An Argument for Uniqueness about Evidential Support

Abstract: White, Christensen, and Feldman have recently endorsed uniqueness, the thesis that given the same total evidence, two rational subjects cannot hold different views. Kelly, Schoenfield, and Meacham argue that White and others have at best only supported a weaker, merely intrapersonal view, uniqueness*, the thesis that, given the total evidence, there are no two views which a single rational agent could take. Here, we give a new argument for uniqueness, an argument with deliberate focus on the interpersonal element of the thesis. Our argument is that the best explanation of the value of promoting rationality is an explanation that entails uniqueness.

Introduction

We give an argument for uniqueness: given the same total evidence, two subjects cannot rationally hold different views. We intend “view” to cover both partial and full beliefs.

Many authors support uniqueness’s negation, permissivism: given the same total evidence, two rational subjects can hold different views. Supporters of permissivism (call them “permissivists”) include Rosen (2001), Schoenfield (2014), Kelly (2010 & 2013), Meacham (2014), and Ballantyne & Coffman (2011).

Authors sympathetic to uniqueness (call them “impermissivists”) include Feldman (2007), who presents some cases offering intuitive support for uniqueness, Christensen (2007), who operates with uniqueness as an “attractive” “assumption” (p.211), and White (2005 & 2013), who constructs several arguments aimed at exposing absurdities that follow from permissivism.

Kelly (2013) has argued that White’s arguments fail to apply to uniqueness, but rather only support uniqueness*, the thesis that, given the total evidence, there are no two views either of which a single rational agent could take. In other words, Kelly claims White may have supported an
intrapersonal uniqueness thesis, but not the original, more ambitious and interesting interpersonal thesis of uniqueness. Many of Schoenfield’s (2014) and Meacham’s (2014) objections to White also support this diagnosis.

Here, we offer a new positive argument for uniqueness, an argument with a focus on the interpersonal character of the thesis. The form of our argument is an inference to the best explanation. Let’s begin, then, by introducing the datum we propose to best explain.

The Datum

The datum we’ll explain, i.e. our explanandum, i.e. the premise of our overall argument, is this: our social practice of epistemically evaluating one another’s beliefs has value. Let’s now clarify and elaborate that.

As a matter of contingent, actual fact, we use epistemic evaluations to discourage irrational beliefs and encourage rational beliefs. We discourage certain beliefs by using criticisms like “That’s irrational!” , or more often we use more colloquial language like “You don’t know what you’re talking about!” or “Don’t be so stupid!”, where context makes clear the evaluation is distinctively epistemic.

Third-personal evaluations may be more common, and more diplomatic and, thus, more effective at influencing audiences than second-personal evaluations; you might have better luck influencing your audience by criticizing a third-party, maybe saying something like “Aren’t these climate change deniers an embarrassment?” . Positive evaluations, correspondingly, serve to encourage certain beliefs. And, all this epistemic criticism and praise can be applied to degrees of belief, e.g. when we say praise someone’s low confidence, maybe with something like, “Pat has a healthy skepticism about new age herbal remedies.”.

In a typical epistemic evaluation, an evaluative predicate is applied to a particular belief, maybe as held by a particular person in a particular context. However, it seems clear on reflection, and it is
agreed by many leading epistemologists, that our ordinary epistemic evaluations of particular beliefs are true or false depending on the way the belief was formed on the basis of the believer’s evidence. Thus, the fundamental objects of epistemic evaluations are rules (or “processes”, or “methods”) that license certain beliefs given certain evidence. More abstractly, we might think of them as functions from total bodies of evidence to total doxastic states. (Goldman (1986, ch.4); Pollock & Cruz (1999), p.123; Boghossian (2007).) Our datum, then, is that there is some value in our social practice of promoting certain epistemic rules, though we often go about this by only explicitly commenting on specific people’s beliefs held in specific contexts.

The datum we hope to explain concerns a highly social practice, an interpersonal practice. It isn’t just valuable to you that you are rational; it’s valuable if others are rational as well. We see this as part of the job of epistemology: the right theory of rationality should explain not only what rationality is, but why it is valuable for us, and -- our concern here -- why it is valuable to promote rationality throughout one’s community.

