

An Argument for Epistemic Permissiveness

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§1. Introduction

What is it rational to believe when one learns of an intellectual peer with whom one disagrees? Suppose I believe that p , and I learn of a peer who believes that not- p . May I continue to believe p ? Must I defer to my peer's belief that not- p ? Must I suspend judgment as to whether p ? Richard Feldman has convincingly argued that this last option is, in many cases of peer disagreement, the uniquely rational one.¹

Feldman's view may seem obviously true given a certain view about evidential support.² On this view, a body of evidence can support at most one doxastic attitude to any given proposition. Feldman calls this view of evidential support the Uniqueness Thesis. If what it is rational to believe is just what one's evidence supports, then Uniqueness entails that for any body of evidence and any proposition, there is at most one rational attitude one may take towards that proposition.³

Roger White "call[s] positions that depart from Uniqueness "permissive" as they entail that epistemic rationality permits a range of alternative doxastic attitudes" to a

¹ Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreement" *Philosophers Without Gods* ed. Louis Antony. Oxford University Press 2007: 194-214 and "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement" in *Epistemology Futures* ed. Stephen Hetherington. Oxford University Press, 2006: 216-236.

² Though, see Thomas Kelly's "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence" *forthcoming* for an argument that the so-called "Equal Weight View" is problematic given Uniqueness.

³ In what follows, I shall use 'rational' and 'reasonable' interchangeably.

proposition given some body of evidence.⁴ In this paper, I shall present an argument for what White calls Epistemic Permissiveness. I shall argue that Uniqueness is inconsistent with what John MacFarlane calls a Nonindexical Contextualist semantics for gradable adjectives and knowledge attributions.⁵

For reasons that shall become clear below, I advocate only a weak form of Permissiveness. If my argument is sound, then it does not follow that Uniqueness is *false*. My argument shows instead that Uniqueness presupposes the denial of a controversial semantic thesis. If what I have to say is correct, then it follows that there are circumstances in which it is dialectically inappropriate to employ Uniqueness in an argument against the possibility of rational peer disagreement.

The strength of my case against Uniqueness varies proportionally with the strength of the case for Nonindexical Contextualism. It is not my aim here to motivate or defend Nonindexical Contextualism. If the view is correct, then so much the worse for Uniqueness. My argument only requires that Nonindexical Contextualism be taken as a live theoretical option.

§2. Uniqueness, Disagreement, and Rationality

Feldman states Uniqueness as

the idea that a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude with respect to any particular proposition. As I think of

⁴ Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness" *Philosophical Perspectives* 19, 2005: 445-459, 445.

⁵ John MacFarlane, "Nonindexical Contextualism," 2007 *manuscript*.

things, our options with respect to any proposition are believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment. The Uniqueness Thesis says that, given a body of evidence, one of these attitudes is the rationally justified one.⁶

In the above formulation, ‘justifies’ is interchangeable with ‘makes rational’. As stated, Uniqueness has two clauses:

- (1) For any body of evidence E and any set of mutually exclusive propositions $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$, to believe at most one of $\{p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n\}$ is rational given E .
- (2) For any body of evidence E and any proposition p , E makes rational at most one of the following doxastic attitudes towards p : belief that p , belief that not- p , or suspension of judgment as to whether p .

In (1) and (2), Feldman has in mind a notion of rationality according to which “a belief is rational only when it has adequate evidential support.”⁷ In what follows, let us understand ‘rational’ in this way. On Feldman’s view, then, no body of evidence adequately supports more than one doxastic attitude to any given proposition.

Let one’s *peers* be those whom one is justified in taking to be as intelligent, rational, responsive to evidence, intellectually virtuous, and so on, as oneself. Let us say that X and Y have a *disagreement* just in case for some proposition p , X believes p while

⁶ Feldman 2007, 205.

⁷ Feldman 2007, 203.

