ALLEGED COUNTEREXAMPLES TO UNIQUENESS

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ABSTRACT: Kopec and Titelbaum collect five alleged counterexamples to Uniqueness, the thesis that it is impossible for agents who have the same total evidence to be ideally rational in having different doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition. I argue that four of the alleged counterexamples fail and that Uniqueness should be slightly modified to accommodate the fifth example.

KEYWORDS: uniqueness, permissivism, impermissivism, evidence, rationality

Introduction

There is now a standing debate about how many doxastic attitudes can be rational given a single body of evidence. This disagreement is about the thesis that

> **Uniqueness**: It is impossible for agents who have the same total evidence to be ideally rational in having different doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition.

I will say that a *permissivist* is someone who denies Uniqueness, whereas an *impermissivist* is someone who accepts Uniqueness.[1]

Uniqueness makes the claim that a certain state of affairs cannot obtain. A good way to object to such a claim is to present possible examples in which it appears plausible that the state of affairs does obtain. This is the strategy pursued by Kopec and Titelbaum.[2] They collect five alleged counterexamples to Uniqueness from the literature. I will argue that only one of these examples is problematic for Uniqueness and that even this example can be dealt with by making a slight modification to Uniqueness.

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[1] The term *permissivist* was introduced by Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness," *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005): 445– 459. The term *impermissivist* was introduced by Sophie Horowitz, "Immoderately Rational," *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 41-56.
[2] Matthew Kopec and Michael Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," *Philosophy Compass* 11 (2016): 189–200.

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Clarifications about Uniqueness

Kopec and Titelbaum distinguish between several theses that might be labelled "Uniqueness."[3] The version of Uniqueness I defend (i) is interpersonal, (ii) applies to all doxastic attitudes, (iii) allows for rational dilemmas, and (iv) applies only to ideal rationality.

First, my version of Uniqueness makes an *inter*personal claim, not an *intra*personal claim. Some statements of Uniqueness are ambiguous between these two interpretations.[4] My version states that if agent A is ideally rational in having doxastic attitude D toward proposition P when A's total evidence is E, then no other doxastic attitude toward P is ideally rational for *anyone* to have when their total evidence is E. For example, my version of Uniqueness entails that, if believing that P is ideally rational given total evidence E, then *anyone* who has total evidence E but doesn't believe that P is not ideally rational.

Second, my version of Uniqueness makes a claim that applies to all doxastic attitudes; this includes believing, disbelieving, suspending judgment, and having credences. For example, according to Uniqueness, if two agents have the same total evidence, then it's impossible for one of them to be ideally rational in suspending judgment about whether P while the other is ideally rational in believing that P. Likewise, if two agents have the same total evidence, it's impossible for one of them to be ideally rational in having credence 0.6 in P while the other is ideally rational in having credence 0.7 in P.

Third, my version of Uniqueness allows for rational dilemmas (cases in which there is no rational response to one's evidence). In other words, my version does not presuppose that there is always at least one rational response to one's evidence. As Kopec and Titelbaum note, some versions of Uniqueness say that, for any body of evidence, there is *at least one* doxastic attitude that is rational; meanwhile, other versions say that, for any body of evidence, there is *at most one* doxastic attitude that is rational.[5] The latter, but not the former, allows for rational dilemmas. My version is in accord with the latter.

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[3] Kopec and Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," 190-2.

[4] E.g., White's statement of Uniqueness in "Epistemic Permissiveness" is ambiguous in this way. This point is made by Thomas Kelly, "Evidence Can Be Permissive," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 2nd ed., eds. Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 298-311; and Michael Titelbaum and Matthew Kopec, "Plausible Permissivism" (manuscript).

[5] Kopec and Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," 190-1. An example of the former version is White, "Epistemic Permissiveness." An example of the latter version is Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," in *Philosophers without God: Meditations on Atheism and*

Fourth, my version of Uniqueness makes a claim about ideal rationality, not about subideal rationality.[6] My version of Uniqueness allows that two people who have the same total evidence may be rational *to some degree* in disagreeing; they might even be *equally* rational. However, they cannot both be *ideally* rational. Within the category of rationality simpliciter, there are two subcategories: ideal rationality and subideal rationality. Ideal rationality is rationality without epistemic mistakes; that is, without making any mistakes about what one's evidence supports. One is ideally rational in having a given doxastic attitude iff one's total evidence supports having that attitude.