Exactly what kind of value do we take our epistemically evaluative practice to have? We believe our evaluative practice has a distinctly practical kind of value for us. Specifically, we take our evaluative practice to have instrumental value relative to our actual goals. Our datum is that, in promoting epistemic rationality, we serve some goal of ours, some goal that we actually care to promote. We seek a non-trivial explanation of this datum, that is, we intend to show that the promotion of epistemic rationality serves, not simply the trivially served goal of promoting epistemic rationality, but some independent goal of ours.

Our view is that the practice of promoting epistemic rationality has instrumental value in the actual world, given our actual goals. This view is the datum of the inference-to-the-best-explanation argument we’ll make, but, though it is thus a “datum”, it is not an arbitrary and unsupported assumption for us. This view seems to us defeasibly reasonable on its face; the view could be proved
wrong, but if it ever is, we’ll lose our motivation to continue promoting rationality, and until then, we should defeasibly hold that our practices serve some desired end, even if ordinary people do not explicitly know how promoting rationality promotes a goal we independently care to serve. The alternative position that we’ve been serving no worthwhile end seems implausibly uncharitable to ourselves. We concede that possible strange cases can be concocted where promoting rationality only frustrates our goals, even our actual goals; but we do not claim, and we see no reason to claim, that promoting rationality necessarily serve our goals. Our claim is that the overall practice, on the whole, actually serves our actual goals. We mean to offer explanation of how our practice does this, indeed of how our practice does this very efficiently. (In the next section, we’ll add some criticisms of that alternative view that our evaluative practice simply lacks non-trivial instrumental value.)

A brief note for those familiar with some related literature: since we are explaining the instrumental value of our practice of promoting rationality, and not simply of being rational, our project is in no conflict with the critiques of the instrumental value of being rational given by Kelly (2003) and Berker (2013). Our position is also consistent with that of Madison (2014), who argues that epistemic rationality, and presumably thus its promotion too, has a non-instrumental value; there may be both kinds of value. Our project is in the spirit of Craig (1990), who asks what practical function is served by attributions of knowledge; however, our interest in this paper is in the function served by epistemic evaluations of rationality (or justification, warrant, reasonableness -- these mean the same to us).

Three Inadequate Views of the Instrumental Value of Promoting Rationality

Shortly, we will offer an explanation that requires the truth of, that is, it entails, uniqueness. To support the inference to this explanation, and thereby to uniqueness, we must argue that this is the best explanation of how promoting rationality is instrumentally valuable, how it serves our goals. In order to help motivate and illustrate the comparative strength of our explanation, we lead up to it by considering
some competing views of what, if anything, explains the instrumental value of promoting rationality, and show why they are inadequate.

Here is a first candidate explanation: promoting rationality serves our goals because, in doing so, we promote consistency among our interlocutor’s beliefs.

A first problem with this candidate is that it is, at best, very far from being a complete explanation. It leaves us wondering why we criticize subjects whose beliefs are perfectly consistent. We actually do criticize subjects -- whether actual people or hypothetical subjects of thought experiments -- for making more substantive rational errors. For example, we criticize conspiracy theorists on rational grounds, even if their stories are consistent down to the last detail. Similarly, we use epistemic evaluations to endorse taking appearances and testimony at face value, and reasoning according to certain statistical and inductive rules, including the projection of green rather than grue. Our actual evaluative practices demand that subjects do more than just have consistent beliefs. And it is plausible that these evaluative practices serve some goal of ours. In promoting standards of rationality that go beyond mere consistency, we must be serving some goal we actually have.

A second problem with this candidate explanation is that even when our evaluations do procure consistency, that outcome, at least by itself, does not clearly serve any of our goals. If we demand consistency of everyone, even skeptics, conspiracy theorists, and gruesome reasoners, it is not clear what goal of ours is served by this demand. So, the suggestion that we promote rationality because we care about promoting consistency does not adequately explain the value of our practice.

Next, let’s consider the view that denies that the value of our evaluative practice can be given any non-trivial explanation: the promotion of rationality serves no other goal than the trivial goal of making people more rational.
Many epistemologists are attracted to this kind of answer; they are happy to see the value of rationality, if there is any at all, as *sui generis*; they see the value of rationality as a brute property, unexplainable as instrumental value in the service of any other goal. It may be impossible for us to say anything that positively refutes this view without begging the question against those who are committed to it. But for those on the fence, we can say why we do not find this position plausible.

