2014: 314). How convincing is this consideration? Unfortunately, not very convincing. The (strong) permissivist might reasonably protest that the reason why many philosophers including White think that it is absurd to think that one can rationally believe P and not-P is their antecedent (and perhaps unquestioned) commitment to the thesis that a given piece of evidence cannot support contradictory propositions. However, this thesis is what permissivism is committed to rejecting. So, there is no non-question-begging argument against permissivism here.

support it provides to a proposition is defeated by the support it provides to the negation of that proposition (or more generally, to one of its contradictory propositions). Thus, a piece of self-defeating evidence does not need an extra piece of evidence in order to be defeated; it undermines its own rationalizing power. So, if E supports P and not-P, then E does not preserve its rationalizing power regarding P. Therefore, the Impossibility Thesis is true. This, in a nutshell, is what I call *the Self-Defeat Argument*.

A bit more formally, the Self-Defeat Argument goes like this:

- (a) E supports P and not-P.
- (b) If E supports P and not-P, then E is self-defeating evidence regarding P (i.e., the support E provides to P is defeated by the support E provides to not-P).
- (c) If E is self-defeating evidence regarding P, then E does not preserve its rationalizing power regarding P.
- (d) Therefore, if E supports P and not-P, then E does not preserve its rationalizing power regarding P.
- (e) Hence, it cannot be that E supports P and not-P while E preserves its rationalizing power regarding P (or, the Impossibility Thesis is true).

In this argument, (a) is the assumption for the conditional proof for (d); (b) follows from the definition of defeat (or of defeated evidence); (c) follows from the conceptual connection between a piece of evidence being defeated and its losing its rationalizing power; and, finally, (e) follows from (d). The Self-Defeat Argument is clearly valid, and its premises are obviously true.

One question that we can raise about the Self-Defeat Argument is this: when the support a piece of evidence provides to a given proposition is defeated by the support it provides to the negation of that proposition, is the defeat in question rebutting or undercutting defeat? Recall that a rebutting defeater for the rationality of a belief that P is a reason for believing the negation of P, and that an undercutting defeater is a reason for abandoning the belief without being a reason for believing its negation. It is clear that if E supports P and not-P, then E is a rebutting defeater for the belief of P and E is a rebutting defeater for the belief of not-P. So, self-defeat is at least rebutting defeat. But is it also undercutting defeat? The answer is no. If E supports P and not-P, then E is not an undercutting defeater for the rationality of the belief that P (and the rationality of the belief that not-P) because E is a reason for believing not-P (and for believing P). So, self-defeat is not undercutting

defeat. So, if E supports P and not-P, the support it provides to P is rebutted but not undercut by the support it provides to not-P.

This completes my defense of AES* conceived as an argument for U*. The defense is, as we have seen, non-trivial and requires making a number of moves that are unobvious. But it crosses the finish line — or so I have argued.

CONCLUSION

The Uniqueness Thesis (U) is that necessarily, there is at most one rational doxastic attitude one can take towards a proposition P, given a particular body of evidence E. The uniquer accepts U, and the permissivist rejects U. The Conditional Uniqueness Thesis (U*) is, as I have defined it, that if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then U is true. The uniquer* accepts U*, and the permissivist* rejects U*. After suggesting that the ongoing dialectic between the uniquer and the permissivist has led to an exaggeration of differences, I have maintained that a clear distinction between the Uniqueness Thesis (U) and the Conditional Uniqueness Thesis (U*) opens up the possibility of finding common ground between the uniquer and the permissivist. The hope is to achieve a rapprochement between the uniquer and the permissivist by showing that U* is true. However, as I have argued, if U* is true, then it is non-trivially true, which gives rise to the question of how it is to be defended.

To this aim, I have argued that AES*, which is a sufficiently weakened version of the argument (AES) White offers in favor of U, is sound if interpreted as an argument for U*. The two critical premises in AES* are the Necessity Thesis and the Impossibility Thesis. The Necessity Thesis is that if E supports P, then necessarily E supports P. Given the complexity of the issues involved, a good portion of my defense of AES* is devoted to the defense of the Necessity Thesis. I have mainly argued that the Necessity Thesis is true because its falsity is inconsistent with the fact that evidential support truths are knowable by us. The Impossibility Thesis is that it cannot be that E supports P and E supports not-P while E preserves its rationalizing power regarding P. The truth of the Impossibility Thesis follows from the fact that if E supports P and not-P, then the support E provides to P is rebutted by the support it provides to not-P. AES* establishes that permissivism* is false, and the falsity of permissivism* is what the uniquer and the permissivist must agree upon.²⁰

²⁰ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for insightful remarks on this paper.

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