

Doxastic permissiveness and the promise of truth

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to challenge what is often called the “Uniqueness” thesis. According to this thesis, given one’s total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition. It is sensible for defenders of Uniqueness to commit to an accompanying principle that: when some agent *A* has equal epistemic reason both to believe that *p* and to believe that *not p*, the unique epistemically rational doxastic attitude for *A* to adopt with respect to whether *p* is the suspension of judgment. In this paper, I offer a case wherein the agent has equal epistemic reason both to believe that *p* and to believe that *not p*, but the agent is not epistemically required to suspend judgment about whether *p*. Furthermore, the case is such that there seems to be no uniquely rational attitude for the agent to adopt.

Keywords Uniqueness · Permissivism · Epistemic rationality · Doxastic rationality · Evidence

1 Introduction

The course of the paper is as follows. In Sect. 2, I introduce the Uniqueness thesis and the accompanying principle (which I call “equal-reason agnosticism”, or “ERA”). I also explain why it is sensible for defenders of Uniqueness to commit to ERA. In Sect. 3, I offer a troubling case for ERA (and, thereby, for Uniqueness as well). I proceed in Sect. 4 to treat three initial worries about the case: first, that practical features of the case are clouding judgments about what is epistemically rational; second, that my analysis of the case either implicitly endorses or relies on a consequentialist outlook

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on epistemic rationality; and third, that my analysis of the case ignores an important distinction between evidential and non-evidential reasons. I demonstrate that the first two worries are based on misunderstandings of the case and my analysis of it, and that the third worry is subject to serious worries of its own. In Sect. 5, I treat what I take to be the most promising attempt by defenders of Uniqueness to uphold the claim that the agent in question is rationally required to suspend judgment. The reply is undergirded by the observation that the Uniqueness thesis is often thought to enjoy general support from the idea that truth is important to epistemic rationality. But I contend that, to the extent that one holds truth to be important to epistemic rationality, it will to that extent be difficult to defend Uniqueness in this case. Ironically, then, one of the very ideas supposedly motivating the Uniqueness thesis actually motivates my analysis of the case in question as a counterexample to the Uniqueness thesis. I conclude, in Sect. 6, that the case does seem to be a genuine counterexample to the Uniqueness thesis; and that *if* a suitable response to the case can be worked out, it cannot be one which relies on a concern for the truth—indeed, it must be a response that allays that concern.

2 Doxastic uniqueness and equal-reason agnosticism

As expressed by most of its proponents, the Uniqueness thesis makes a claim about the relation between evidence and epistemic rationality.¹ The specific claim of interest in this paper is the claim that:

For any body of evidence E bearing on some proposition p , there is, given E , some unique epistemically rational doxastic attitude for any agent A to adopt with respect to p .²

I will refer to this claim as **Uniqueness**,³ and I will refer to the denial of this claim as **permissivism**.⁴

¹ It is worth noting, if one has an eye on the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification, that I am taking the Uniqueness thesis to be a claim about propositional justification. That is: to say that there is some uniquely rational doxastic attitude is to say, roughly, that there is some uniquely propositionally justified attitude. Thanks to Michael Titelbaum for pointing out to me the need to make this clarification. For an interesting, helpful, and provocative discussion of the relationship between propositional and doxastic justification, see work by Turri (2010).

² White (2005, p. 445), who says he has taken his statement of the thesis from Feldman (2007), puts it this way: “given one’s total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition.” Other statements of the thesis have been given by Christensen (2007, p. 210), Kelly (2010, p. 119, 2014, p. 299), and Schoenfield (2014, p. 195). I will, with White and Schoenfield, refer to “permissivism” as the denial of Uniqueness.

³ I will in this paper often treat the Uniqueness thesis as though it reads this way: for any agent A and balance of epistemic reasons R , there is some uniquely epistemically rational doxastic way F for A to respond given R . This comes from the common analysis of *evidence* as *epistemic reason for believing*. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that, though this analysis is common, it might break down in precisely the type of case that I intend to hang my argument on. We may need to mind the difference between *evidential* and *non-evidential* epistemic reasons (in which case the Uniqueness thesis should be reformulated to substitute “evidential reasons” for “evidence”). I more thoroughly discuss the relevance of this distinction in Sect. 4 of the paper.

⁴ Since I take myself to be engaging the dialectic at a point where both positions have met a basic burden of plausibility, I will not spend time here recounting the initial motivating arguments usually given in favor

Now, I take it that there should not be much argument between these two camps about cases where the body of evidence leans clearly in one direction. For example, imagine that Wendy is leaving for work in the morning, and she is wondering whether p : the roads will be wet today. She wants to know what the weather will be like, so she turns on the weather channel and sees that r : the forecast is wind and light rain. Assuming (for simplicity) that r is the only reason that bears on the issue of whether p , I take it that proponents of permissivism and Uniqueness alike would hold that the reasonable doxastic attitude for Wendy to adopt is the belief that p .⁵

Rather, the arguments between the two camps will be about other kinds of cases. In the next section I want to suggest that there should be more discussion about what I will call **equal-reason cases**, wherein the agent A has equal epistemic reason both to believe that p and to believe that *not* p . For example, suppose that a car has just pulled in to Carl's driveway. Now suppose that Carl has two friends that both own a car of the same make, model, and color; and it is a car of this description that has pulled into the driveway. Carl can see that the car is of this description, but he cannot see who the driver is. Carl seems to have just as much reason for believing that it is the one friend as he does for believing that it is the other. It might seem that the solely rational thing for Carl to do is suspend judgment about who has pulled into his driveway; and so the case is what might be called an **impermissive case**, wherein the balance of reasons does not admit of more than one rational response.⁶