One thing to say is that, as a methodological point, this kind of answer should be our last resort. We are considering a universal human linguistic practice with a deep biological and a cultural history: it is highly unlikely that it developed for no practical purpose. So it is worth looking at what explanations of this practical purpose we can find, and considering their plausibility, before positing brute facts or unexplainable kinds of value, or saying there is no value. At this point in the dialectic, it’s plausible that promoting rationality *does* serve some non-trivial goal. And there *are* candidate explanations for what this non-trivial instrumental value is. Rejecting the possibility of an explanation seems to us, in this case, premature.

We can also bring out the implausibility of this objection by comparing it with the corresponding view about the instrumental value of having and promoting knowledge. While it may seem that knowledge is valuable for its own sake, and while it may even seem to some that this is the *entire* explanation of the value of promoting it, there exists a far more substantive explanation of the instrumental value of not only having knowledge, but of promoting knowledge in others. The substantive explanation, in rough outline, runs as follows. Knowledge entails true belief, and true belief is instrumentally valuable, both in oneself and in others. (We always mean true belief *about matters we’re actually interested in.*) True belief is instrumentally valuable in others, because so much of our information is derived from the accurate testimony of others; and true belief is instrumentally valuable in oneself, because actions that are based on true beliefs tend to serve our goals. (Functionalisists like Lewis (1974, p.337) and Stalnaker (1984, p.15) suggest this link between actions, beliefs and
goals/desires is necessary; here we only assume it is actual. See Horwich (1990/98, section 3.11) and Goldman (1992, p.164) for more endorsements.)

We can extend this truth-oriented explanation (of the instrumental value of knowledge and its promotion) even further. Plausibly, knowledge is not only true, but reliably true, perhaps on some “safety” model of reliability, including Williamson’s (2000; 2009, p.329) non-reductive notion of safety (that is to say, we do not assume the notion of safety can be fully explicated independently of our notion of knowledge). A belief’s safe truth consists in its truth throughout some range of nearby possible worlds where that belief is held. (Exactly what’s in the range is hard to say, hence the appeal of the non-reductive notion.) What is the instrumental value of this further feature of knowledge, beyond its mere factivity? The value is that, even when we are uncertain which world, and which imminent future, we actually find ourselves facing, if our beliefs are safely true then they will be actually true, no matter which nearby world turns out to be actual. Reliable, or safe, truth is thus tremendously useful, in ourselves and in others we might ever need to rely on (Craig (1990, pp.19-20)).

Thus, the instrumental value of having and promoting knowledge can be substantively explained, in terms of the independent instrumental value of truth and reliability. We need not settle for saying (nothing more than) that knowledge is valuable for its own sake. We thus likewise doubt that we should settle for saying (nothing more than) that rational belief is valuable for its own sake, or not valuable at all.

The above discussion of the value of knowledge given in terms of truth and reliability may lead one to suspect that a parallel explanation can be given of the instrumental value of rationality. Thus, we have the third and last view we’ll criticize here: it is instrumentally valuable to promote rationality because, in doing so, we make it more likely that one another’s beliefs will be true. Or alternatively: it is instrumentally valuable to promote rationality because, in doing so, we make one another’s beliefs
more reliable.

We think this view is on the right track. We already observed that true beliefs and reliable beliefs are instrumentally valuable and worth promoting. And, in fact, we do think that using epistemic evaluations to promote rationality is instrumentally valuable because it promotes true belief, and we have true belief as a goal. Our criticism of this view is that, as it stands, it is missing a large core of the real explanation of how promoting rationality serves our truth goal. If this view, stated just as succinctly as in the italicized sentences in the last paragraph, gave the whole story, we would be left with an unexplained mystery as to why so many of us are so ready to criticize (as epistemically irrational) various characters who are known to be highly and robustly reliable, though unwittingly so, famous characters such as BonJour’s (1980) clairvoyant, Lehrer’s (1990) Mr. TrueTemp, or Plantinga’s (1993) brain lesion sufferer. As these cases show, our epistemically evaluative practice does not consider reliability a sufficient condition for rationality. These characters’ beliefs would be highly reliable if they were allowed free rein to continue trusting their belief-forming methods, so the present candidate explanation cannot account for why we promote standards of rationality that exclude these characters. Is criticism of these characters misplaced or pointless? Is this a glitch in our practice, a kind of evaluation that serves no goal? If some explanation accounts for the apparent value of promoting a standard of rationality that excludes these characters, that explanation is a better one. Is there any better explanation of the instrumental value of promoting our ordinary standard of rationality?

