

# THE CASE FOR RATIONAL UNIQUENESS

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ABSTRACT: The Uniqueness Thesis, or rational uniqueness, claims that a body of evidence severely constrains one's doxastic options. In particular, it claims that for any body of evidence E and proposition P, E justifies at most one doxastic attitude toward P. In this paper I defend this formulation of the uniqueness thesis and examine the case for its truth. I begin by clarifying my formulation of the Uniqueness Thesis and examining its close relationship to evidentialism. I proceed to give some motivation for this strong epistemic claim and to defend it from several recent objections in the literature. In particular I look at objections to the Uniqueness Thesis coming from considerations of rational disagreement (can't reasonable people disagree?), the breadth of doxastic attitudes (can't what is justified by the evidence encompass more than one doxastic attitude?), borderline cases and caution (can't it be rational to be cautious and suspend judgment even when the evidence slightly supports belief?), vagueness (doesn't the vagueness of justification spell trouble for the Uniqueness Thesis?), and degrees of belief (doesn't a fine-grained doxastic picture present additional problems for the Uniqueness Thesis?).

KEYWORDS: disagreement, evidence, justification, rationality

## 1. Introduction

Suppose that you have a body of evidence. Given that body of evidence, precisely how open are your doxastic options, rationally speaking, regarding any given proposition? Does this body of evidence rationally permit you to believe whatever you want or are the doxastic restrictions much more stringent? The Uniqueness Thesis claims that one's doxastic options are rationally quite constrained by any given body of evidence. In fact, according to the Uniqueness Thesis there is at most one rational doxastic attitude to adopt towards any one proposition given any particular body of evidence.

The Uniqueness Thesis, or rational uniqueness,<sup>1</sup> is a strong claim about the permissiveness of rationality. Although it has been put to much use in the current

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using the terms 'Uniqueness Thesis' and 'rational uniqueness' interchangeably. 'The Uniqueness Thesis' is Richard Feldman's term ("Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers without God: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194-214), whereas David Christensen ("Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187-218) uses 'rational uniqueness.'

debates regarding the epistemology of disagreement, the Uniqueness Thesis tends to receive rather little explicit attention.<sup>2</sup> In what follows I will explain and clarify a version of the Uniqueness Thesis which I will be defending. Although this characterization of the Uniqueness Thesis will differ from other accounts in the literature, it is a more general characterization which adequately captures the claim of rational uniqueness. I will then examine the relationship that this claim has with evidentialism, and proceed to defend my characterization of the Uniqueness Thesis from several objections.

## 2. Some Clarifications

First, what is the Uniqueness Thesis? As mentioned above, the claim is that given a body of evidence, there is no more than one justified doxastic attitude to have toward a proposition. I will be defending a precisification of this thesis which claims the following:

(UT) For any body of evidence E and proposition P, E justifies at most one doxastic attitude toward P.

Some clarifications are in order to make this claim precise. First, bodies of evidence are possessed by individuals at times. They can be shared by more than one individual, and they can change from time to time. (UT), however, makes no reference to individuals or times since (UT) claims (in part) that *who* possesses the body of evidence, as well as *when* it is possessed, makes no difference regarding *which* doxastic attitude is justified (if any) toward any particular proposition by that body of evidence.

(UT) concerns justification. In what follows, I will be using the terms 'justified,' 'reasonable,' and 'rational' all interchangeably unless otherwise noted. My concern will be with *epistemic* justification, so when I speak of a belief's reasonability or rationality it will concern the reasons to think that it is true, and not any means-ends or pragmatic considerations to which 'rationality' or 'reasonability' are sometimes used to refer. (UT) concerns propositional justification, rather than doxastic justification.<sup>3</sup> That is, the kind of justification

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<sup>2</sup> Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness," *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005): 445-459, and Nathan Ballantyne, E.J. Coffman, "Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality," *Philosophers Imprint* (forthcoming) are notable exceptions.