Perhaps this is the intuitive verdict for the case of Carl. But it is worth taking a closer look at the case, and at why defenders of Uniqueness in particular should agree with this verdict. If Uniqueness is true, there is one uniquely epistemically rational doxastic attitude for Carl to have with respect to whether p . It is hard to see how that attitude could be either the belief that p or the belief that *not* p ; since these two attitudes are equally epistemically reasonable, neither attitude could be uniquely epistemically reasonable. So defenders of Uniqueness look to what seems to be the only remaining option: the suspension of judgment with respect to whether p . According to this line of thought, then, the suspension of judgment is the uniquely reasonable doxastic attitude

Footnote 4 continued

of these two views. For those interested, [Christensen \(2007\)](#), [Feldman \(2007\)](#), and [White \(2005\)](#) capture many of the motivations for Uniqueness. [Kelly \(2010\)](#) has presented challenges to the thesis, and [Schoenfield \(2014\)](#) is a sample of one who argues in favor of permissivism.

⁵ Whether there is agreement in these cases may depend on the framework in which the cases are understood. In this paper I assume that there are three coarse-grained options: believe that p , believe that *not* p , and suspend judgment about whether p . I have done this partly for the sake of simplicity, but mostly for the reason that this is the way in which my opponents have framed similar cases. On a more fine-grained picture involving degrees of belief or levels of credence, or a coarse-grained picture involving more than three options, the case of Wendy might generate argument between the two camps.

⁶ I borrow this case, and the impermissive analysis of it, from [Feldman \(2006, pp. 228–229\)](#). [White \(2005, pp. 449–451\)](#) refers to these as “non-permissive” cases. Permissive cases, on the other hand, are those in which the balance of reasons does not determine a uniquely rational response. Here also I follow [White \(2014, p. 313\)](#).

in such cases. This shows a kind of commitment⁷ by defenders of Uniqueness to what I will call the principle of **Equal-Reason Agnosticism** (ERA):

If any agent *A* has evidence that gives *A* equal epistemic reason to believe that *p* and to believe that *not p*, then the uniquely epistemically rational doxastic attitude for *A* to adopt with respect to *p* is the suspension of judgment.

By appealing to ERA as a plausible rule of epistemic rationality,⁸ defenders of Uniqueness find principled ground on which to assert that there is a uniquely rational doxastic attitude to adopt in equal-reason cases. According to Uniqueness, every case is impermissible; and ERA predicts that every equal-reason case is impermissible. But is that true?

3 A permissive equal-reason case

I think that it is not true; and there is a certain class of cases that demonstrates why. The class is a subset of those cases involving what have been called *self-fulfilling*, *self-verifying*, or *auto-alethic* beliefs. These are cases wherein, roughly, the agent's attitude toward some proposition *p* affects the epistemic status of *p*—by either directly affecting the truth of whether *p*, by affecting what evidence there is for whether *p*, or by some other means. Such cases are not new (they date back at least to James), and it has long been noticed that they have the potential to create interesting epistemological puzzles.⁹ Richard Foley has suggested that such cases show that *evidence* does not always coincide with *good reason for belief*. Roderick Firth and Selim Berker have pointed out that versions of epistemic consequentialism may be committed to giving counterintuitive verdicts in some such cases. Carr and Greaves have noticed that some such cases might present challenges for epistemic utility theories. Nathaniel Sharadin has used such cases to argue that non-evidential considerations can be (epistemic)

⁷ I do not here claim that defenders of Uniqueness are *logically* committed to ERA. For my part, though, adopting the principle of ERA does seem like the most sensible thing for defenders of Uniqueness to do in the face of equal-reason cases; and I know of no other position on equal-reason cases taken up by a defender of Uniqueness.

⁸ I take it that the principle could be reworded in many ways acceptable to defenders of Uniqueness. Take for example Feldman's (2006, p. 229) statement that "suspending judgment is intellectually demanded in the case at hand"; he later says (2006, p. 235) that "in situations... where there are not evident asymmetries, the parties... would [only] be reasonable in suspending judgment about the matter at hand."

For reasons that will become clear in Sect. 4, it is important here that it is *A*'s *evidence* that is the source of the reasons, and so these are *epistemic* reasons (rather than, say, *practical* reasons)—in particular, they are what some have called *evidential reasons*. Thanks to two anonymous referees whose comments inspired me to make this change, and also to Sinan Dogramaci for suggesting this particular formulation.

⁹ A recent discussion of James by Scott Aikin (2014, pp. 148–154) leads me to note how the cases have developed since James. First, the agents's beliefs in James's cases do not *secure their own truth*, but are rather but are rather required for or increase the probability of the truth of some other proposition. Second, the justification for believing these propositions is, in James's view, based on the practically favorable state of affairs that would obtain as a result of such believing. Thanks to an anonymous referee for making me aware of the relevant work by Aikin.

motivating reasons for belief. Andrew Reisner has used such cases to argue against Evidentialism—and the list goes on.¹⁰

I think that such cases also have the potential to create problems for Uniqueness; indeed, I think that some such cases constitute counterexamples to Uniqueness. I will center the rest of my paper around one such case, involving Ian, who is battling a life-threatening illness. Suppose that Ian does not know whether p : he will survive the illness. He has only the following information about his prospects of survival: the illness could lead to his death, and if he does survive, the battle with the illness will render the quality of his remaining life extremely low. Knowing how grim his life might be after survival, Ian is genuinely torn as to whether he wants to survive at all. Indeed, Ian's psychology is such that he has no reason to think that he is more likely to end up believing that p rather than *not* p . But Ian does know that by believing that he will survive, he will in fact secure his survival; and he knows that if he believes that he will not survive, then he will not survive.¹¹