Our Proposed Explanation of the Value of Promoting Rationality

Something must explain why using epistemic evaluations to promote rationality is a worthwhile practice. It naturally seems that the explanation should have something to do with a connection between rationality and truth or reliability. Unfortunately, as we noted above, examples like BonJour’s (1980) unwittingly reliable clairvoyant show that the belief-forming rules that yield rational beliefs cannot
simply be identified with the reliable belief-forming rules.

The existence of examples like BonJour’s clairvoyant now reveals that our original datum cries out for an explanation far more loudly than it initially appeared. There is something distinctly puzzling in our ordinary epistemically evaluative practice. The puzzle is this. Naturally, we want true belief, in ourselves and others, and we want to use ways of forming beliefs that are reliable, and so, naturally, we thus use “true” and “reliable” to correct each others’ beliefs and modify each others’ ways of forming beliefs. But, if our terms of epistemic evaluation, “[ir]rational” and various colloquial synonyms and antonyms, differ in extension from “[un]reliable”, then why do we go around making epistemic evaluations of one another’s beliefs, or ways of forming beliefs? Why do we use these epistemically evaluative terms to reinforce certain ways of forming beliefs, and to discourage or suppress other ways of forming beliefs, if we recognize that these ways do not line up with the reliable ways? It looks mysterious. A major virtue of the explanation we will propose of the practical, instrumental value of our epistemically evaluative practice is that it will solve this mystery.

To begin with, we make an observation: what the well-known examples like the clairvoyant still leave open, and what is anyway plausible, is that the rational rules are a subset of the rules that are actually reliable. This observation allows us to give the following explanation of the value of rationality.

The core idea of our offered explanation is this: given uniqueness, the promotion of rationality is an efficient means of ensuring the reliability of testimony. Our explanation thus will make the promotion of rationality an instrumentally valuable practice, given our goal of getting the truth (about matters of interest). Let us now elaborate our proposed explanation and its theoretical virtues.

**Epistemic surrogates.** If uniqueness is true, then the promotion of rational belief-forming rules is the promotion of a fixed stock of belief-forming rules that are reliable and shared by rational
reasoners. When rational reasoners thus coordinate upon the same reliable belief-forming rules, this has
the result that rational reasoners are able to serve as each other’s epistemic surrogates: the views that a
rational testifier reports are the same reliable views that a rational audience would have arrived at on
their own, had the audience acquired the testifier’s evidence and drawn their own conclusions.

*The need to vet non-conformists.* Promoting epistemic surrogates is an *efficient* way of
ensuring the reliability of testimony. To illustrate how so, consider a testifier who violates the epistemic
norms enforcing coordination. Such a non-conformist testifier might be reliable (like the clairvoyant),
but they also might not be reliable, so their testimony cannot safely be taken at face value. Taking their
testimony at face value is dangerous, since it would risk gullibly accepting unreliable testimony. To
safely trust a non-conformist, audiences must do something to discriminate a reliable non-conformist
from an unreliable non-conformist testifier. That requires an investigation into the track-record of the
non-conformist’s belief-forming rules. Such an investigation costs resources, and after the investigation
the testimony may well become redundant, since the audience must research for themselves the facts on
which the testifier was reporting. So, while a non-conformist testifier might be reliable, without the
costly investigation of independently vetting the testifier there is a danger of gullibly accepting
unreliable testimony. (Of course, if we know that some non-conformist is reliable, someone like
BonJour’s clairvoyant, then we need not miss out on the benefit of his super-powers. If we share with
him our knowledge of his reliability, the clairvoyant is free to deliver all of his reliable conclusions, but
now by applying ordinary rules like Modus Ponens.)