<sup>3</sup> Doxastic justification concerns not only the factors which support adopting a certain doxastic attitude toward a proposition, but also how those factors are utilized in the formation of that doxastic attitude. Thus, doxastic justification concerns the status of a doxastic attitude which is held by an individual and depends in part upon how that individual came to have that doxastic attitude or upon what that doxastic attitude is based.

relevant to (UT) is solely a relation between a body of evidence, a doxastic attitude, and a proposition. How individuals have come to have the doxastic attitudes they have toward the proposition in question will not be relevant to our discussion. Further, individuals can be propositionally justified in adopting attitudes toward propositions which they psychologically cannot adopt. An ability to take on a given doxastic attitude toward a proposition is not a requisite for being propositionally justified in believing it. It is easy to see that (UT) concerns propositional justification and not doxastic justification since no mention is made of any particular individual actually having any particular doxastic attitude toward any proposition.

Importantly, it is not a necessary condition for being justified in believing *p* that one be able to demonstrate that one is justified in believing *p*. The *project* of justifying or giving a defense of one's belief that *p* is distinct from the *state* of being justified in believing that *p*. One need not be able to articulate one's reasons for believing *p* in order to be justified in believing *p*.<sup>4</sup>

The version of the Uniqueness Thesis which I have given differs from other accounts in the literature in that it claims that *at most* one doxastic attitude is rational as opposed to claiming that there is *exactly one* doxastic attitude which is rational.<sup>5</sup> In most cases there will be exactly one rational doxastic attitude, but as Feldman<sup>6</sup> notes, it may be that no doxastic attitudes are rational to adopt towards a proposition which one does not or cannot understand. That is, it may be that a necessary condition for *any* rational doxastic attitude towards a proposition that one understands or grasps, or at least is able to understand or grasp, the proposition in question. So, to at least avoid taking a stand on that issue, I think that the Uniqueness Thesis is best stated in this slightly weaker way.

It is important to clarify how a body of evidence should be understood. (UT) makes a claim about how many doxastic attitudes are justified toward a proposition by a body of evidence. (UT) does not make any claims regarding how many doxastic attitudes are justified toward a proposition by distinct total bodies of evidence which contain identical bodies of evidence as proper parts. Both Earl Conee<sup>7</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> See James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Nous* 34 (2000): 517-549, for a more detailed defense of this claim.

<sup>5</sup> Contrast White, "Epistemic Permissiveness," and Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 111-174, for two examples.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement," in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216-36.

<sup>7</sup> Earl Conee, "Rational Disagreement Defended," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, 69-90.

Alvin Goldman<sup>8</sup> have illustrated that there can be cases where individuals who differ in terms of their higher-order evidence (their evidence about the character of their first-order evidence) can be justified in adopting distinct doxastic attitudes toward a single proposition, even when these disparate bodies of evidence share the same first-order evidence (or ‘evidence relevant to the dispute’ as Conee refers to it). Conee and Goldman each give examples of cases where two individual’s have the same first-order evidence regarding a proposition, but have different evidence regarding the various relevant epistemic principles (or ‘E-systems’ as Goldman talks of them). Given all of this, the two individuals are justified in adopting distinct doxastic attitudes toward the relevant proposition. These considerations, however, do not tell against (UT). (UT) is not a claim restricted to one’s first-order evidence (or evidence directly pertaining to the dispute). (UT) claims that a body of evidence supports at most one doxastic attitude toward a proposition; it makes no claim whatsoever regarding the number of doxastic attitudes one could be justified in adopting towards that proposition if that single body of evidence were supplemented in distinct and diverging ways resulting in disparate total bodies of evidence.

Finally, what are the doxastic options which (UT) concerns? Often doxastic attitudes are seen as ‘all-or-nothing’ affairs and are limited to three possibilities: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. Others think of the doxastic options in a more fine-grained way and speak instead of degrees of belief. Those within the degreed camp can be further distinguished by how expansive each doxastic attitude is conceived to be, from a single point value or probability function, to a range of probability functions. (UT) makes no claim regarding which doxastic picture is correct. Although (UT) is silent on this matter, in the bulk of the paper I will be examining the prospects of (UT) given a tripartite doxastic taxonomy, but I will conclude by briefly extending the discussion to a richer doxastic picture.

### 3. Uniqueness and Evidentialism

Before going any further it will be beneficial to briefly examine the relationship between (UT) and Evidentialism. Evidentialism is the claim that which doxastic attitude one is justified in adopting toward a proposition at a time is determined entirely by one’s evidence at that time. More formally the evidentialist thesis is as follows:

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<sup>8</sup> Alvin Goldman, “Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement,” in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, 187-215.