Let's take a closer look at the case of Ian. Ian's doxastic standing with respect to his medical situation might be akin to one's standing with respect to a coin flip: he has no decisive epistemic reason to form a belief on either side of p . Importantly, though, Ian does have some epistemic reason to form a belief about p in light of his knowledge that his belief formation with respect to p will determine the truth of the matter.¹² We can identify this reason as something like *that it will be true*, or *that it is guaranteed to be true*, or perhaps *that it will be true if I believe it*.¹³ This consideration does not

¹⁰ For some of the relevant works, see, respectively, James (1896, pp. 96–97), Foley (1991), Firth (1981), Berker (2013, pp. 370–371, 376–377), Carr (2013, pp. 6–7ff), Greaves (2013, p. 915ff), Sharadin (2016, p. 5ff), and Reisner (2007, p. 305ff, 2013). Although Reisner (2016, pp. 15, 18) does not develop the challenge, he does note in passing that such cases might be used to challenge impermissive views of epistemic rationality. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out some of these examples to me. Though such cases might seem bizarre, Carr demonstrates that we should be familiar with the notion that, for at least some propositions, one's believing that p can *increase the chances* that p is true.

¹¹ As an anonymous referee has pointed out to me, this is a somewhat bare-bones description of the case; and complications may arise if certain details are added or omitted. We may need to make certain assumptions to have a workable case. For example, we should add that if Ian manages to believe both that p and that *not* p , then his belief will have no effect on whether p (so as to avoid contradictions). If necessary, we can also add that the self-fulfilling effect is a one-off phenomenon: it will only work for the first belief that Ian forms (so there is no question about whether it would be rational for Ian to switch back and forth between believing that p and that *not* p). There may be other details like this which require screening off. Finally, it is worth noting that we could also alter the case such that if Ian does not believe that p , then he will not survive. This variation of the case creates a particularly interesting complication, in that Ian would know that if he suspends judgment about p , then it will be the case that *not* p . The question would then arise whether, possessing this knowledge before adopting any attitude about p , it would be rational for Ian to suspend judgment nonetheless. Relevant here might be what Elga (2007, p. 480) has called the "Reflection Principle".

¹² It is worth noticing that Ian's case is not like some other cases involving special pills and genies. The crucial difference is that *at the very moment* that Ian believes that p (for example), it is the case that p ; his believing makes it the case. There is, therefore, no lag separating Ian's belief-formation and the truth of the matter obtaining. So, unlike some other cases, there is no point at which Ian believes something which the evidence does not support.

¹³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that it might matter how we specify the content of Ian's reason. I address this in greater detail in the next section.

alter the *balance* of epistemic reasons, though, since Ian is guaranteed the truth either way his belief formation goes.

Is Ian rationally required to suspend judgment about whether p , as the Uniqueness thesis and ERA would predict? I will argue, for the remainder of this paper, that that is a difficult claim to make; it looks as though it is epistemically permissible for Ian to form a belief about whether p . For my part, it is simply the intuitive verdict about the case to say that Ian is not rationally required to suspend judgment about whether p . But we can ask, anticipating pressure applied to this intuition: what would make it unreasonable for Ian to *not* suspend judgment about p ? What would make it unreasonable, for example, for Ian to form the belief that p ?¹⁴ What could be brought to bear against him as a doxastic agent? Those who defend Uniqueness could claim that Ian has violated ERA, a plausible rule of rationality. But following that criticism of Ian to its conclusion would have us demand that an agent knowingly adopt the only attitude which is not guaranteed to be true—willingly casting aside the promise of truth. Since Ian knows that he is guaranteed the truth so long as he forms a belief about whether p , demanding conformity to ERA here seems tantamount to demanding that Ian not aim for (or, alternatively: try or intend to believe) the truth. This is surely an unpalatable result; even if ERA seems plausible from reflection on other equal-reason cases, its import seems quite paltry when placed on the balance opposite the weighty *guarantee* of truth.¹⁵

So, I think, the answer to the question beginning the previous paragraph is: No; Ian is not so required.¹⁶ But if Ian is not epistemically required to suspend judgment about whether p , as Uniqueness and ERA would predict, then what doxastic attitude is he required to adopt? The only other options seem to be the belief that p or the belief that *not* p . But, as in the earlier example of Carl, both of these doxastic attitudes seem to be equally epistemically reasonable for Ian; and so neither one of them can be the *uniquely* reasonable attitude for Ian to adopt. If the uniquely rational attitude for Ian to adopt with respect to p is neither the belief that p , nor the belief that *not* p , nor the suspension of judgment about whether p , then it seems that there is no uniquely rational attitude for Ian to adopt. But if there is no uniquely rational attitude for Ian to

¹⁴ Here I make use of what I take to be a quite plausible assumption, that: if some agent A is required by reason to F , then there must be something in virtue of which it is unreasonable for A to not F .

¹⁵ I do not mean to imply here that *in any case* where A knows that A is guaranteed the truth so long as A forms a belief, then it is rationally permissible for A to form a belief. I limit my claim here to equal-reason cases in particular. I take this to be crucial to any defense of the case as a counterexample; see note 35 for more.