(But wait: isn’t there still a need for a costly investigation -- namely, an investigation into who
is and is not a conformist -- before we can take one another’s testimony on board? Maybe there is some
cost. But promoting coordination is still more efficient than the alternative, which requires separate
investigations of both rationality and reliability. Promoting coordination also brings us toward a state
where more and more people are reliable surrogates; so, there is less and less need to check one
another’s conformity to safely trust one another’s testimony. Not so for the permissivist view, where even if we were all to become rational, there would still be a need to check one another’s reliability.)

*Anti-skepticism means knowing you’re reliable.* By promoting the rational belief-forming rules, and thereby promoting coordination upon a shared stock of reliable rules, there is no need -- and, likely, no possibility -- of independently investigating those rules’ reliability. Their reliability is already known however it is that anti-skepticism is achieved, that is, however it is that we are able to know that our own belief-forming rules are reliable. While any anti-skeptic is in the position of knowing that her own belief-forming rules are reliable, on our view we can also know that the rational rules are reliable.

*Dividing the labor of collecting, but not storing, evidence.* Promoting, in this way, epistemic surrogates, is thus the efficient way of ensuring the reliability of testimony. We can safely place as much trust in our surrogates’ testimony as we do our own faculties, with no extra efforts or costs of vetting our testifiers’ track-records. Having such trustworthy surrogates is extremely valuable. We all want to acquire true beliefs, and no false beliefs, about various topics of interest. This task is efficiently pursued by a team of epistemic surrogates, one that functions like a team of parallel processors. Different inquirers will go out and collect different batches of evidence, and then the testimony they report back on the basis of this evidence can be safely trusted by the other surrogates. Each surrogate can safely treat the testimony of the others’ in the way they would treat the testimony of their own belief-forming rules. In the simplest case, a surrogate’s testimony becomes as good as one’s own eyes and ears, but without the effort of seeing and hearing for oneself, without the effort of collecting the evidence the testifier collected. And the testifier enjoys the benefit of not having to store and share all of her evidence with her audience of surrogates, which would be enormously costly; the testifier can just report the beliefs she has retained, and forget the rest of the evidence she once based those beliefs on. (It is impossible to store all our evidence anyway, as noted in Harman (1986, ch. 4).) So, a coordinated group can efficiently accomplish the task of collecting evidence, and forming reliable
beliefs on the basis of that evidence, as a team of parallel processors.

Of course, sometimes things are a bit more complicated, and we cannot simply take surrogates’ testimony on board. If your evidence supports that Apu will attend the party, and my evidence supports that Beth will attend, our total evidence pooled together may not support that both will attend. (Maybe we know that they avoid parties where there is any chance of running into one another.) However, these more complex cases are not the norm; most of the time, testimony is a way of learning about things that we have not investigated for ourselves. And even in these more complex cases, having epistemic surrogates is an efficient way of sharing information, and more efficient than the alternative. We can make informed guesses about what kind of evidence our testifiers have, without sharing all of it, and we can take account of whether unshared details about their evidence are likely to be significant. Though occasional errors will happen -- as is inevitable, given our cognitive limitations -- we will be in a much better position than if we had to attempt the truly impossible feat of storing all of our evidence plus all of our testifiers’ evidence.

**Dividing the labor of reasoning.** A coordinated group also more efficiently accomplishes the task of drawing inferences on the basis of known premises. If Wiles reports that Fermat’s Theorem is true, or Einstein proposes a theory that best explains the known evidence, we can trust these reports without ourselves discovering or even reasoning through the proposed arguments. As long as we trust that these conclusions are being reached using only applications of belief-forming rules that we accept, then we don’t need to ourselves do the work of applying those rules; we can directly benefit from the work, and the creativity, of others who are ultimately only using belief-forming rules that we all share. Granted, while there may always be some benefit to “checking the work” of others we trust, it is in practice impossible to check every piece of testimony that we rely on in life, and so we must ultimately depend, for so much of what we know in life, on the fact of our mutual epistemic coordination.
**Uniqueness is Required.** Our proposed explanation of the instrumental value of promoting rationality (relative to our truth goal) is a proposal that requires uniqueness. If permissivism is true, then rational reasoners need not coordinate. That is, there are cases where rational reasoners use alternative belief-forming rules, rules that yield distinct views given the same evidence. In this case, the enforcement of rational rules of reasoning does not make it safe to trust the testimony of rational reasoners, since there is now a risk that a rational reasoner will not be reliable.