(ET) For any subject S, proposition P, time T, and doxastic attitude D, S is justified in adopting D toward P at T if and only if having D toward P fits the evidence S has at T.<sup>9</sup>

Evidentialism is thus a supervenience claim – it claims that which doxastic attitude is justified for an individual regarding a proposition at a time supervenes upon that individual’s evidence at that time.

(ET) might be thought to entail (UT), but this is not the case. Even if which doxastic attitude is justified for an individual at a time is entirely determined by that individual’s evidence at that time, it needn’t be that there is no more than one competitor doxastic attitude which is so justified. That is, it could be that although evidence alone determines which doxastic attitude(s) are justified for me, I nevertheless have doxastic options.<sup>10</sup> 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. It could be that what supervenes on the evidence is broader than any one doxastic attitude. So, it could be that a body of evidence is such that believing or suspending judgment would be justified for any individual with that body of evidence – that it is this disjunction of doxastic attitudes which supervenes on the evidence.<sup>11</sup> The evidential thesis does not rule this out. I will critically examine below whether a body of evidence could be like this, but for now my task is simply to illustrate that one could consistently endorse evidentialism and yet deny (UT).<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, (UT) might incorrectly be thought to entail (ET).<sup>13</sup> If one’s evidence always picks out at most one rational doxastic attitude concerning a proposition, then it must be that the evidence (and the evidence alone) is what is conferring the justificatory status upon the doxastic attitude. However, (UT) is silent as to *how* this uniquely rational attitude is determined by the evidence. (UT) is clearly consistent with (ET) in that it may be the attitude which *best fits* the evidence which is the uniquely justified one, but (UT) can also be consistently

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<sup>9</sup> This closely resembles the (E) principle Conee and Feldman define and defend as evidentialism. See Earl Conee, Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15-34.

<sup>10</sup> Goldman makes such a suggestion. See Goldman, "Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement."

<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, on a degreed picture, one’s evidence might justify a larger range of confidence than any one doxastic attitude (even if the attitudes themselves are ranges and not precise points). In sum, what the evidence justifies might be broader than what the doxastic options are.

<sup>12</sup> In addition, the evidentialist could endorse a relativist notion of ‘fit,’ in which case she could endorse (ET) and deny (UT). This route is explored in Ballantyne, Coffman, "Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality."

<sup>13</sup> Ballantyne, Coffman, "Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality."

defended along with ‘anti-evidentialism’ which claims that the uniquely justified attitude is the one which has the *least or worst fit* with the evidence.<sup>14</sup> (UT) can also be consistently defended with ‘Tuesday evidentialism’ which claims that the uniquely justified attitude is the one best supported by one’s evidence obtained on Tuesdays as well as other such ‘evidential’ theories of justification. Anti-evidentialism and such other ‘evidential’ theories are not very plausible, but they do show that the defender of (UT) need not defend (ET) on pains of consistency.

Nevertheless, the implausibility of anti-evidentialism shows that there is an intimate relation between (UT) and (ET). If (ET) is false, then it seems that (UT) will also be false since anti-evidentialism and the other alternative ‘evidential’ theories are clearly false. So, the falsity of evidentialism would spell trouble for rational uniqueness.<sup>15</sup> The non-evidentialist has no business endorsing (UT).<sup>16</sup> However, I will not be examining indirect attacks to (UT) via criticisms of evidentialism, though such critiques do affect the plausibility of (UT), given the implausibility of anti-evidentialism and the other relevant alternatives.<sup>17</sup> Rather, in what follows I will be assuming the truth of evidentialism, or (ET), and will proceed to assess the prospects for (UT) given that assumption regarding the nature of epistemic justification. There are enough challenges to (UT) worthy of our consideration within this restricted domain.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Richard Feldman for both pointing this relation out to me and giving me the term ‘anti-evidentialism.’

<sup>15</sup> Presumably, rival accounts of epistemic justification will have their own rival accounts of a uniqueness claim where the feature or features they see as relevant for epistemic justification will be held fixed and replace the body of evidence in (UT). Thus, for process reliabilism we might expect something like:

(UT\*) For cognitive belief forming process C, subject S, proposition P, and time T, C justifies at most one doxastic attitude for S toward P at T.

Or,

(UT\*\*) For any degree of reliability D had by a belief forming process C, Subject S, proposition P, and time T, the D of C justifies at most one doxastic attitude for S toward P at T.