¹⁶ Indeed, given certain connections between rationality and the truth, this might seem to be the *worst* option for Ian—perhaps even to the extent that one should like to say that he is epistemically required *not* to suspend judgment. I would not say anything so strong as that, although I do think that Ian would be epistemically criticizable if he were to suspend judgment.

It may be worth reiterating here that, when I say that Ian is not epistemically required to suspend judgment about whether p , I mean that Ian's belief that p is propositionally justified (and so would have been his belief that *not* p). One might think that Ian's believing that p could not be *doxastically* justified, but that is neither here nor there *vis-à-vis* whether this case is a counterexample to the Uniqueness thesis. Furthermore, if Ian's belief that p is propositionally justified, and he believes that p on the basis of those considerations which propositionally justify it, it seems to me not obvious that Ian's belief is not also doxastically justified.

adopt with respect to p , then we have found a permissive equal-reason case, and so the Uniqueness thesis looks to be in trouble.¹⁷

4 Three initial worries

Before explaining why I think the case of Ian presents a particularly difficult challenge to Uniqueness, I want to address three possible initial worries about the case and my analysis of it. The first worry is that my analysis of Ian somehow allows practical and epistemic rationality to be run together, delivering the wrong verdict about Ian. The second worry is that my analysis of the case either implicitly endorses or relies on a consequentialist view of epistemic rationality; but consequentialism is itself controversial. The third and most substantial worry is that this is no counterexample to Uniqueness at all, since Uniqueness makes a claim about evidence, and Ian's belief is not based on any evidence. I will treat these concerns in turn.

According to the first worry, there are practical features of the case clouding judgments about the epistemic aspect of the case. More specifically: perhaps the fact that Ian can save his own life by forming the belief that p is influencing us to (incorrectly) judge that it would be epistemically rational for Ian to form the belief that p —or at least that he could not be irrational for so believing. I say three things in response. First, even if one did think that Ian's belief that p would be *practically* rational, this is neither here nor there with respect to whether it would be *epistemically* rational. But second, recall that, due to the effect that the illness could have on Ian's well-being, it is genuinely unclear whether it is desirable for him to survive. So it is not clear that the practical reasons lean clearly in one direction or another. Perhaps this strains the imagination a bit; but a third point here is that we can easily call upon cases wherein the agent is not at all practically invested in the truth of the matter at hand.¹⁸ Suppose, for example, that, on a whim, Hannah has decided to try to do a handstand. Hannah does not really care at all about whether she has the general ability to do a handstand—much less whether she successfully executes *this* handstand. Furthermore, Hannah knows that her confidence about whether she will succeed in doing this handstand directly affects whether she will succeed in doing this handstand (to the point that her belief about whether she will do a handstand fully determines the truth of matter). Finally, although Hannah does not care about whether she executes a handstand, she *does* care generally about believing the truth. Noticing that the promise of truth—and no risk of error—lay before her, she forms the belief that she will not succeed in doing a handstand.¹⁹ Now, it seems to me that in this example, we find epistemic features exactly

¹⁷ Importantly, it is not just what Kopec and Titelbaum (2016, p. 191) call “interpersonal” Uniqueness that is threatened by this example. Interpersonal Uniqueness has been subject to compelling counterexamples by Schoenfield (2014) and others. As Kopec and Titelbaum (2016, p. 197f) rightly note, a case like that of Ian would be unique in presenting a counterexample even to “intrapersonal” Uniqueness. Thanks to an anonymous referee for making me aware of this paper.

¹⁸ It should be quite easy to generate this kind of case, and there may be variations of the case with fewer distractions. For other interesting (yet not farfetched) examples of cases like these, see Carr (2013, pp. 5–8).

¹⁹ As an anonymous referee pointed out to me, it might be important for the argument of my Sect. 5 that agents like Ian and Hannah could be motivated in their belief-formation *purely* by concern

analogous to those in the case of Ian, and none of the distracting practical features. So, contrary to this first worry, I think we are well able to focus and make judgments exclusively on the epistemic features of this sort of case.

According to a second worry, my analysis of Ian either implicitly endorses or relies on a consequentialist view of epistemic rationality; but consequentialism itself is controversial. According to Selim Berker,

All consequentialist theories hold that (i) there are certain states of affairs that are inherently good, and other states of affairs that are inherently bad, and (ii) all other normative notions under the theory's purview are determined by how well the objects of assessment conduce toward or promote those states of affairs (either.. directly... or indirectly...).²⁰

Many regard truth as the chief epistemic value. So, one might think that my analysis implicitly endorses a kind of epistemic act-consequentialism, since it appears to violate a supposed rule of rationality (ERA) in pursuit of a favorable state of affairs (that state of believing the truth). But my analysis in fact falls far short of endorsing consequentialism. To see why, we can observe that there are other claims about epistemic rationality which would capture the intuitive verdict in the case of Ian. Consider, for example, what I will refer to as **Promised-Truth Permissivism** (PTP):

In a case where an agent *A* knows that if *A* were to form the belief that *p*, it would be true that *p*, and *A*'s evidence with respect to *p* does not decisively support believing that *not p*, it is not epistemically irrational for *A* to form the belief that *p*.

Now, my purpose here is not to argue for or endorse PTP; and neither my judgment about nor my analysis of Ian is driven by any commitment to PTP.²¹ The point here is just that PTP is both different from and weaker than consequentialism, but it nonetheless captures the given analysis of Ian.²² This shows that one need not be a consequentialist to adopt the given analysis of Ian.²³ If PTP is true, then Ian's belief

Footnote 19 continued

for believing the truth. Otherwise, I could not plausibly argue that permissivism is, in such cases, in accord with the axiom that belief should aim at the truth. But I think that this description of the case of Hannah illustrates that characters like Ian could be so motivated.