Views that deny uniqueness come in many different flavors. Radical permissivist views, which only require consistency or coherence (for example), have no hope of explaining our central datum: these views count grue-projectors, counterinductivists, and the like as rational. But promoting that kind of reasoning won’t serve our goals. More moderate views that fall under permissivism may only allow slight differences in rational beliefs given the evidence, perhaps only a slight difference in rational degree of belief. But, we claim, our view requires rejecting even these moderate views. While these views may not make rational reasoners downright unreliable, they still have the result that rational reasoners cannot be ensured to be as reliable as they can be if uniqueness is true. Thus, uniqueness best explains the high practical value of rationality.

Our view explains why it is worth our while to promote rationality. Having a community of reliable testifiers is beneficial for everyone. And our view captures plausible judgments about what is, in fact, rational: it rules out unreliable epistemic practices like those of a gruesome reasoner or a committed conspiracy theorist, and it rules out flukey reliable epistemic practices, like clairvoyance. Our view also requires, that is, it entails, the truth of uniqueness. Inferring to the best explanation, then, we infer uniqueness.

Our view is closely related to some views defended in recent literature. In ethics, Gibbard
(1990) and Fricker (forthcoming) argue that evaluations of moral praise and blame serve a coordinative function. In epistemology, Dogramaci (2012, forthcoming) argues, much as we did, that epistemic evaluations serve a coordinative function. Our aim here has been to focus on such a view as it relates to uniqueness; see these authors for further detail and defense of views of the sort we favor. Gibbard and Dogramaci examine and defend many of the empirical psychological and sociological commitments these views carry. In a very similar spirit to the present paper, Hedden and Greco (ms.) independently explore how the views of Craig, Gibbard, and Dogramaci can be applied to argue in favor of uniqueness.

Let’s address some potential worries about our particular view and our use of it to support uniqueness. We’ll reply to four objections.

First Objection: An Elitist Permissivism Could Do Just As Well

Objector: You claim that your view requires uniqueness in order to explain your central datum, the value of promoting rationality, and to explain how we can trust one another as epistemic surrogates. But couldn’t a permissivist say all the same things? I am imagining an elitist sort of permissivist, who forms a community of like-minded friends who share her epistemic rules. She trusts members of her in-group and treats them as epistemic surrogates. But she extends her judgments of rationality to some members of the out-group as well as the in-group.

Us: We have three replies to this objection.

First: while it’s true that there could be a community of permissivists who have a practice like this, we are aiming to explain our actual practice, which we do not think works this way. In most cases, when we are reluctant to accept people’s testimony, we are also reluctant to call them (fully) rational. (You may trust your sister about most things, but not about politics -- she’s been brainwashed by Fox
News. Your sister doesn’t trust you about whether it’s safe to drive in this weather -- you’re paranoid and over-cautious.)

Second, this practice is less efficient than the one we get with uniqueness. If uniqueness is true, we only need to make one kind of evaluation where permissivism would require two. With uniqueness, the rational rules are also trustworthy rules (i.e. the rules that make their followers acceptable epistemic surrogates). With this elitist version of permissivism, we must keep track of the rational rules (that both in-groupers and rational out-groupers follow) and the trustworthy rules (that the in-groupers follow) separately. (Of course, on both views we may need to also evaluate the reliability of irrational agents like Norman.)

Third, if our practice did work this way, it would be mysterious why the in-groupers should bother to give any positive appraisal to the rational out-groupers. Why should we care about promoting (or even just identifying) rationality, rather than just in-group rationality? With uniqueness there is no such mystery.