Y believes not- p .⁸ Further, let us say that X and Y have a *rational disagreement* just in case they have a disagreement and X believes rationally that p while Y believes rationally that not- p . Also, let us say that X and Y have a *rational disagreement in full disclosure* just in case X and Y have a rational disagreement and X knows all of Y 's reasons for believing not- p and Y knows all of X 's reasons for believing p .⁹ Finally, let us say that X and Y have a *mutually recognized rational disagreement* just in case X and Y have a rational disagreement in full disclosure and X rationally believes that Y is rational in believing not- p and Y rationally believes that X is rational in believing p .¹⁰

So, given Uniqueness, are rational disagreements between peers possible? If you and I have different evidence, then we may indeed rationally disagree. The proponent of Uniqueness is committed to denying, however, that rational disagreements between peers who share evidence are possible, that rational disagreements in full disclosure are impossible. Suppose Smith and Jones disagree on p given evidence E . Smith believes p ; Jones believes not- p . If Uniqueness is true, then either E supports p , E supports not- p , or E supports neither p nor not- p . In any case, either Smith, Jones, or both Smith and Jones believe irrationally.

It is important to note that Smith and Jones needn't be aware of their disagreement in order for Uniqueness to apply. If the uniquely rational attitude towards p given E is one of disbelief, then Smith's belief is irrational whether he learns of Jones's disagreement with him or not.

⁸ I do not intend this notion to provide the sense for the ordinary English expression 'to have a disagreement'. Most philosophers working on the peer disagreement explicitly defined 'disagreement'. As MacFarlane (2007) observes, it is rather difficult to provide a counterexample free definition of this expression as it is ordinarily used.

⁹ The term 'full disclosure' is Feldman's.

¹⁰ The term 'mutually recognized rational disagreement' is also Feldman's.

§3. Nonindexical Contextualism

John MacFarlane suggests that the term ‘context sensitive’ as employed by philosophers in the debate over Epistemic Contextualism is often taken to mean ‘indexical’, which he glosses as follows: “An expression is *indexical* iff its *content* at a context depends on features of the context.”¹¹ The core cases of indexicals, ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘here’, ‘now’, and so on vary with respect to the content they contribute to propositions expressed by sentences in which they occur based on features of the conversational context. Epistemic Contextualism, then, can be described as the view that epistemic predicates, e.g., ‘knows that’, are indexical. The contribution made by ‘knows that’ to the proposition expressed by

(3) Smith knows that he has hands,

varies with respect to the epistemic standards in play at the context of utterance.

According to Epistemic Contextualism, in contexts where everyday epistemic standards are operative, (3) expresses a proposition that is true. In contexts where brain in a vat scenarios have recently been discussed, perhaps, (3) expresses a different, false proposition.

MacFarlane observes that expressions may be *context sensitive* without their being indexical. On MacFarlane’s view, “[a]n expression is *context sensitive* iff its

¹¹ MacFarlane 2007, 2.

extension at a context depends on features of the context.”¹² Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism, then, can be described as the view that epistemic predicates are context sensitive. The contribution made by ‘knows that’ to the proposition expressed by (3) is invariant across contexts. In contexts where everyday epistemic standards are in play, however, the extension of ‘knows that’ includes Smith and the proposition that Smith has hands, while the extension of ‘knows that’ does not contain Smith and this proposition at contexts where skeptical counter-possibilities are salient. On Non-Indexical Contextualism, in circumstances in which everyday standards are operative, Smith and the proposition that he has hands are in the extension of ‘knows that’, but in circumstances in which brain in vat scenarios have been discussed, Smith and that proposition are not in the extension of ‘knows that’. So, in the former set of circumstances utterances of (3) are true, while in the latter set of circumstances utterances of (3) are false.

For any gradable adjective, both Contextualist and Nonindexical Contextualist semantics are possible. Take ‘flat’ for example. On a Contextualist view, the contribution made by ‘flat’ to the proposition expressed by,

(4) This field is flat

said of some soccer field, varies with respect to features of the context of utterance. At contexts where soccer practice is relevant, (4) expresses a proposition that is true, say. At contexts where landing a small aircraft is relevant, (4) expresses a different, false proposition.