²⁰ See Berker (2013, p. 364); the rest of Berker's paper recounts and adds to Firth's (1981) well-known criticism of consequentialist theories.

²¹ Indeed, it would be a mistake, in my view, to argue or imply, as Kopec (2015, p. 404) and Raleigh (2015, pp. 310, 314) do, that cases like that of Ian succeed as counterexamples only if some principle of rationality can deliver the permissive verdict. The case of Ian (and any genuine counterexample, I think) is in no need of help from such accoutrements. Thanks to an anonymous referee for making me aware of these two papers.

²² I hope that the manner in which PTP is "different" from consequentialism is straightforward. I think of PTP as "weaker" than consequentialism at least in the sense that it does not make any exhaustive claim about the nature of epistemic rationality.

²³ This complaint is anticipated by Raleigh (2015, pp. 313–314), who makes a somewhat similar argument against Uniqueness. Raleigh, however, seems to respond to the worry about consequentialism by saying that "anti-consequentialism" looks implausible. I think we should say instead, as I have here, that the merit of the case of Ian as a counterexample to Uniqueness does not at all rest on the plausibility of consequentialism.

about whether p is not epistemically irrational; but if Ian's belief is not irrational, then ERA and Uniqueness are false.

According to a third and final worry about the case, my analysis of Ian ignores an important distinction between two kinds of epistemic reasons. We can say that **epistemic reasons**, roughly, are reasons that bear on what it is epistemically rational to do. We can say that among the epistemic reasons to believe that p are the **evidential reasons** to believe that p : roughly, those reasons that bear directly on the truth of whether p (perhaps by making it more or less likely that p is true). But also among the epistemic reasons are the **non-evidential reasons** to believe that p : roughly, those reasons that, while epistemically relevant in the sense that they may bear on what it is epistemically rational to do, do not bear directly on the truth of whether p . Now, if we are being careful, perhaps we should also say that the consideration to which Ian might respond in forming a belief is something like: *if I believe that p , then it will be true that p* . But this proposition does not, on its own, affect the truth of whether p . So Ian's reason for forming a belief about whether p is not an evidential reason; the consideration which intuitively makes his belief epistemically rational (if indeed it is rational) is a non-evidential reason. But the Uniqueness thesis—someone might say—is properly understood as a claim about the relation between *evidential* reasons and epistemic rationality; and the accompanying principle of ERA, we might recall, makes a claim about what is epistemically required when an agent's *evidence* gives her equal epistemic reason to believe that p and to believe that *not* p . So even if Ian's belief that p (or that *not* p) would be rational, it would not be so in any sense that threatens Uniqueness.²⁴

This is an interesting thought, and one worth considering. I think the potential concern here can be captured in the following way. The Uniqueness thesis, in saying that there is a uniquely epistemically rational response to any body of *evidence*, makes an explicit claim about the relation between the evidential reasons and epistemic rationality. But it does not, as stated, make any claim about how the non-evidential reasons might bear on epistemic rationality. So perhaps the distinction between these two kinds of epistemic reasons should lead us to distinguish what I have called the Uniqueness thesis from

Wide Uniqueness: For any body of epistemic reasons (whether evidential or non-evidential) ER bearing on some proposition p , there is, given ER , some unique epistemically rational doxastic attitude for any agent A to adopt with respect to p .

How could this help defenders of the Uniqueness thesis? The thought here might be that the case of Ian is a counterexample to Wide Uniqueness (since it is the *non-evidential*

²⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this worry, and also for pointing out to me that the resources for such a worry could be found in the literature on self-fulfilling beliefs. A relevant sample of those who develop such a distinction specifically in cases relevantly similar to that of Ian includes Foley (1991), Reisner (2007, 2013, 2016), and Sharadin (2016). Note that the class of non-evidential reasons here is meant to be a subclass of the epistemic reasons, and so should not be taken to include so-called *practical* reasons to believe.

reasons giving Ian epistemic permission to form a belief), but not to Uniqueness—at least, not as I have construed it here.

But it is not clear how helpful this line of resistance can ultimately be. Uniqueness is often understood as a view on which the evidence *determines* or *fixes* a uniquely epistemically rational attitude. According to this way of thinking, if there is a uniquely rational response to any body of evidence *E*, it follows that that response is the uniquely rational response to any body of epistemic reasons including *E*.²⁵ That is to say: Uniqueness, as it is commonly conceived, entails Wide Uniqueness.²⁶ But if that is correct, then any counterexample to Wide Uniqueness is also a counterexample to Uniqueness. So to use this distinction in their defense, adherents of Uniqueness would have to show that the case of Ian is not a counterexample to Wide Uniqueness. But since it seems that it is the non-evidential considerations making it the case that Ian is epistemically permitted to believe either that *p* or that *not p*, and Wide Uniqueness accepts that the non-evidential considerations can bear on what it is epistemically rational to do, it is not clear how this could be done. It is ultimately not clear, then, how the distinction between evidential and non-evidential reasons can be exploited to defend Uniqueness against the case of Ian.²⁷

²⁵ Here I rely on what I take to be a common way of understanding Uniqueness, on which the thesis has the logical form of a conditional (if there is a body of evidence *E*, then there is a uniquely rational response *F*). It may help to keep in mind here that, since Uniqueness is being paired with ERA, even cases where the agent has no evidence about whether *p* count as cases wherein there is a uniquely rational response to the body of evidence (since, if *A* has no evidence for *p*, and also no evidence for *not p*, then *A* is in an equal-reason case).

²⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that whether this entailment holds depends on how Uniqueness and Wide Uniqueness are understood. It is possible that, instead of adopting the conception I mention here, defenders of Uniqueness might acknowledge the distinction between evidential and non-evidential epistemic reasons, and intend for their claim to be strictly limited to the evidential reasons. Understood in this way, Uniqueness would not entail Wide Uniqueness, and may also be safe from the counterexample of Ian (although arguments from those like Schoenfield (2014) may still trouble it). I highly doubt, though, that any defender of Uniqueness would count this a real victory. That is because at its core, the debate here is about whether, as Horowitz (2014, p. 41) has put it, *rationality* is permissive. That being so, I suspect that those who defend Uniqueness will not be content to accept the given distinction between evidential and non-evidential epistemic reasons, and proceed to defend Uniqueness only about evidential reasons. For on this understanding, even if evidence is impermissive, the case of Ian shows that epistemic rationality is not.

²⁷ It is possible that one could understand the distinction in an altogether different way, which could be of help to Uniqueness. One might take the distinction between evidential and non-evidential reasons not as a distinction between two kinds of epistemic reasons, but rather as the distinction between epistemic reasons and non-epistemic reasons. On this view, the epistemic reasons are exhausted by the evidential reasons (so, perhaps the Uniqueness theorist could also endorse the view often called *Evidentialism*, of which Conee and Feldman (2004) give the orthodox elaboration and defense). If that is so, then the non-evidential consideration that *it will be true if I believe it* could not make Ian's belief epistemically permissible. I do not have the space here to thoroughly treat this suggestion, but my initial response to this thought would be twofold. First, epistemic reasons are usually demarcated by their bearing a special relation to the truth. But if non-evidential reasons can bear a special relation to the truth in the way I describe in the next section, we need to know why that is not enough to count them among the epistemic reasons. Second, it is not clear why the case of Ian is not also a counterexample to the view that only evidential reasons can be epistemic reasons. If it is intuitive that Ian's belief that *p* (or that *not p*) is epistemically permissible, and the only consideration that seems capable of creating this verdict is a non-evidential consideration, then it seems most plausible to say that some non-evidential reasons are epistemic reasons (thanks to an anonymous referee for making me aware that Reisner (2007, 2013, 2016, p. 15ff) has made almost this very argument

So it seems that the first two initial worries about my argument against Uniqueness are based on misunderstandings of the case of Ian and my analysis of it; and the third initial worry, though more substantive and serious, is subject to serious worries of its own.

5 Doxastic permissiveness and the promise of truth

The case of Ian, then,—these initial worries notwithstanding—does seem to produce a troubling result for the Uniqueness thesis. In this section, I wish to cast some additional light on why I believe it will be so difficult for defenders of Uniqueness to uphold the claim that Ian is epistemically required to suspend judgment. The difficulty has its source in the importance of truth to epistemic rationality. I will discuss three ways in which epistemologists (including those who defend Uniqueness) have given truth a place of prominence in the theory of epistemic rationality: first, they have held that there is some intimate connection between epistemic rationality and the truth; second, they have claimed that the truth is the proper aim or end of belief; and third, they have claimed what makes epistemic rationality valuable is primarily its connection to the truth. I do not wish here to defend any of these claims (plausible though they may be). Rather, I wish only to point out that defenders of Uniqueness have often appealed to them in defending the Uniqueness thesis—but they are at odds with claiming that Ian is epistemically required to suspend judgment. This makes the difficulty here a *conditional* one: to the extent that truth is important to epistemic rationality in the three ways just mentioned, it will to that extent be difficult to defend Uniqueness in the case of Ian.

I believe that the most promising response on behalf of Uniqueness is quite simple: defenders of Uniqueness should just try to uphold the claim that Ian is rationally required to suspend judgment about whether *p*. Usually, in equal-reason cases, defenders of Uniqueness might appeal to ERA to make this claim. But here ERA itself has been challenged; so now defenders of Uniqueness must say something to keep the principle afloat in the face of an apparent counterexample. A good strategy, I believe, would be to provide independent, general and theoretical reason (rather than motivation based on judgments about cases) to believe ERA.²⁸

Such motivation could come from the three issues I cited above. The first of these regards what I will call the **truth-connection**: the apparent connection between epistemic rationality and the truth.²⁹ It is a common thought—perhaps a fundamental

Footnote 27 continued

against Evidentialism). Impermissivists might at this point want to allow that Ian's belief would be rational, but not *epistemically* rational. But I cannot see what other variety of rationality could be at play here, since it does not seem to fit the bill for either *practical* or *moral* rationality. So I think the burden would be on defenders of Uniqueness to give an account of this new variety of rationality.

²⁸ Insofar as there is a question about the burden of proof here, it is worth noting that there is often thought to be good reason to believe permissivism generally. Rosen (2001, pp. 71–72) has put this point nicely; but even defenders of Uniqueness, such as Feldman (2006, pp. 217–218) and White (2005, pp. 445–447), seem to acknowledge the intuitive pull of the position.