Second Objection: The Difficulty of Enforcing Impermissive Standards

Objector: You’ve proposed to explain the value of promoting rationality in terms of the practical value of having epistemic surrogates. You claim the ideal surrogate will give testimony based on beliefs that are exactly the beliefs the audience would have had themselves if they had acquired and reasoned through the testifier’s evidence. A source of potential worry here is the thought that it is not an efficient use of resources to cultivate ideal surrogates, ones with exactly the beliefs we’d have. This thought leads to a worry that your proposed approach to explaining the value of promoting rationality leads not to uniqueness, but rather to a moderate form of permissivism. This moderate form of permissivism is especially attractive in a partial- or degree-belief framework: this view may hold that, given a body of evidence, different credences within some narrow range are all rational. The worry here
is that it is very difficult, and thus an inefficient use of our resources, to apply the impermissivist’s exacting standards of epistemic evaluation. If the explanation of the value of promoting rationality really is, as you proposed, that it is an efficient means of ensuring the reliability of testimony, then, so the worry here goes, the efficient practice is one that promotes beliefs or credences that conform to moderately permissive standards.

*Us:* The objector here rightly points out that, if you lower your standards, they become easier for those evaluations’ subjects to meet. But we do not think that this point shows that it would be more efficient for evaluators to apply a permissive rational standard rather than an impermissive one.

To illustrate this, consider an analogy. As a teacher, you want your students to write good papers. You hold them to a high standard: almost nobody gets an A+. Would it be more efficient to become an easier grader? Not necessarily: your main goal is to end up with a good batch of papers at the end of the semester. To achieve that goal, it makes sense to help each student approach the A+ level, by giving comments and criticism that will help each student get better. This practice would make sense regardless of whether you lowered your standards for grading. And it would make sense even if -- as is actually the case -- you know that almost nobody will end up with an A+.

Holding one another to high standards makes sense in the epistemic case as well. Though we won’t all reach the rational ideal, we can all get closer. And our epistemic community as a whole will become more reliable if we encourage everyone to improve, rather than settling for “good enough”. Even if subjects won’t, or can’t, achieve the ideal, the most plausible thing that’ll get them closest is to encourage them to aim for it, not for something else.

*Objector:* Sure, but if you lowered the standards for an A+, wouldn’t the papers at least be easier to grade?

*Us:* In one sense, it might. If you could merely separate good papers from the bad ones, and not bother with separating the excellent papers from the merely good, your grading might go more quickly.
But as we’ve already seen, *fast* grading is not all that we want; we want good papers, too.

And, more importantly, the objector’s point (that lowering standards makes grading easier) does not clearly carry over to epistemic evaluation. Evaluations that apply impermissive standards are not harder to make than evaluations that apply standards that permit a range of acceptable credences. Impermissive standards are *strict*er, but they are not thereby *more precise* than permissive standards. The range enforced by a permissivist can be just as precise as the point enforced by the impermissivist.

If it is hard to make evaluations that apply precise impermissive standards, that’s because it can be difficult to sort out borderline cases. But permissive standards will admit of as many or *more* borderline cases. So, we claim, permissive standards are not easier to enforce, and do not more efficiently promote our goals, than impermissive ones.

It may be true that, as impermissivists, our day-to-day evaluations will inevitably be clumsy, vague and sometimes off-target, but the same would be true of permissive recommendations. And impermissivist standards, unlike permissive ones, are clearly worth shooting for.

*Third Objection: Knowing Which Credence Is Rational*

*Objector:* If, given the evidence, a unique credence in some particular hypothesis is rational, how on earth could we be expected to know what that exact credence is? How could you know that, given this particular batch of evidence, hypothesis H requires a credence of exactly 0.53629, or something like that? Or, if you think credences are, or can be, “mushy”, and the uniquely rational credence is something like the interval [0.4837 - 0.683], how could we possibly know this?

*Us:* We have two points to make in reply.

First, the (moderate) permissivist is in no better position to address these concerns about the epistemology of facts about rationality (“epistemic epistemology”, an issue analogous to the issue of so-called “moral epistemology”). If permissivism is true, then given the evidence, some range of
credences, maybe a range of various possibly mushy credences, is rational. How are we able to know what that permitted range is? If anything, it seems harder to know.

Second, even though we don’t have here a complete account of how we know what’s rational given evidence \( E \), our impermissivist has a neat story about how we can easily and usefully form our views about what’s rational given \( E \): just take whatever you think \( you \) would believe if you were to acquire evidence \( E \), and consider that view to be the rational view given \( E \). To the extent that you are right about what you would believe, promoting that response is what promotes coordination, i.e. what cultivates epistemic surrogates, and we’ve already seen the value of that.