¹² *Ibid.*

On Nonindexical Contextualism, however, (4) expresses the same proposition in both kinds of context. The relevant features of the context of utterance, however, suffice to fix an extension for ‘flat’ that in the former case includes the relevant field, and in the latter case does not.

§4. Two Cases

In this section, I shall argue that Uniqueness is inconsistent with Nonindexical Contextualism about epistemic predicates and gradable adjectives.

§4.1. The Airport Case

Consider a case from Stewart Cohen’s 1999 paper, “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons”:

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and responds, “Yes I know—it does stop in Chicago.” It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, “How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.”¹³

¹³ Cohen, “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 57-89.

Suppose that Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is true. Let us say that John and Mary occupy a high-stakes context while Smith occupies a low-stakes context. The stakes at John and Mary's context serve to determine a standard, *S*, for evaluating knowledge ascriptions. The stakes at Smith's context determine a lower standard, *S*-minus. Let us suppose that John and Mary take a brief glance at Smith's flight itinerary. It appears as though they have the same evidence Smith does for

(5) The plane stops in Chicago.¹⁴

Call this evidence *E*. Given *E* and *S*, the proposition expressed by

(6) John and Mary know that the plane stops in Chicago,

is false. Given what is at stake for John and Mary, their merely possessing *E* does not suffice for knowledge of (5). So, were John and Mary to assert, "We know that the plane stops in Chicago," on Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism, their assertion would be false, for the ordered pairs {<John, [5]>, <Mary, [5]>} are not included in the extension of 'knows'.¹⁵

Suppose that Smith were to utter (6). Smith would thereby say something true.

For John and Mary meet the standard for knowing operative at Smith's context, namely

¹⁴ This may not seem quite right. After all, doesn't Smith have evidence about how reliable his travel agent is, and so on? For the present argument, let's suppose that Smith shares any such evidence with John and Mary.

¹⁵ I introduce the following notation '[α]' for 'the proposition expressed by α ' where α is some sentence or other.

S-minus, so the ordered pairs {<John, [5]>, <Mary, [5]>} are included in the extension of 'knows'.¹⁶

I maintain that not only do *S* and *S*-minus determine which knowledge ascriptions are appropriate, they also determine what it is rational to believe about who knows.

Given *S*, John and Mary's having *E* does not suffice for their knowing (5), and thereby does not warrant an utterance of (6). What is it rational for John and Mary to believe about whether they know? Would it be rational for them to believe that (6) is true?

Given that on *S*, having *E* does not justify a self ascription of knowledge, it seems unreasonable for John and Mary nevertheless to *believe* that they know. Given what is at stake for them, they should not believe that they know.

What about Smith? May he believe that John and Mary know? Given that he may truthfully *assert* that they know, it seems hard to deny that he may rationally believe that they do. So, if Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is true, it looks like there is a single proposition that *E* makes rational for Smith to believe but not for John and Mary to believe. So, on Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism, Uniqueness is false.

§4.2. The Soccer Field Case

Suppose that some friends, Bill, Susan, James, and Sally are looking for a field on which to hold their weekly soccer practice.¹⁷ They only have an hour for practice. They've

¹⁶ The version of Non-Indexical Contextualism I am considering here has it that the standards that fix the extension of a knowledge predicate or a gradable adjective are fixed by features of the context of *utterance*. Other versions of the view on which the relevant standards are determined by features of the *subject's* context (in knowledge attributions) or by features of the context of *assessment* might be maintained.

¹⁷ This example is adapted from an example of Mark Richard's in his *When Truth Gives Out*, Oxford University Press 2008..

narrowed their choice of soccer fields to two options: Flanders Field and Anderson Field. Bill and Susan advocate using Flanders Field, while James and Sally are in favor of Anderson Field. There are a number of considerations that each party takes into account in forming their opinions: how far they'll have to drive to get to their practice site, how flat each field is, and so on.