²⁹ Here I borrow some language from Littlejohn (2012), who talks more in terms of “justification” rather than “rationality”.

intuition in epistemology—that epistemic rationality and truth are intimately connected. As Cohen has observed,

A variety of philosophers from Descartes to the present have presupposed the view that justification and truth are conceptually related — that there is an internal connection between a belief being justified and being true.³⁰

The best views in epistemology, it is often thought, will likely be the ones that respect and give a satisfying account of the truth connection. The best views will also give a satisfactory answer to what I will call the **aim question**: the question of what the proper aim or end of epistemic activity is. It has often been thought that the correct answer to this question must appeal to the truth, as Ralph Wedgwood has written³¹:

It is often claimed that beliefs aim at the truth. Indeed, this claim has often been thought to express an essential or constitutive feature of belief.

...that suggestive but metaphorical slogan, ‘Belief aims at the truth’, expresses a fundamental truth about belief.

Finally, a third important issue is what Sophie Horowitz has called the **value question**. The value question asks: why is epistemic rationality (or rational belief) valuable? As with the previous two issues, it is often thought that a satisfactory answer to the value question must centrally feature the truth.

All of this shows that certain general positions on the truth-connection, the aim question, and the value question, have often been thought to be at least *prima facie* plausible. But what does this have to do with Uniqueness, ERA, and epistemic rationality in equal-reason cases? As I will suggest, defenders of Uniqueness seem to be invested in certain positions on these issues; and ERA itself might be motivated by positions on these issues. Consider the following passages from Roger White and Sophie Horowitz (respectively), defending Uniqueness:

Only if I could reasonably suppose that arbitrarily selecting a [belief-inducing] pill will most likely lead to the truth would this be a way to form beliefs that can rationally survive recognition of having been formed this way. We certainly have no reason to expect that rational assessment of the evidence reliably leads to the truth [in such cases].... so forming beliefs in response to evidence that does not determine a rational conclusion seems no better than taking belief-inducing pills.³²

Impermissivism is attractive for a number of reasons... [it] offers an attractive answer to the value question. That is, impermissivists can argue that rationality

³⁰ See Cohen (1984, p. 279), who, like Littlejohn, uses language of “justification”.

³¹ See Wedgwood (2002, p. 267) and Wedgwood (2002, p. 291), respectively, for these two thoughts.

³² Indeed, this point is made by White (2005, p. 449) in the midst of a longer argument that permissivism cannot adequately account for the truth-connection.

matters because it guides us to the truth, in a particular way: given a body of evidence, the rational credences are those that maximize expected accuracy.³³

I think these passages show how defenders of Uniqueness might package positions on the truth-connection, the aim question, and the value question in order to motivate their position about equal-reason cases. I also think these passages capture the spirit of the most promising reply to my analysis of Ian.

These passages illustrate the good reason we have to be suspicious of permissivism, especially in equal-reason cases. I take it that one of the main points here is that if there really were situations wherein two options were equally reasonable—or even epistemically permissible—then in such situations, forming a belief based upon the evidence would be no better off vis-à-vis the truth than forming a belief via a random-belief-inducing pill. But, of course, we *do* think that forming beliefs based upon the evidence is best vis-à-vis the truth; so we should say that such cases (permissive equal-reason cases) do not exist. Furthermore, it seems rationally unacceptable to form beliefs in ways that, upon reflection (either in advance or after the fact), we could not expect to lead to the truth. One who recognizes in advance that one’s belief-forming practices could not be expected to reliably lead to the truth could not really be said to be aiming to believe the truth in following those practices. But any reflective agent who forms a belief in an equal-reason case fits this description³⁴; so we should think that Ian’s belief forming practices are rationally unacceptable. Finally, if we do not adopt these impermissive stances, we raise the troubling question for ourselves as to why we care about epistemic rationality at all. What would be the value of being epistemically rational if it did not reliably lead to the truth? Perhaps there is some intrinsic value in being epistemically rational, but disconnecting it from the truth would surely rob it of what is perhaps its primary value.

This might look like a pretty promising reply in defense of Uniqueness and ERA. However, this general line of defense is impotent in the case of Ian. Let me explain why. One of the thoughts here is that Uniqueness and ERA are in a better position to preserve the truth-connection. But this is clearly not true in the case of Ian, since Ian is guaranteed the truth should he form a belief about whether *p*. Quite contrary to the impermissive line of thought above, declaring Ian’s belief-formation to be irrational would make it harder to explain the truth connection. Furthermore, Ian *knows* that he is guaranteed the truth should he form a belief about whether *p*, and he forms his belief in the light of that knowledge. That being so, when Ian reflects on his deliberative process, he will observe a process *guaranteed* to lead to the truth, in which he responded to that guarantee.³⁵ It seems to me quite difficult to claim, then, that Ian’s belief cannot be

³³ See Horowitz (2014, p. 47), who (2014, p. 42n1) uses the label “impermissivism” for what others call “Uniqueness”. In agreement with White, Horowitz argues that “moderate permissivism” cannot properly account for the importance of truth in epistemic rationality.

³⁴ To see why, recall that we often use the phrases “what the evidence supports” or “what there is most reason to believe” interchangeably with “what is most likely to be true”. See Christensen (2007), Feldman (2006, 2007), and Kelly (2010) for examples of those who frame the whole discourse in terms of agents’ reflections on the notion of *what is most likely to be true* (or some similar notion).