There are many cases where it’s hard to say what the rational response to a body of evidence is, and plausible-looking candidates turn out to be wrong. (It sometimes turns out that what looked like the rational response to our evidence is supported by, e.g., indifference intuitions which turn out to be inconsistent. (See, e.g., Meacham (2014) for discussion of these cases.)) It is sometimes argued these kinds of cases pose special problems for uniqueness, because they are cases in which it is hard to answer the question of what it is rational to believe. To the extent that it is hard to know how we would respond to our evidence in these situations, our proposal will be admittedly limited. But in spite of that, uniqueness still offers an advantage in conducting epistemic epistemology. Reflecting on what you would believe, given some evidence, is a job that anyone should be able to do, permissivist or not. Insofar as we can know what we would believe, our proposal offers the impermissivist, and only the impermissivist, something to say about how we could come to know a good deal about which beliefs are rational.

*Fourth Objection: Trusting Epistemic Surrogates with Different Jamesian Values*

*Objector:* Your argument assumes that it only makes sense to trust epistemic surrogates who believe as you would, given their evidence, because these surrogates are the ones you can most
efficiently take to be reliable sources of true belief. But this assumption papers over an important point. There are different ways to assess the truth and reliability of someone’s beliefs and epistemic methods, corresponding to different trade-offs between the two Jamesian goals: *believe truth* and *avoid error*. Suppose there are many rationally permissible ways to weigh those two goals against one another. Then those different weightings also lead to different rational responses to a single body of evidence. It would then make sense for you to evaluate others as rational, just as long as their weighting of the Jamesian goals was permissible -- even if those others don’t believe as you would, given their evidence.

Kelly (2013, section 2) suggests this Jamesian picture as a possible motivation for permissivism. He writes: “I think that someone who arrives at the conclusion that Uniqueness is false in this [Jamesian] way should not feel especially threatened by the kinds of arguments offered by Roger [White].” That is: a Jamesian permissivist who denies the *interpersonal* thesis, **uniqueness**, should not feel especially threatened by White’s ((2005) and (2013)) arguments, since those only support the *intrapersonal* thesis, **uniqueness*.*

**Us:** We disagree with Kelly: the permissivist should feel threatened. When supplemented with our picture of the value of promoting rationality, White’s arguments cause the Jamesian objection to **uniqueness** to fail.

The objector is right that on our view, regarding someone else’s beliefs as *rational* involves regarding her as a reliable epistemic surrogate. But this does not mean merely assessing their beliefs as “reliable” or “truth-conducive” according to some sensible way of measuring reliability or truth-conduciveness; it means being ready to trust their testimony, and to take on their beliefs without having to sort through all of their evidence oneself. If this is right, you should not regard the beliefs of someone else who strikes a different trade-off between the Jamesian goals as rational beliefs unless you, yourself, are willing to make that trade-off. (If you were unwilling to make that trade-off yourself, you would also be unwilling to take the person’s testimony at face value.) Now suppose that the second
step of the Jamesian argument is right, and that different Jamesian trade-offs license different beliefs in response to a single body of evidence. Then, assessing more than one set of Jamesian values as rational means being willing to take on for yourself the beliefs that each those values license. Interpersonal permissivism requires intrapersonal permissivism as well.

It is precisely this feature of intrapersonal permissivism -- being willing to adopt several different responses to a single body of evidence -- that White’s arguments target. (White argues for (among other things) the irrationality of “flip-flopping” between two sets of rational beliefs, and of treating rational beliefs other than your own as suitable for practical deliberation.) Our view draws a connection between the intrapersonal and interpersonal theses; it provides reason to adopt uniqueness, given uniqueness*.

Interestingly, many defenders of permissivism are happy to deny the intrapersonal version, and to grant uniqueness*. And permissivist critiques of White’s arguments have been largely focused on the fact that they seem to support uniqueness* rather than uniqueness. (See, for instance, Kelly (2013), Schoenfield (2014) and Meacham (2014) on both of these points.) Many permissivists should, therefore, be happy to take White’s arguments on board. But if we are right, accepting White’s arguments also means rejecting the Jamesian objection to uniqueness. If you are not willing to accept testimony from those with different Jamesian values, you should also be unwilling to evaluate them as epistemically rational.

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