

Conditional Uniqueness

Erhan Demircioğlu*

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Abstract: In this paper, I aim to do three things. First, I introduce the distinction between the Uniqueness Thesis (U) and what I call the Conditional Uniqueness Thesis (U*). Second, I argue that despite their official advertisements, some prominent uniqueness theorists effectively defend U* rather than U. Third, some influential considerations that have been raised by the opponents of U misfire if they are interpreted as against U*. The moral is that an appreciation of the distinction between U and U* helps to clarify the contours of the uniqueness debate and to avoid a good deal of talking past each other.

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Is there any slack between the evidence and what is rational to believe given the evidence? According to the Uniqueness Thesis (U), the answer is no:

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

* Koç University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1579-7505>

 Department of Philosophy, Koç University, Rumelifeneri Yolu, 34450, Sarıyer – Istanbul, Turkey

 erdemircioglu@ku.edu.tr

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U has been defended notably by Feldman (2006), White (2005), Christensen (2007) and Matheson (2011). Permissivism (P) is the denial of U. According to P, 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. P has been defended notably by Douven (2009), Titelbaum (2010), Kelly (2013), and Schoenfield (2014).

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.¹ 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). 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 towards 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? There are various alternatives here, one of which derives from the subjective Bayesian conception of prior probability distribution. According to subjective Bayesianism, what determines what is rational to believe are both the subject’s total evidence and her prior probability distribution, where the only constraint on the latter is consistency with probability calculus. On this view, there is no unique starting point for all subjects even when their total evidence is the same. So, as Kelly (2013, 308) puts it, “even if specifying an agent’s total evidence and her prior probability distribution suffices to pin down some doxastic attitude as the uniquely reasonable one, it does not follow that merely specifying her total evidence suffices to do the same”. So, if subjective Bayesianism is true, then the simplicity objection is sound and U is false.

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

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

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. (White 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?

The case is even clearer in Matheson's (2011) defense of U. Matheson explicitly takes evidentialism for granted, according to which what is rational for a subject to believe is determined only by the subject's evidence. Matheson writes:

The falsity of evidentialism would spell trouble for U... However, I will not be examining indirect attacks to U via criticisms of evidentialism, though such critiques do affect the plausibility of U... Rather, I will be assuming the truth of evidentialism and will proceed to assess the prospects of U given that assumption... (Matheson 2011, 364)

So, 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 “no”, and the uniquer effectively argues for a “yes” answer to the conditional question. That is, while the permissivist rejects U, the uniquer effectively defends what one might call the *Conditional Uniqueness Thesis* (U*), according to which if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then U is true. 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.

A failure to make a clear distinction between U and U* has led to an exaggeration of differences and given rise to a good deal of talking past each other. For instance, 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” (Ballantyne and Coffman 2011, 12). This sounds like a good start for developing the simplicity objection against U. However, Ballantyne and Coffman (2011, 12) also claim that this appeal to “extra-evidential features” relevant to rationality undermine White’s defense of U. However, this latter claim rests on overlooking passages from White like the one quoted above and is false. White’s defense of U is in effect a defense of U*, and as such Ballantyne and Coffman’s strategy against it is bound to misfire.

Here is another example. Kelly (2013) criticizes White’s defense of U by noting that it rests on a failure to distinguish between intrapersonal and interpersonal readings of U. U taken as having only intrapersonal import—Intrapersonal Uniqueness—is a thesis about how a particular body of evidence constrains the number of rational doxastic attitudes for a *single* subject; and thus taken, it is “silent on whether some other individual with the same total evidence might take up a different attitude towards the same proposition that’s fully reasonable” (Kelly 2013, 304). Interpersonal Uniqueness is the

thesis that there is just one rational doxastic attitude *any* individual having a body of evidence might take towards a proposition. Interpersonal Uniqueness is stronger than Intrapersonal Uniqueness. And, as Kelly (2013, 305) notes, it is clear that the uniqueness debate is about whether Interpersonal Uniqueness is true. The simplicity objection, if sound, undermines Interpersonal Uniqueness but is consistent with Intrapersonal Uniqueness given that the extra factor that purports to contribute to rationality (e.g., prior probability distribution) is presumably fixed by the facts about the single subject in question. And, Kelly (2013, 305–6) argues that White’s defense of U is best construed as a defense of Intrapersonal Uniqueness because, if interpreted as a defense of Interpersonal Uniqueness, it fails drastically.

However, if Kelly’s diagnosis about White’s defense of U is on the right track, then we are left with an unsettling question: if it is clear that the uniqueness debate is about Interpersonal Uniqueness, and if White’s defense of U is best construed as a defense of Intrapersonal Uniqueness, then how does White fail to see that his defense of U is simply irrelevant to the uniqueness debate? There are two possible answers to this question. The less charitable answer is that White conflates Intrapersonal with Interpersonal Uniqueness and thus does not recognize the slide from the former to the latter. However, I don’t think even Kelly (2013, 309) would wholeheartedly endorse this answer because, as he openly acknowledges, he does not “imagine that any of [the points he makes] is news to [White]”. The more charitable (and textually supported) answer is that White’s defense of U is in effect a defense of U^* and there is no substantive intra/inter-personal distinction that applies to the latter. There is an intra/inter-personal distinction that applies to a uniqueness thesis just in case there is an extra factor other than evidence that contributes to rationality but might not be shared by two different subjects having the same evidence. However, whether there is such an extra factor is irrelevant to a defense of U^* : if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, then if Intrapersonal Uniqueness is true, then Interpersonal Uniqueness is true. So, when it comes to defending U^* , the slide from intrapersonal to interpersonal considerations is not fallacious.

The following seems to me a fair description of a portion of the current dialectic. The uniquer’s “official” aim is to give an affirmative answer to

the uniqueness question (that is, the question whether the Uniqueness Thesis is true) but perhaps 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 a “yes” answer to the conditional question (that is, the question whether if evidence is the sole determinant of rationality, U is true), sometimes even without an explicit indication that that answer falls short as an answer to the uniqueness question. The permissivist (qua a proponent of the simplicity objection), 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 anyway. The upshot is that some confusion surrounding the uniqueness debate might have been avoided if the distinction between the Uniqueness Thesis and the Conditional Uniqueness Thesis were clearly appreciated.

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