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Evidential Nihilism

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Abstract: A considerable literature has grown up around the claim of Uniqueness, according to which evidence rationally determines belief. It is opposed to Permissivism, according to which evidence underdetermines belief. This paper highlights an overlooked third possibility, according to which there is no rational doxastic attitude. I call this Nihilism. I argue that adherents of the other two positions ought to reject it but that it might, nevertheless, obtain at least sometimes.

It would now be an overstatement to write, as Jonathan Matheson did several years ago, that "the Uniqueness Thesis tends to receive rather little explicit attention" (2011: 360). Nevertheless, I argue that there is an overlooked third option in the opposition between Uniqueness and Permissivism— what I call Nihilism. Moreover, Nihilism is not just some mere possibility in logical space. There may at least be some cases in which Nihilism holds.

The Uniqueness Thesis is typically posed as a universal claim which applies *for all* total evidence and *for all* propositions. As Thomas Kelly remarks, treating it as a universal claim makes it "an extremely strong thesis" which can be overturned by even a single counter-example (2014: 299). Permissivism, posed as the negation of The Uniqueness Thesis, becomes the modest claim that there is at least one counter-example.

Rather than framing it as an all-or-nothing matter, let's begin with Uniqueness and Permissivism as two-place relations which might obtain between a total evidence and a proposition. We can thus ask which holds in a specific case. If someone still wants to talk about them, the stronger Uniqueness Thesis and weaker Permissivism can be expressed using these relations and quantifiers: The (strong) Uniqueness Thesis is then the claim that *for all evidence and for all propositions* Uniqueness obtains. The negation of that is the claim that *for at least some evidence and for some proposition* Uniqueness fails.

1. Uniqueness and permissivism

Uniqueness is the idea that evidence suffices to determine what one may rationally believe. Practical considerations do not enter into it. As Chris Meacham notes, the

thesis at issue could more precisely be called Evidential Uniqueness (2019). That is my target here, so I will omit the qualifier.[1]

Let's start with a typical formulation. Elizabeth Jackson and Margaret Turnbull, following Richard Feldman, define Uniqueness as "the thesis that there is at most one rational doxastic attitude toward a proposition" (forthcoming). Similar definitions are given by Matheson (2011) and Kopec and Titelbaum (2016).

Consider a schematic situation in which one has total evidence e and considers some proposition p. Suppose for now that there are three possible attitudes one can adopt towards p: One can believe p, disbelieve p, or suspend judgement. (Note that 'disbelieving p' means more or less the same as believing $\sim p$; it is stronger than merely not believing.) The thesis posed by Jackson, Turnbull, Matheson, Kopec, and Titelbaum is then:

> **U:** Given e, there is at most one attitude which one may rationally adopt with respect to p.

Note that "at most one" allows for the possibility of zero. Jackson and Turnbull are explicit about allowing this. They write, "Feldman's version of uniqueness… allows for the possibility that for some bodies of evidence, there may not be even one doxastic attitude which can be rationally adopted towards them" (forthcoming). Kopec and Titelbaum (2016) formulate the uniqueness thesis like U so as to allow for the possibility of rational dilemmas. They suggest that this would still be in the spirit of uniqueness. As I argue below, however, a central motivation for uniqueness is also motivation to reject the possibility of rational dilemmas.

It is common to pose Uniqueness and Permissivism each as the negation of the other. For example, Brueckner and Bundy write that "*Permissiveness* is the denial of Uniqueness" (2012: 166); see also Kelly 2014. This has an advantage of economy. Only one of the two needs to be carefully defined, and the other can be defined just by relation to the other.

Nevertheless, let's spell it out. With Uniqueness understood as U, we get:

> **Permissivism:** Given e, there is more than one attitude which one may rationally adopt toward p.

Note that the claim of Permissiveness is not that one could possibly both believe p and adopt some other attitude toward it at the same time, but just that one might rationally believe p or instead adopt some other attitude toward it. Roger White (2005, 2014) distinguishes strong and weak permissivism which differ in whether

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[1] Thinkers who hold that some further factor may rationally influence belief might hold a version of Uniqueness according to which evidence plus the further factor is sufficient to determine what one may believe. Such a Trans-evidential Uniqueness would allow for parallel senses of Permissivism and Nihilism.

all or just some attitudes are rationally permissible. According to Strong Permissivism, one may rationally adopt any attitude toward p.

Let's return to the question of whether U captures the idea behind Uniqueness. When Feldman originally introduces *The Uniqueness Thesis*, he characterizes it this way:

> The idea is 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 toward any particular proposition. As I think of things, our options with respect to any proposition are believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment. (2007: 205)

Yet he quickly goes on to write, "The Uniqueness Thesis says that, given a body of evidence, one of these attitudes is the rationally justified one" (2007: 205). And he also writes, "If The Uniqueness Thesis is correct… evidence uniquely determines one correct attitude, whether it be belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment" (2007: 205). So he more often characterizes it in terms of *exactly one* rationally allowed attitude than in terms of *at least one*.

The thesis he offers in the latter passages, posed in terms of our schematic scenario, is:

> **Uniqueness:** Given e, there is exactly one attitude which one may rationally adopt toward p.

This is more aptly called 'uniqueness', because it claims that rationality picks out a unique attitude given the evidence. So, from here on, let's use the name Uniqueness just for this narrower claim.