Now it seems that the reliabilist would reject (UT\*), although I’m not sure what she would say about (UT\*\*). However, I will not here explore rival accounts of the Uniqueness Thesis nor their plausibility within rival accounts of epistemic justification.

<sup>16</sup> Is this itself a problem for (UT)? I don’t think so, since most of those who have been concerned with the truth of (UT) are already committed to some form of evidentialism. The interesting question is whether (UT) is true even given the truth of evidentialism.

<sup>17</sup> See Ballantyne, Coffman “Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality,” for such an attack on (UT).

<sup>18</sup> If the reader is not convinced that evidentialism is correct, then the rest of this paper can be treated as defending a conditional claim: if evidentialism is true, then the Uniqueness Thesis is correct. For more on the relationship between the Uniqueness Thesis and Evidentialism see Ballantyne, Coffman “Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality.”

#### 4. Motivating Rational Uniqueness

Before turning to these challenges to (UT), it is worth motivating this epistemic claim. Why think that a body of evidence justifies at most one doxastic attitude toward any proposition? (UT) seems quite plausible on a tripartite doxastic taxonomy (that our doxastic options are belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment) since there are also three ways that a body of evidence can be regarding a proposition. It seems that a body of evidence either on balance supports  $p$ , on balance supports not- $p$ , or is on balance neutral between  $p$  and not- $p$ . A body of evidence cannot on balance support both  $p$  and on balance support not- $p$ , and a body of evidence cannot on balance support  $p$  and on balance be neutral between  $p$  and not- $p$ .<sup>19</sup>

So, given our evidentialist assumption, there seems to be a unique doxastic option regarding  $p$  for each type of possible evidential situation regarding  $p$ . If the evidence supports  $p$ , then believing  $p$  is the uniquely justified doxastic attitude regarding  $p$ . If the evidence supports not- $p$ , then disbelieving  $p$  is the uniquely justified doxastic attitude regarding  $p$ . If the evidence is neutral between  $p$  and not- $p$ , then suspending judgment is the uniquely justified doxastic attitude regarding  $p$ . If the body of evidence is neutral between  $p$  and not- $p$  it is not that believing or disbelieving  $p$  would both be rational. Suspension of judgment is always an option, and it is this doxastic attitude that would be rationally demanded in such an evidentially tied situation.<sup>20</sup> A body of evidence is like set of scales: there are only three ways the scales can be: favoring the left side, favoring the right side, or perfectly balanced.

So, there are three ways that a body of evidence can be, and, at least given a tripartite doxastic taxonomy, one unique doxastic response which fits each evidential possibility. So, consideration of the tripartite account of doxastic attitudes and ways that a body of evidence can be give reason to believe that rational uniqueness is correct.

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<sup>19</sup> Similarly a body of evidence cannot on balance support not- $p$  and on balance be neutral between  $p$  and not- $p$ . This motivation for rational uniqueness parallels one given by White, "Epistemic Permissiveness."

<sup>20</sup> In this way, one's doxastic options are more expansive than one's practical options always are. Thus, William James (*The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: David McKay, 1911)) is mistaken in likening one's doxastic options to a practical choice such as whether to offer a marriage proposal. While not deciding whether to offer the proposal gives the same result as deciding to not offer the proposal, in the doxastic cases, suspension of judgment offers a third distinct alternative. This third option is unparalleled in some practical cases (those James calls 'forced' options). For more on this point see Richard Feldman, "Clifford's Principle and James's Options," *Social Epistemology* 20 (2006): 19-33.

In what follows I will examine various objections to the Uniqueness Thesis and respond to each. I will consider objections concerning disagreements, being cautious, the breadth of justified doxastic attitudes, and problems concerning vagueness.

## 5. Objection 1: Disagreement

The Uniqueness Thesis is not without its detractors. Gideon Rosen, for instance, takes it as an obvious fact that individuals can reasonably disagree even given a single body of evidence. He explains,

When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators.<sup>21</sup>

Here Rosen takes it that cases of disagreement show that rational uniqueness is clearly false. Cases of disagreement have been used in ethics to argue that there is no universal objective moral code, and it seems that Rosen takes it that a similar case can be made against rational uniqueness.