Meanwhile, subideal rationality is a form of rationality that is consistent with making mistakes about what one's evidence supports. Let's look at a few examples in which it seems that there is an agent whose doxastic attitude is subideally rational. My first example is as follows:

> Jones and Smith have the same complex body of evidence. Jones concludes that P. Smith concludes that ~P. Jones concluded that P because he made the subtle mistake of putting too much trust in the testimony of Expert 1. Smith concluded that ~P because she made the subtle mistake of putting too much trust in the testimony of Expert 2.

Next, here is an example inspired by Cohen:

> Jones concludes that P on the basis of his total evidence E. Almost all intelligent people would agree that E supports believing that P. However, for subtle reasons that only a super genius could discern, E actually supports believing that ~P.[7]

The last example I will mention is based on a case that Podgorski discusses:

> Jones and Smith have the same evidence concerning whether P and are listening to the same radio program. The radio program mentions something that bears on whether P. Smith takes the new evidence from the radio program into account and increases her credence in P, which is what her evidence now supports. Meanwhile, Jones heard the same news from the radio; however, just afterward, his apartment caught on fire. Instead of increasing his credence in P (as his new evidence

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the Secular Life, ed. Louise Antony (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194-214.

[6] In this way, I follow Roger White's revised statement of Uniqueness, stated in terms of "fully rational" doxastic attitudes, from his "Evidence Cannot be Permissive," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 2nd ed., eds. Matthias Steup, John Turri, and Ernest Sosa (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 312-23. White's earlier formulation of Uniqueness from "Epistemic Permissiveness" is not explicitly restricted to full or ideal rationality.

[7] Stewart Cohen, "Defense of the (Almost) Equal Weight View," in *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*, eds. David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98-119.

requires), Jones ran for his life.[8]

What is the correct epistemic evaluation of the conclusions reached by Jones in these cases? One option is to say that, in each case, Jones made mistakes, so his doxastic attitudes are not rational. This is to assume a perfectionist view of epistemic rationality such that epistemic rationality is inconsistent with epistemic mistakes. The other option, which I adopt in this paper, is to take an imperfectionist view of epistemic rationality, according to which a doxastic attitude can be rational, despite being based on a mistake. This view allows that Jones' doxastic attitudes are *subideally* rational, but not *ideally* rational. For a doxastic attitude to be subideally rational is for it to fall short of ideal rationality but still not be so bad that it counts as irrational. According to this view, Jones can be subideally rational (because he approximates rational perfection closely enough), but not ideally rational (because he made mistakes).

Jury Example

Having made these clarifications, we can now consider the alleged counterexamples that Kopec and Titelbaum discuss. They draw their first example from something Rosen says:

> It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable.[9]

The alleged counterexample in question goes like this:

> **Jury example**: The members of a jury hear the same evidence presented to the court. One juror concludes that the defendant is guilty. Another juror concludes that the defendant is not guilty. Both jurors are ideally rational in their respective beliefs.

The impermissivist should respond by noting that if the jury example is intended to be a realistic example of jury deliberation, then it won't be plausible that the jurors have the same evidence. Even after hearing closing arguments, the members of the jury may remember different things. Having different memories entails having different evidence. But let's assume that all the jurors remember every aspect of the case. Nevertheless, before the trial even begins, the jurors will come in with different memories based on having had different experiences. Because of such differences, the jurors may come in with different evidence of relevance to the case.

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[8] Abelard Podgorski, "Dynamic Permissivism," *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016): 1923-1939.
[9] Gideon Rosen, "Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 (2001): 69–91.

Therefore, in addition to the trial evidence, the jurors have the non-trial evidence that they came into the courtroom with. In other words, the *trial* evidence does not exhaust the juror's *total* evidence. So, it's implausible that the members of an actual jury have the same total evidence. For example, suppose that the case against the defendant has an epistemic property, EP. One juror might have non-trial evidence that EP is truth-conducive, whereas another juror lacks this evidence. More concretely, one juror might have non-trial evidence that people who act in a specific way are giving dishonest testimony, whereas another juror lacks this evidence. Thus, if this example is supposed to be realistic, it fails as a counterexample.

Can we idealize the example into a convincing counterexample? Let's stipulate that the jurors have the exact same evidence. But even the best version of this example doesn't give us a knockdown argument against Uniqueness. What the permissivist apparently wants to say is this:

1. Even if two agents have the same evidence and disagree, there can still be something epistemically good about each of their respective beliefs.

2. This "something epistemically good" is ideally rational belief.

3. Therefore, even if two agents have the same evidence and disagree, each of them can be ideally rational in their respective beliefs.

The impermissivist can grant the first claim, but deny that the "something epistemically good" amounts to ideally rational belief. The impermissivist can say, instead, that the "something epistemically good" is subideally rational belief. At this point, the permissivist will need to make the case that the type of rational belief is ideal, not just subideal. If nothing else, the example in question doesn't show this. Some other kind of argument is needed.