Bill and Susan give more weight to the fact that Anderson field is two miles away while Flanders field is only a couple of blocks away than they do to the fact that Anderson Field has fewer bumps and depressions than Flanders field. Bill and Susan are more interested in having a long practice session than they are in playing on a field free of bumps and depressions. James and Sally, on the other hand, do not mind driving a bit further and thereby sacrificing some practice time to play on the field with fewer bumps.

Given this distribution of concerns, consider the groups' attitudes towards the proposition expressed by

(7) Flanders Field is flat.

Suppose that Nonindexical Contextualism supplies the correct semantics for 'flat'. Given their weighting of the relevant concerns, utterance of (7) looks appropriate for Bill and Susan. Given James and Sally's weighting, however, utterance of (7) does not look appropriate.

At Bill and Susan's context, the extension of 'flat' includes Flanders Field, while at James and Sally's context it does not. Suppose that each group forms their respective opinions in isolation from the other group. Are Bill and Susan rational in believing (7)?

Do James and Sally rationally believe (7)'s denial? It seems clear that both groups' beliefs can be rational. If this is the case, then, supposing each group has the same evidence, Uniqueness is false.

§5. Objections

In this section I shall consider some objections to the above arguments. I shall begin with objections to the argument from the Airport Case.

§5.1. Objections to the Airport Case

The most obvious objection is that John, Mary, and Smith do not really have the same evidence. John and Mary have a piece of information that Smith lacks, namely, they know

(8) John and Mary have an important business meeting in Chicago.

How would learning (8) change what it is rational for Smith to believe about whether John and Mary know the plane stops? If gaining this information is sufficient to bump Smith into a high-stakes context, then his coming to learn (8) would make a significant difference. If, however, Smith's coming to learn (8) does not result in a hike in standards for knowledge ascriptions, then the addition of this fact to Smith's body of evidence will make no difference to whether he may rationally believe (6).

Are there any circumstances in which Smith's learning (8) would not affect a hike in standards? It seems to me that there are. Suppose that Smith just doesn't care whether John and Mary make it on time to their meeting. He thinks Mary's worries about a misprint are *silly*. He observes John and Mary claiming not to know that the plane stops in Chicago, and he thinks they are being epistemically spineless. He evaluates the evidence that John and Mary have for believing that the plane stops, and he deems it sufficient for knowledge that the plane stops. So, he makes the ascription in (6). Is Smith rational to believe that (6) is true? If Smith's callousness is sufficient to prevent the standards from going up, then he is rational to believe that (6) is true.

What reason do we have to think that Smith's attitude about the business meeting could influence the standards for assessing knowledge ascriptions that prevail at his context? Presumably, it is because John and Mary care about making it to the meeting as much as they do that their standards go up. Suppose the case involved a business meeting that John and Mary couldn't care less about. Worries about a misprint in Smith's flight itinerary in such a case would be powerless to generate anxiety for John and Mary about whether the plane really stops in Chicago. The same would be true of Smith. Since he lacks any concern about the meeting, worries about a misprint are powerless to raise the standards that prevail at his context.

It might be objected at this point that Uniqueness can be trivially reformulated in order to escape my argument. My argument targets clause (2) of the thesis. So, the objection goes, this clause can be reformulated as

(2') For any body of evidence E , any proposition p , and any context c , E makes rational at most one of the following doxastic attitudes towards p : belief that p , belief that not- p , or suspension of judgment as to whether p .

The John and Mary case does not provide a counterexample to (2'), for *ex hypothesi*, Smith and John and Mary occupy different contexts.

I grant this. (2'), however, cannot be used to argue that rational peer disagreement is impossible. At most, (2') can be used in an argument to show that rational peer disagreement is impossible when peers occupy the same context.¹⁸ This claim is somewhat weaker than the claim Feldman thinks follows from Uniqueness.