Rosen, however, thinks that there is an important asymmetry between the epistemic and ethical cases of disagreement. He thinks that even if ethical disagreement does not tell against ethical objectivism, the same is not true regarding the effect of disagreement upon rational uniqueness. He writes,

Rational permission differs from moral permission in the following respect. There is no presumption that when an act is morally impermissible, we should be able to lead any clear-headed, open-minded, intelligent agent to see that it is. That's why rationally irresolvable moral disagreement is a possibility. In the epistemic case, on the other hand, a claim to the effect that one is obliged to follow a certain rule is undermined if we can describe a reasonable-seeming, fully reflective, and fully livable human practice that eschews it ... You can charge [the disagreeing party] with irrationality, and they will listen to the indictment. But what will you say to back it up? When they ask you, "What's wrong with our way of proceeding?", what will you say? If you have nothing to say, then the charge will not stick. Not only will they (quite reasonably) fail to heed you. If you have nothing to say, then in my view the charge is mistaken.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gideon Rosen, "Nominalism, Naturalism, and Epistemic Relativism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 (2001): 71.

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, "Nominalism," 83.



There are a couple of things worth noting about Rosen's comments. First and foremost, Rosen seems to confuse the *project of justifying one's beliefs* with the *state of having justified beliefs* or being justified in believing certain things. As mentioned above, being epistemically justified in believing p does not entail that one is able to convince others that p or to even give a non-question begging defense of p. Being unable to articulate why one's claim is correct, or what is wrong with an opponent's counter-argument, does not have the consequence that one's claim is not justified or that the opponent's claim is not unjustified. Given (ET), whether either claim is justified will depend upon its fit with the evidence, so one's inability to convince another does not show that the belief in question is not justified; thus, it does not show that (UT) is false.<sup>23</sup>

Second, it is not clear that morality permits rationally irresolvable disagreements in the way Rosen imagines – John Rawls<sup>24</sup> and Roderick Firth<sup>25</sup> at least think otherwise. Rawls and Firth are concerned with rational procedures and thus are using 'rational' in a sense other than we are, but if we closely examine Rosen's comments, it seems that he too is thinking of rationality in this procedural way. In the first quote given above, Rosen refers to each individual 'carefully weighing the evidence,' and 'being thoughtful.' Such responsible inquiry and careful consideration, however, does not guarantee that one's resulting beliefs will be epistemically justified.<sup>26</sup> As we are understanding it, epistemic justification is a matter of evidential fit alone. So, even if ideal agents could undergo rational procedures and come to different conclusions, this is not to say that those distinct conclusions are each epistemically justified by their evidence. To maintain that this is the case would be contrary to our evidentialist assumption.

I agree with Rosen that individuals can each undergo *rational procedures* and come to different conclusions, but this is not the type of rational permissiveness that is relevant to (UT). So long as ideal agents are still fallible judges of the evidence, two such individuals could each carefully weigh the same body of evidence and yet come to distinct conclusions. This, however, does not show that the body of evidence does not support only one of the differing doxastic attitudes.

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<sup>23</sup> See Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement," and Pryor "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," for more on this claim.

<sup>24</sup> John Rawls, "Outline for a Decision Procedure in Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): 177-197, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

<sup>25</sup> Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (1952): 317-345.

<sup>26</sup> A similar distinction is made by Russ Shafer-Landau and utilized in attacking an anti-realist argument from moral disagreement. See Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), especially Ch. 9.

So, it is hard to see how Rosen's considerations regarding disagreements show that (UT) is false. Importantly, (UT) does not claim that it will always be easy to determine which doxastic attitude is the uniquely justified one to adopt toward a proposition given a body of evidence. Often it will not. In fact, this difficulty in part explains the widespread and persistent disagreement which we often encounter in our lives over a variety of topics.

## 6. Objection 2: The Breadth of Justified Doxastic Attitudes

Alvin Goldman briefly questions the Uniqueness Thesis concerning potential mismatches between one's doxastic options and the prescriptions made by a body of evidence. Goldman claims that it seems unlikely that the correct epistemic principles will make doxastic prescriptions only in the narrowest doxastic categories (whichever these may be). Goldman notes that there are psychological limits as to how narrow or wide a doxastic state can be regardless of the correct doxastic taxonomy. Given that there is some narrowest doxastic state, Goldman questions why we should think that the correct epistemology will have it that solely one of these narrowest doxastic states will be justified by any body of evidence. Goldman thinks that this criticism applies equally well to a tripartite taxonomy of doxastic attitudes as to a degreed notion of belief. On the tripartite picture, Goldman maintains that the evidentially prescribed doxastic attitude could plausibly be a disjunctive category such as 'belief or suspension of judgment.'<sup>27</sup>