This response also shows that it's not the case that impermissivists lack the resources to give due credit to the jurors whose responses were not ideally rational. Suppose these jurors acted in good faith. Suppose they did their best. Suppose there are many intelligent people who agree with these jurors. The thought goes: "Shouldn't such responses count as rational? It's not like they concluded that aliens or witches committed the crime." The impermissivist can answer affirmatively: Such responses may well be rational (subideally rational), but not ideally rational.

In addition to the jury example, Rosen also uses the example of paleontologists who disagree about what killed the dinosaurs.[10] This example is different from the jury example at least inasmuch as it involves expertise rather than the sort of everyday epistemic abilities that we hope for jurors to have. And we don't need to limit ourselves to just paleontology. Scientific disagreement extends to all areas of

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[10] Rosen, "Nominalism," 77.

science. Do we really want to say that so many scientists in so many fields have been failing to respond to their evidence in a rational way?

My response is basically the same. First, if we're being realistic, we can't rule out the possibility that the scientists in question had some different evidence despite having a great deal of overlap in their evidence. Next, even if we say they had the same evidence, there is little pressure to say that all the parties to these scientific debates were being ideally rational rather than subideally rational. Either way, we don't have a counterexample to Uniqueness.

Materialism Example

Next, let's consider an example that Kopec and Titelbaum borrow from Decker.[11] Here is their paraphrase:

> **Materialism example**: [S]uppose two initially identical agents spontaneously materialize, one on Earth and the other on Twin Earth. Both agents encounter perceptually identical worlds, and therefore are guaranteed to have all the same evidence. But further suppose that while the Earthling comes to form a strong conviction in a mind independent world composed of material objects, the Twin Earthling becomes convinced of a Berkelean world composed entirely of either minds or ideas in minds. So let P be the proposition that "The world is composed of physical objects." The Earthling [rationally] believes P, while the Twin Earthling [rationally] believes not P, and both have the very same evidence.[12]

We should begin by asking: What evidence do the agents have for and against materialism? Materialism and idealism (if justified at all) must be justified by philosophical arguments. If the agents are aware of different arguments, then they have different evidence. So, the example must stipulate that they are aware of the same arguments for materialism and idealism. The difference is that they disagree about which arguments are sound: One agent thinks that at least one argument for materialism is sound, while the other thinks that at least one argument for idealism is sound. In this way, the agents in question are similar to metaphysicians in the actual world who disagree about whether materialism or idealism is true. The main difference is that our actual metaphysicians are part of a wider philosophical community.

As a result, this example is more pregnant than it may initially appear. If these hypothetical metaphysicians are analogous to our actual metaphysicians, then this example requires saying that the materialism-idealism debate in the actual world is a permissive case. Is there anything special about the materialism-idealism debate

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[11] Jason Decker, "Disagreement, Evidence, and Agnosticism," *Synthese* 187 (2012): 753–83.

[12] Kopec and Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," 196.

that distinguishes it from most other long-standing metaphysical debates? It seems not. So, the implication is that many longstanding metaphysical debates are permissive. And are metaphysical debates so different from other philosophical debates? If not, we can generalize from metaphysics to the rest of philosophy and conclude that most long-standing philosophical debates are permissive.

Thus, if the materialism example is possible, then Uniqueness is not only false, but believing it might entail having a radically mistaken view about the rationality of philosophical disagreement. How should impermissivists respond? To see, let's note that the reasoning behind the materialism example seems to be similar to the reasoning behind the jury example. Do we really want to say that one of these agents is being *irrational*? After all, their reasoning may well be commendable in several ways. They may have tried their best. They may have come up with arguments that are by no means crazy or incoherent. They may even make use of arguments that actual metaphysicians find plausible and accept. So, why not say that the agents are both rational? My response to the materialism example is the same as my response to the jury example: Even if we make the (not-so-realistic) assumption that the agents have the same evidence, there is little pressure to say that they are both ideally rational rather than subideally rational.