³⁵ As I said earlier, I do not mean to imply here that *any* belief formed as a response to the guarantee of truth is rationally permissible. If Ian’s evidence clearly indicated that *not p*, for example, it might be

aiming at the truth. If anything, it seems that following ERA and suspending judgment could not easily be described as aiming to believe the truth.³⁶ Finally, bearing all of this in mind, it likewise seems hard to suggest that a permissive verdict about the case of Ian would imply a wrong answer to the value question. The permissive position could hold Ian up as an example of an agent whose epistemic faculties guided him to the truth; on the other hand, it would be difficult to explain how adhering to ERA in this case implies the right answer to the value question. In claiming that Ian must suspend judgment, defenders of Uniqueness would, by their own lights, put the cart before the horse: they would use a supposed rule of rationality (ERA) to deny Ian the very thing that makes that rule valuable (the truth). Such a commitment here seems to me not much more than a bit of what Smart called “superstitious rule-worship”.³⁷

It is important to point out here that one need not (and that I do not here) endorse or defend any position about the truth-connection, the aim question, or the value question in order to cause difficulties for Uniqueness. Of course, to the extent that one finds the standard positions on these three issues plausible (as many have), one should to that extent agree with my analysis of Ian. But there is a more dialectically specific point here: many defenders of Uniqueness have tried to motivate their position—occasionally in equal-reason cases in particular—by discussing these issues. However, as I have just shown, if there is any legitimate worry over the epistemic rationality of Ian’s belief about whether p , it cannot be grounded in any concern to uphold the truth-connection, or to claim that truth is the proper aim of belief, or to claim that truth is a large part of what makes epistemic rationality valuable and desirable. Ian’s belief is immune to such criticisms, and so defenders of Uniqueness must find some other way to indict his belief of irrationality.

Before I conclude, I want to point out one more possible consequence of defending Uniqueness and ERA in the case of Ian. As I have been suggesting, claiming that Ian must suspend judgment in the present case represents a downgrading of the role of truth in epistemic normativity. I believe that this may have consequences for the project of demarcating the realm of epistemic normativity, especially as distinct from other realms of normativity. When asked what distinguishes, for example, epistemic normativity from practical normativity, it is very tempting to appeal to the truth and answer with something like: “epistemic normativity is that variety which, first and

Footnote 35 continued

impermissible for him to believe that p despite having the guarantee of truth (though I take no stance on such a case here). So I do not rest my argument, as Kopec (2015, p. 404) and Raleigh (2015, p. 310) seem to, on any unqualified claim that it is permissible to form beliefs on the basis of methods known to be reliable.

³⁶ Another way of seeing this point is by observing, with Kelly (2014, p. 301), that “there is the goal of *not believing what is false*, a goal that can be successfully achieved with respect to a given issue by suspending judgment on that issue. On the other hand, there is the goal of *believing what is true*, for which suspending judgment is obviously insufficient”. White (2005, pp. 445–446) discusses a similar point. But Ian knows that he can achieve *both* of these goals by forming a belief; he faces no danger of believing what is false. That being the case, if Ian were to suspend judgment about whether p , I think he could be described only as *not* pursuing the goal of believing what is true.

³⁷ Smart’s point (1956, pp. 248–249) about rule-utilitarianism can be applied here via a general form: if concern for some value v is what truly motivates some rule or principle r , then it makes no sense to uphold or adhere to r in cases where such adherence would not adequately respect the concern for v .

foremost, cares about and aims for the truth”.³⁸ Claiming that Ian is epistemically required to suspend judgment about whether p seems to me a direct denial of this claim. Indeed, if we take this characterization of epistemic normativity seriously, there is a legitimate sense in which our theory should hold Ian up as an exemplar of epistemic rationality—for he cared about and pursued the truth even when a plausible principle of rationality might have steered him away from it. If we go the other route, and commit to the theory that robs Ian’s belief of its rational status, we run the risk of robbing ourselves of our best resource for declaring what is the distinctive character of epistemic normativity.

6 Concluding remarks

I think that, rather than suffer potentially serious and wide-ranging theoretical costs, we should simply give up ERA and the Uniqueness thesis. But, more importantly, I think that the issues surrounding the truth-connection, the aim question, and the value question make it particularly difficult for defenders of Uniqueness to stick to their guns in the case of Ian. Until some defense is presented on behalf of Uniqueness, I take it that we have found a class of cases which creates trouble for the thesis; and if no defense can be found, such cases should lead us to give up the thesis. That class of cases is such that:

- [1] A has equal epistemic reason both to believe that p and to believe that *not* p ;
- [2] If A were to form a belief about whether p , the belief would be true³⁹;
- [3] A knows that [2].

As a way of concluding, I think it may be useful to keep in mind that a belief that violates ERA or that is, in some sense, arbitrary, is not necessarily a belief formed *without regard to reason* or an *unreasoned* belief. For suppose Ian forms the belief that p . There is good reason—perhaps sufficient reason—supporting the belief that p . The reason is (something like) that it will be true that p . Even if it is true that there is not much for Ian to choose between p and *not* p , there might be plausible principles of epistemic rationality (such as PTP) that permit forming a belief nonetheless. Once we appreciate this possible path of deliberation, the possibility of a principle that vindicates it, and some basic intuitions about the role of truth in epistemology, I think it becomes quite difficult to genuinely criticize Ian’s belief as unreasonable or irrational. Ian’s belief accounts for all of the relevant evidence; Ian’s belief is supported by good epistemic reasons; his belief is in keeping with a (perhaps plausible) principle of rationality; and his belief is aimed at, and formed on the promise of, the truth. What more could epistemic rationality really require of doxastic states?

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³⁸ Too many to name have expressed this thought, but I think Raz (2011, pp. 36–58) has discussed it particularly well.

³⁹ It is an interesting question whether this conditional must obtain in the way discussed in this paper: A’s believing that p (or that *not* p) is what makes it true. I take no stance on that issue here.

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