From considerations explored above, it is hard to see how Goldman could be correct on this point. On the tripartite doxastic taxonomy a body of evidence simply could not support one of Goldman's disjunctive doxastic categories. A body of evidence either supports a proposition, supports its denial, or is neutral on the matter. Given which way the body of evidence is, belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment respectively will be the justified doxastic attitude to have toward that proposition. A body of evidence cannot both be neutral regarding *p* and also support *p*, so it is not plausible that Goldman's disjunctive categories could be justified for an individual to adopt toward a proposition given a body of evidence.

## 7. Objection 3: Borderline Cases and Caution

Thomas Kelly does not think that rational uniqueness is especially plausible even on a tripartite picture of one's doxastic options. He thinks that marginal cases cast

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<sup>27</sup> Goldman, "Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement." Goldman even offers invented labels for such states such as 'belension' and 'disbelension' – the disjunctive category of disbelief and suspension of judgment.

insurmountable doubt upon the claim that there is at most one rational doxastic attitude to adopt toward a proposition given a body of evidence.<sup>28</sup> Kelly asks us to imagine the following case:

Suppose that the evidence available to me is just barely sufficient to justify my belief that it will rain tomorrow: if the evidence was even slightly weaker than it is, then I would be unjustified in thinking that it will rain. Suppose further that you have the same evidence but are slightly more cautious than I am, and so do not yet believe that it will rain tomorrow. It is not that you are dogmatically averse to concluding that it will rain; indeed, we can suppose that if the evidence for rain gets even slightly stronger, then you too will take up the relevant belief.<sup>29</sup>

Given this setup, Kelly thinks that it is by no means clear that the reader is being any less reasonable than Kelly in adopting her distinct doxastic attitude toward the proposition that it will rain tomorrow.

It is hard to follow Kelly here. After all, as Kelly claims, the evidence *is sufficient* to justify believing that it will rain. When one's evidence is like that, withholding belief is not the justified doxastic response – one has sufficient reason to believe the proposition at hand. Being cautious is often a good thing, but in this case exercising caution is causing an individual to adopt a doxastic attitude which is distinct from the doxastic attitude toward *p* justified by the reader's evidence. So, in this case, the reader has adopted the wrong doxastic attitude regarding the proposition that it will rain tomorrow given her evidence. This follows from our evidentialist assumption and Kelly's given description of the case.

This being so, nothing in (UT) dictates how bad of an epistemic crime it is to fail to adopt the uniquely correct doxastic attitude toward a proposition,

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<sup>28</sup> Roderick Chisholm makes room for such cases. In setting out his terms of epistemic appraisal, Chisholm asserts that one such status is acceptable. He defines this epistemic status as follows: "h is acceptable for S =Df Withholding h is not more reasonable for S than accepting h." (Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 9.) Chisholm goes on to claim that not all propositions that are acceptable, in this sense, are also beyond reasonable doubt (such that accepting them is more reasonable than withholding). The motivation that Chisholm gives for this claim comes from what he sees might be an adequate theory of perception. He states that such a theory of perception might require us to say, "if I have that experience which might naturally be expressed by saying that I 'seem to see' a certain state of affairs (e.g., 'I seem to see a man standing there'), then the state of affairs that I thus seem to perceive (the proposition that a man is standing there) is one that is, for me, ipso facto, acceptable. It may be, however, that although the proposition is thus acceptable, it is not beyond reasonable doubt; i.e., although withholding it is not more reasonable than believing it, believing it cannot be said to be more reasonable than withholding it." (Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 9-10.)

<sup>29</sup> Kelly, "Peer Disagreement," 10.

particularly in borderline cases. In borderline cases such as this one, Kelly's suspension of judgment seems to be much less of an epistemic transgression than one who remains skeptical even after much more positive evidence comes in on the matter. It would be a mistake, however, to confuse a slight failure of rationality with rationality. In the case described, Kelly can be properly reproached for not believing in accordance with the evidence, though he still does epistemically better than he might have. The defender of (UT) can satisfactorily account for this case.