Another worry is that John, Mary, and Smith's difference of opinion as to the truth of (6) does not count as a genuine disagreement.¹⁹ If this is the case, then my argument cannot be used to motivate the view that rational disagreements between peers are possible. According to this objection, the epistemic standards that shrink or expand the extension of 'knows' on Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism are features of a context of utterance much like the world or time of utterance. On this view, epistemic standards are parameters that determine the truth of a given proposition containing epistemic vocabulary. No one, however, would count persons who have a difference of opinion over the proposition expressed by

(9) Barack Obama is President of the United States,

¹⁸ Given that 'peer' is a technical term, there may be those who would rather define it in such a way that sameness of context is required for peerhood. No one in the literature on rational disagreement has explicitly made such a move, however.

¹⁹ Thanks to Stewart Cohen for this point.

as having a *disagreement* if their difference of opinion were grounded in the fact that they occupy different worlds. Suppose A occupies the actual world at which (9) is true, while B occupies some other world at which (9) is false. To say that A and B have a disagreement would be silly.²⁰

There are a couple of things to say. First, even if this objection is sound, Uniqueness still seems to be in trouble. Insofar as Epistemic Permissiveness merely requires a departure from Uniqueness, my argument is still sufficient to establish some form of Permissiveness.

Second, it is not clear that John, Mary, and Smith do not have a genuine disagreement. Suppose that Smith becomes apprised of John and Mary's business meeting, but resists a shift to John and Mary's high stakes context.²¹ Don't John and Mary disagree with Smith about which epistemic standard is appropriate given the circumstances? It seems clear to me that they do. John and Mary disagree with Smith about the extension of 'knows' because they disagree about which standards are appropriate, they do not disagree with Smith about which standards are appropriate because they disagree on the proper extension of 'knows'. Their disagreement with Smith is not merely verbal or semantic; rather, it is a substantive dispute over the appropriateness of epistemic standards.²²

If Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is true, Uniqueness, as Feldman formulates it, is false. Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is a contentious thesis, however. So, I do not wish to conclude that Uniqueness is false. An argument for the

²⁰ MacFarlane (2007) makes this point.

²¹ Here I am assuming that John and Mary and Smith are still 'in isolation'.

²² This argument mirrors Mark Richard's comments on disagreement from chapter 4 of his 2008.

impossibility of rational peer disagreement that relies on Uniqueness, however, must either presuppose that Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is false or replace (2) with something like (2'). If one presupposes that Nonindexical Epistemic Contextualism is false in arguing against the possibility of rational peer disagreement, then one's argument is dialectically weak; it presupposes the denial of a controversial thesis. If one reformulates (2) as something like (2'), however, the argument is no longer valid. At most the argument can show that *very many* rational peer disagreements are impossible. Perhaps this conclusion would be enough for some theorists, but it is not the strong thesis Feldman and others advocate.

§5.2. Objections to the Soccer Field Case

One might object that at most one weighting of the relevant concerns (e.g., distance of the field, flatness of the field, amount of practice time available) is rational. On this objection, then, either Bill and Susan or James and Sally are being irrational in maintaining their opinion.

This objection seems clearly wrongheaded. On what grounds can one say that Bill and Susan's weighting of the relevant concerns or James and Sally's weighting is *irrational*? There seems no motivation, other than saving Uniqueness, for saying this.

There is a related objection, however, that has more bite. One might object that, in full disclosure, the rational thing for both parties to do is to suspend judgment over the truth of (7). In the case that the debate becomes intractable, each side would be irrational to maintain its pre-disclosure opinion.

There are a couple of things to say here. First, consider the evidence that both parties have in full disclosure. This evidence includes the information that peers disagree with respect to (7). Call this evidence E'' . Suppose that I concede to the objection that E'' suffices to make rational a unique attitude towards (7), namely suspension of judgment. Consider, however, the evidence both parties have in isolation. Call this E' . Does E' make rational a single attitude towards (7)? It seems clear that it does not.