Community Example

Let's consider a third example. This one is drawn from Schoenfield:

> **Community example**: You have grown up in a religious community and believe in the existence of God. You have been given all sorts of arguments and reasons for this belief which you have thought about at great length. You then learn that you only have the religious beliefs that you do, and only find the reasoning that you engaged in convincing, because of the influence of this community. If you had grown up elsewhere, you would have, on the basis of the same body of evidence, rejected those arguments and become an atheist.[13]

How should impermissivists respond? As with the jury example, to the extent that this case is realistic, it is not plausible that the agent would have the same evidence in both conditions. It's unlikely that a religious community would supply reasons in favor of atheism that are as good as one would hear in an atheistic community; and vice versa. But let's agree to work with an idealized case in which the religious community in question and the atheistic community in question do provide the same evidence for and against the existence of God. You, then, learn that, if you had grown up in a different community, then you would have formed

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[13] Miriam Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism is True and What it Tells us about Irrelevant Influences on Belief," *Noûs* 48 (2014): 193–218.

different beliefs based on the same evidence. As a straight counterexample, this example seems to fail badly. The intuitive reaction is that there is something worrisome about the belief in question. One worries, "Should I continue to hold this belief while knowing that my having this belief is influenced by which community I grew up in, which is irrelevant to the truth of the matter?" This much shows that the community example fails as a straight counterexample, since counterexamples are supposed to be intuitively plausible.

Schoenfield acknowledges as much and makes it the burden of her paper to show that this intuitive reaction is not right; rather, she thinks one can rationally keep such beliefs.[14] Schoenfield's goal is to argue that, *contrary to appearances*, people in cases like the community example can be rational in sticking to their beliefs.[15] This is because epistemic rationality supervenes on (at least) two things: one's total evidence and one's epistemic standards (roughly, one's way of evaluating evidence). On her view, growing up in a religious community can imbue one with religious epistemic standards, and growing up in an atheistic community can imbue one with atheistic epistemic standards. The same evidence, filtered through these different standards, can lead to different rational responses to the evidence.[16] And we need not change our minds to accommodate others' epistemic standards; rather, we can stick to our beliefs as long as we live up to our own epistemic standards.[17] Therefore, people in cases like the community example can rationally stick to their beliefs.

Importantly, however, this line of reasoning wouldn't work as an objection to Uniqueness.[18] Such an objection would have to assert the premise that

> There are different epistemic standards that are all ideally rational to have

in support of the conclusion that

> Uniqueness is false.

However, such an argument would be question-begging without independent support of the premise, since clearly no impermissivist should grant that premise.[19]

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[14] Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe," 193.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe," 199-200.

[17] Adam Elga, "Lucky to be Rational," (manuscript) talks in terms of living up to one's standards.

[18] Again, Schoenfield never says this line of reasoning should be used as an objection to Uniqueness.

[19] The point I make is this: Impermissivists already deny that two agents who have the same total evidence can be ideally rational in having different *doxastic attitudes*. So, do we really think they will grant that two agents who have the same total evidence can be ideally rational in having different *epistemic standards*? Another objection is to challenge the idea that all we need to do is

Reasoning Room Example

A fourth example that Kopec and Titelbaum discuss is taken from another one of their co-authored works.[20] Here is the case:

> **Reasoning room example**: You are standing in a room with nine other people. Over time the group will be given a sequence of hypotheses to evaluate. Each person in the room currently possesses the same total evidence relevant to those hypotheses. But each person has different ways of reasoning about that evidence (and therefore different evidential standards). When you are given a hypothesis, you will reason about it in light of your evidence, and your reasoning will suggest either that the evidence supports belief in the hypothesis, or that the evidence supports belief in its negation. Each other person in the room will also engage in reasoning that will yield exactly one of these two results. This group has a well-established track record, and its judgments always fall in a very particular pattern: For each hypothesis, 9 people reach the same conclusion about which belief the evidence supports, while the remaining person concludes the opposite. Moreover, the majority opinion is always accurate, in the sense that whatever belief the majority takes to be supported always turns out to be true. Despite this precise coordination, it's unpredictable who will be the odd person out for any given hypothesis. The identity of the outlier jumps around the room, so that in the long run each agent is odd-person-out exactly 10% of the time. This means that each person in the room takes the evidence to support a belief that turns out to be true 90% of the time.[21]

The problem with this example is that it starts off with the assumption that the agents in the reasoning room have different ways of reasoning. In order to be a counterexample to Uniqueness, we must strengthen this assumption to say that more than one of these different ways of reasoning is ideally rational. (We won't have a counterexample if only one way of reasoning is ideally rational.) Ways of reasoning are important to the example, because Kopec and Titelbaum think that epistemic rationality supervenes on (at least) two things: one's total evidence and one's way of reasoning. On their view, the same evidence can be filtered through two different ways of reasoning in order to reach two different but rational doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition.[22] Thus, Kopec and Titelbaum have to argue from the premise that

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live up to our epistemic standards. For this objection, see White, "Epistemic Permissiveness," 451-2; and Feldman "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," 149.