### 8. Objection 4: Vagueness

These considerations of borderline cases of justification can lead us to think that justification and rationality are vague concepts. Individuals who endorse this claim would deny that there is a clear and distinct line separating when one is justified in believing a proposition and when one is not. The borders between cases where a doxastic attitude is justified and those where it is not may well be fuzzy and such that no amount of inquiry or conceptual analysis would settle whether that doxastic attitude toward the proposition in question was justified. In this way, the justification relation may be relevantly like the 'is close to' relation.

Why think justification is vague? First, it could be that it is vague whether a certain body of evidence supports a proposition or whether a given doxastic attitude fits that body of evidence. This seems to be particularly likely where there are a lot of evidential considerations at hand and there are defeaters and defeater-defeaters on both sides of the issue. In addition, it could also be vague whether a certain piece of evidence is part of a given body of evidence. Whatever the conditions for evidence possession are, it is quite plausible that at least some of them are vague.<sup>30</sup>

The vagueness of justification might be thought to create problems for (UT). If justification is vague, then there will be bodies of evidence such that it is not clear whether a certain doxastic attitude is justified or not regarding a proposition. Given that possibility, one might wonder how (UT) could be correct. One might be tempted to reason that if justification is a vague concept, then at least in these cases of indeterminacy, there can be distinct doxastic attitudes that are such that one would be justified in adopting either of them towards a proposition.

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<sup>30</sup> Access internalists, for instance, claim that a necessary condition on something being part of one's evidence is that one is aware of it (or aware that it is a mental state which one is in). So, one's evidence is restricted to the mental states that one is aware of being in. However, it seems that it can be vague whether one is aware of being in a particular mental state. To see this we can examine a sorites series on awareness between clear cases of awareness and clear cases of unawareness. Although there are clear cases on both sides of the spectrum, there does not appear to be any sharp divide between cases of awareness and cases of unawareness.

Vagueness will not present a challenge to (UT) in cases where it is indeterminate whether a body of evidence justifies one doxastic attitude, yet it determinately does not justify all other doxastic attitudes towards that particular proposition. In such a case, it may be that the evidence justifies no doxastic attitude toward that proposition, but (UT) is consistent with this. Recall that (UT) claims only that *at most* one competitor doxastic attitude is ever justified by a body of evidence toward a proposition.

Things might be thought to be more problematic in cases where it is indeterminate whether a body of evidence justifies each of two distinct doxastic attitudes. However, such cases will only present a problem for (UT) if the indeterminacy has it that both of these doxastic attitudes are then justified for the relevant proposition by this body of evidence. However, it is hard to see why the indeterminacy of justification would have this result.

To give an analogous case, it can plausibly be vague whether a certain color patch is blue and at the same time vague whether that same color patch is green. This fact, however, does not suffice to show that the color patch is both blue and green at the same time. Similarly, it may be vague that a certain individual is tall and at the same time vague that the same individual is not tall. However, there is no obvious route from this fact to the individual's simultaneously being both tall and not tall. Some responses to vagueness deny bivalence, but the consequence examined here would be much more drastic than that. Such a response would seemingly permit the truth of contradictions! So, indeterminacy in cases of justification does not entail the permissiveness of rationality. Even if it is vague whether each of two distinct doxastic attitudes fits the evidence, it does not follow that each doxastic attitude is justified for that proposition given that body of evidence.<sup>31</sup> So, it is at best unclear how vagueness will present any challenge to (UT).

## 9. Degrees of Belief

Thus far we have been examining the prospects for rational uniqueness given a tripartite picture of one's doxastic options. These days, many epistemologists have opted instead for a more fine-grained doxastic picture, preferring to talk in terms of degrees of belief rather than all-out-belief or all-or-nothing-belief. It is worth briefly exploring the prospects of the Uniqueness Thesis given this richer doxastic picture.

The Uniqueness Thesis has been claimed to be implausible on such a richer doxastic picture,<sup>32</sup> but the reasons typically given are as those we have considered

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<sup>31</sup> Christensen ("Epistemology of Disagreement," 192) makes a similar point.

<sup>32</sup> See Kelly, "Peer Disagreement."

above. While it might be more plausible to think that there are borderline cases and vagueness issues on this richer doxastic conception, what we have said above will apply equally well on this more fine-grained approach. So, I don't think that these are good reasons to abandon the Uniqueness Thesis on a degreed picture of belief either.