Even if E'' suffices to make rational a single doxastic attitude towards (7), namely suspension of judgment, my argument only requires that E' does not suffice to fix a single rational attitude to (7). So, while my argument may not suffice to show that rational disagreements in full disclosure are possible, it does suffice to show that Uniqueness is false on a Nonindexical Contextualist semantics for gradable adjectives like 'flat'.

Second, however, it is not apparent that suspension of judgment is the unique rational attitude even after full disclosure. I suggest that the above objection gains traction because it tempts us to conflate practical and epistemic rationality. Given their goal of practicing soccer together, it would be irrational for both groups obdurately to persist in arguing for their respective opinions. After all, there is only an hour of practice time, and the more time is spent in practical deliberation about where to play, the less time there is for practice. So, it would be *prudent* for both groups to abandon their arguments and perhaps resort to some arbitrary decision procedure to determine where to play. But, it does not follow from this claim that it would be unreasonable for Bill and Susan to go on believing that (7) is true and for James and Sally to go on believing that it

is false. Given their respective weightings of the relevant considerations, in fact, it seems that it would be irrational for each group to give up their beliefs.

It will be further objected that Bill and Susan do not have a genuine disagreement with James and Sally. The rejoinder to this objection is similar to the analogous objection pressed against the Airport Case. Even if no genuine disagreement takes place, the case still demonstrates a problem for Uniqueness. However, it is not clear that the parties to the dispute do not have a substantive disagreement, perhaps one over which relative weighting of relevant concerns is appropriate.

Similarly, a reformulation of Uniqueness that contains a variable ranging over contexts might be suggested. The same considerations I adduced above apply here as well.

§6. Conclusion

I do not take myself to have refuted either Uniqueness or the claim to the impossibility of rational peer disagreement. What I hope to have accomplished, however, is to have provided a model on which rational peer disagreements are possible. If Nonindexical Contextualism turns out to be indefensible, then my arguments do not show that Uniqueness is false, nor do they show that rational peer disagreements are possible. My conclusion is therefore somewhat tentative.

Also, in sketching the Airport Case, I have made a number of assumptions. Perhaps the most controversial of these are (i) that shifts in context due to stakes can be resisted, and (ii) that the standards operative at one's context determine what it is rational

to believe about who knows what. If either of these assumptions turns out to be false, then I will have failed to provide, with this case, a model of rational peer disagreement.

Further, I take myself only to have provided a model for rational peer disagreement in situations of *full disclosure*. In sketching the Airport Case, I am imagining that John and Mary have shared their reasons and evidence fully with Smith. I maintain that, so long as Smith is sufficiently callous to resist a context shift, his disagreement with John and Mary is a mutually rational one. But can this dispute be a mutually recognized rational disagreement? There is some pressure to think that it cannot.

There is something peculiar about Smith saying, “Well, John and Mary are reasonable in believing that they don’t know, but I’m reasonable in believing that they do”. There is something equally peculiar about John and Mary thinking that Smith’s belief that they know is reasonable but that their belief that they do not know is also reasonable.

If this is correct, then one may worry that the model I’ve provided is not one that makes true ordinary utterances of “There are things about which reasonable people may disagree”. For the sense of disagreement here, one might maintain, is mutually recognized rational disagreement.

It is less clear, however, that mutually recognized rational disagreement is not possible in the Soccer Field case. Imagine the situation after full disclosure. Would it sound odd for Bill and Susan to say, “Well, given the way they assess the relevant considerations, James and Sally are rational to believe as they do, and given the way we assess them, we are rational to believe as we do”? This does not sound so jarring to the

ear. Perhaps, then, the Soccer Field Case is an example of a case in which mutually recognized rational disagreements are possible.

Further, the model I've sketched only suffices to show that rational peer disagreements *about knowledge claims* and disputes over the application of *gradable adjectives* are possible. We tend to disagree with peers about a great many other things, however. So, even if what I've said is right, Feldman's conclusion that we must give up many of our beliefs on controversial topics might still go through.