[20] Titelbaum and Kopec, "Plausible Permissivism." The shorter, published version of which is Michael Titelbaum and Matthew Kopec "When Rational Reasoners Reason Differently," in *Reasoning: New Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*, eds. Magdalena Balcerak-Jackson and Brendan Balcerak-Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 205-31.

[21] Kopec and Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," 196.

[22] In this way, their view is like Schoenfield's, "Permission to Believe."

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> There is more than one way of reasoning that is ideally rational

to the conclusion that

> Uniqueness is false.

But just as impermissivists should deny that there are multiple epistemic standards that are ideally rational, impermissivists should also deny that there are multiple ways of reasoning that are all ideally rational. To assume this premise without further argument begs the question.

Self-fulfilling Example

The last example that Kopec and Titelbaum discuss aims to make trouble for Uniqueness by applying it to self-fulfilling beliefs.[23] The example is as follows:

> **Self-fulfilling example**: God appears to you, and (rationally) convinces you of her omnipotence and omniscience. For example, she's able to read your mind perfectly, predict all of your actions, grant all your wishes, and change the weather at will. One day, God makes the following proposal: If you believe that it will rain in Canberra tomorrow, then she will make sure it rains in Canberra tomorrow. But if you believe it won't rain tomorrow, then she'll make sure it doesn't. She doesn't say what will happen if you suspend judgment on the matter (maybe she'll flip a coin?). Assume that before she made the proposal, you hadn't even considered whether it would rain. Supposing you rationally believe she'll deliver on the proposal, it seems like you're now in a permissive case. If you believe that it will rain in Canberra, then it certainly will rain, so that belief is surely justified. If you believe it won't, it certainly won't, so that belief is surely also justified. Uncertainty only creeps in if you suspend judgment. So if we let P be the proposition that "It will rain in Canberra tomorrow," then it's rationally permissible for you to form either a belief in P or, instead, a belief in not P.[24]

This example, if possible, would refute intrapersonal versions of Uniqueness and thereby refute interpersonal versions.

My response is to concede that the self-fulfilling example is a counterexample to Uniqueness, but to modify Uniqueness so that it only applies to act-state independent doxastic attitudes. These are doxastic attitudes whose accuracy does not

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[23] For other arguments to this effect, see Morten Dahlback, "Infinitely Permissive," *Erkenntnis* (forthcoming); Jonathan Drake, "Doxastic Permissiveness and the Promise of Truth," *Synthese* 194 (2017): 4897-4912; Matthew Kopec, "A Counterexample to the Uniqueness Thesis," *Philosophia* 43 (2015): 403-409; Thomas Raleigh, "Another Argument Against Uniqueness," *Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (2017): 327-346.

[24] Kopec and Titelbaum, "The Uniqueness Thesis," 197.

depend on whether the agent comes to have that doxastic attitude.[25] The result is this:

> **Uniqueness***: It is impossible for agents who have the same total evidence to be ideally rational in having different act-state independent doxastic attitudes toward the same proposition.

This modification would still be in line with the considerations that motivate Uniqueness. By now, there are many different arguments for Uniqueness. But if there is one main motivation for Uniqueness, it is that epistemic rationality would allow for objectionably arbitrary beliefs if Uniqueness were false. However, the self-fulfilling example doesn't involve the kind of arbitrariness that impermissivists are concerned to avoid. So, this modification is relatively painless for the impermissivist.

Moreover, merely pushing impermissivists back from Uniqueness to Uniqueness* would fail to vindicate any of the permisisvist's favorite examples. A central motivation for permissivism is to vindicate examples in which it appears that people are rationally disagreeing despite having the same evidence (e.g., the examples from Rosen). But the self-fulfilling example has nothing to do with permissivists' favorite examples, since these examples involve act-state independent doxastic attitudes. In sum, the self-fulfilling example seems very remote from the considerations that are most important to the debate about Uniqueness.

Conclusion

I have argued that, if we replace Uniqueness with Uniqueness*, then none of the five examples considered by Kopec and Titelbaum should lead us to reject impermissivism. Here is a quick summary of the responses I have given to each alleged counterexample: Impermissivists can respond to the jury example by granting that the agents in question are subideally rational, but denying that they are ideally rational. Impermissivists can respond to the materialism example by, again, granting that the agents in question are subideally rational, but denying that they are ideally rational. Impermissivists can respond to the community example by noting that the intuitive verdict doesn't support permissivism. Impermissivists can respond to the reasoning room example by rejecting the question-begging assumption that there are multiple ways of reasoning that are ideally rational. Finally, impermissivists can respond to the self-fulfilling example by replacing Uniqueness with Uniqueness*.[26]

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[25] Dahlback, "Infinitely Permissive."