However, above we dismissed the 'breadth of doxastic attitudes' objection since a tripartite picture of one's doxastic option seemed to not let this objection off the ground. We saw that a body of evidence simply could not be such that it supported [belief or suspension of judgment] toward  $p$ . Nonetheless, on a degreed doxastic picture, it seems that this same response will not do. It may seem possible that a body of evidence not uniquely prescribe only one doxastic attitude when there are so many more distinct doxastic alternatives. Goldman doesn't find the tripartite account very convincing, so what about his worry applied to a richer doxastic picture?

In applying his objection to a degreed picture of doxastic attitudes, Goldman gives the example of an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which made projections it deemed 'likely.' The panel's finding of the projections being 'likely' was to be interpreted as having a 66 – 90% chance of being correct. Such a claim seems to allow for quite a bit of leeway regarding a degree of confidence in the projections which would seemingly nonetheless be rational. Goldman does not explicitly claim that epistemic principles are similar in the relevant ways to such projections, but claims that if they are, then there is some doxastic permissiveness.

The problem here seemingly has to do with the fact that there may be several distinct ranges which all cover the degree(s) of belief justified by one's evidence. For instance, if we suppose that the justified doxastic attitude is a range, we might wonder whether any doxastic attitude which is a proper part of that justified range would itself be justified. For instance, if the evidence justified the range of .66 -- .9 belief that  $p$ , would competitor doxastic attitudes of believing to degree .74 and believing to degree .76 each be justified as well?

Similarly, competitor doxastic ranges that each encompassed the justified doxastic attitude might each be thought to be justified. So, if the evidence justified believing  $p$  to degree .75, one might think that having the doxastic attitude which ranges from .75 – .8 and the doxastic attitude which ranges from .7 – .75 would be equally rational. If so, then there would be more than one competitor doxastic attitude which one would be justified in adopting toward a proposition given a single body of evidence.

Are such distinct doxastic attitudes toward  $p$  justified by a single body of evidence? I don't think so. I am yet to be convinced that the existence of justified doxastic attitudes which are ranges of degrees of belief has such a consequence. If

one has adopted a doxastic attitude toward a proposition which is more expansive than what is justified by the evidence (as in the latter case), then that individual has not responded appropriately to the evidence. In such a case, one's doxastic attitude is too encompassing. There is a doxastic attitude which better fits the evidence. Similarly, if an individual has adopted a doxastic attitude toward  $p$  which is narrower than what the evidence supports (as in the former case), then that individual as well has not responded correctly to the evidence – a broader range of belief is called for. Here too there is a doxastic attitude which better fits the evidence. In both cases the individual in question could have had a doxastic attitude which better fits the evidence. It is *this* doxastic attitude (the one which best fits the evidence) which is the justified one to have toward the proposition in question. So, in Goldman's example, the doxastic attitude to have is the range of .66 – .9 belief that the panel's projections are correct. Any narrower or broader doxastic range would fail to appropriately fit the evidence.

Here again, the degree to which individuals whose doxastic attitudes fail to precisely line up with the justified doxastic range are believing irrationally will depend upon how much larger or smaller one's doxastic attitude is in comparison to the justified range of belief. It may be on this response that what is in fact justified for the individual is to believe the proposition question to the exact probability which his or her evidence supports the proposition in question (supposing there is some such probability). It may be that this is psychologically impossible, but it may nonetheless be what is epistemically required. As mentioned earlier, an individual having propositional justification for adopting an attitude toward a proposition does not entail that she is able to adopt that attitude toward that proposition. So, considerations of psychological limitations do not pose a problem for (UT). Again, more can be said about degrees of irrationality or unjustified doxastic attitudes that may be able to soften this blow. It needn't be that such individuals are to blame or that they ought to be censured. So, it is by no means clear that such a doxastic picture rules out the Uniqueness Thesis. We have seen no additional complications for rational uniqueness that come from adopting a more fine-grained doxastic picture.

## 10. Conclusion

We have seen some motivation for endorsing rational uniqueness and have fought off several objections to this claim. Rational uniqueness seems to be quite defensible given a tripartite doxastic taxonomy, and we have not seen any complications that arise from adopting a more fine-grained account of our doxastic options. So, the uniqueness thesis appears to be a strong, yet plausible claim regarding the permissiveness of rationality.