Although Permissivism is the negation of U, it is not the negation of Uniqueness. There is a third possibility— namely, that reason does not allow for any attitude. Let's call this possibility Nihilism. Schematically, the claim is this:

> **Nihilism:** Given e, there is no attitude which one may rationally adopt toward p.

Permissivism, Uniqueness, and Nihilism form a trichotomy. U, if we wish to refer to it, is the disjunction of Uniqueness and Nihilism.

This distinguishes Nihilism as a third logical possibility. Yet one might object that this is needless logic-chopping. This objection could take two forms. First, one might allow that U is not strictly-speaking a claim of *uniqueness* but insist that it nevertheless serves perfectly well as a foil for Permissivism. On the contrary, I argue (in section 2) that some of the primary motivations for rejecting Permissivism are also reasons to reject Nihilism. Second, one might think that Nihilism needs to be mentioned only so that it can be set aside. If it were never realized, then the real

action would be between Uniqueness and Permissivism. I argue (in section 3) that there may be some cases in which Nihilism obtains.

2. Arguments from ambivalence

Roger White, a prominent defender of Uniqueness, offers a panoply of arguments (2005, 2014). Nevertheless, there is one idea at the core of most of them. It is the worry that Permissivism allows for an unacceptable arbitrariness about what to believe.

Imagine you have considered your available evidence and concluded, on the basis of that evidence, that p obtains. You believe p, and you think that you are rational to do so. Suppose further that you know this is a case in which Permissivism holds. Someone might consider that same evidence, disbelieve p (or suspend judgment), and be just as rational as you are. This means that you could change your attitude toward p and not be any less rational than you are now. It is absurd that rationality should allow for this arbitrariness, White maintains. So Permissivism must not hold.

To strengthen the intuition pump, White describes thought-experiment pharmaceuticals that change your doxastic attitudes. For example, imagine that before you evaluate the evidence you are offered a magic potion which would make you immediately adopt some attitude. If you know that Permissivism holds, you know that drinking the magic potion will give you an attitude that would be just as rational as any you could form by weighing the evidence. Should you just drink the potion and save yourself the trouble? Surely not, White maintains.

Alternately, imagine a kind of doxastic Jekyll-and-Hyde case. The good doctor believes p by day and disbelieves p by night. He collects no new evidence, but his attitude just switches back and forth with the rising and setting of the sun. If Strong Permissivism holds, the doctor's day-time belief is just as rational as his night-time disbelief. So there is no rational objection to the toggling attitude, either. But how could you not think that a steady attitude towards p on the basis of the evidence is more rational that the doctor's on-again, off-again belief?

Scenarios like these are easily multiplied, but they all have the same thrust. What is supposed to be absurd about Permissivism is the indifference it posits between different attitudes. In all of these scenarios, you could do the best one could do rationality-wise but be on the same footing if you kept your current attitude as if you changed it. White's intuition is that rationality just cannot be that fickle.[2]

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[2] Simpson (2017) calls this The Arbitrariness Objection to Permissivism. A standard reply to it is to say that other facts about an agent, besides just their evidence, help to determine which belief is appropriate for them. Schoenfield (2014) argues that epistemic standards serve this role. Simpson argues that cognitive abilities do. Stapleford (2019) argues that these responses to arbitrariness fail.

How does this intuition bear on the possibility of Nihilism? Imagine you have considered the available evidence and concluded, on the basis of that evidence, that p obtains. You believe p, and you think nobody could settle the question more rationally than you have. Suppose further that you know this is a case in which Nihilism holds. Someone might consider that same evidence, disbelieve p (or suspend judgment) and be precisely as rational as you are. White's intuition is that such arbitrariness is absurd.

The previous paragraph just repeats the first reductio of Permissivism but with Nihilism replacing Permissivism *mutatis mutandis*. One might think that there's a tremendous difference that you are *irrational* in the Nihilist case and would be irrational regardless of how you decide the question. Yet this parallels the Permissivist case in an important sense. When you have considered the question and arrived at the belief that p, we can think of rationality as giving you a score or grade. In both cases, you would have gotten the same grade if you had disbelieved p instead. Moreover, in both cases, there is no alternative way of deciding the question that would give you a higher score.

The difference between the two cases is just this: In the Permissivist case, you get a passing grade of A+ regardless of what determination you make. In the Nihilist case, you get a failing grade of F regardless.

One might think this difference breaks the symmetry between the two cases. The metaphorical F in rationality is a bad thing, and you'd like to avoid getting a low mark like that. And (one might think) you could avoid it by forming no doxastic attitude at all with respect to p. Note, however, that suspending judgment counts as one of the possible doxastic attitudes. How could you escape the trichotomy between believing p, disbelieving p, and suspending judgement? You might not have the concepts required to think p, or perhaps you might just never have considered the matter.

On some accounts, a perfectly rational agent would have a doxastic attitude toward every proposition. On such accounts, having not considered the matter is already a symptom of irrationality. Regardless, once you consider the question it is too late. You will wind up in some doxastic state.[3] If Nihilism holds, that means that the outcome will be irrational.

So there is parallel arbitrariness in cases of extreme Permissivism and Nihilism. In either case, doing as well as one could do rationality-wise is compatible with different resultant attitudes, and adopting one attitude rather than another makes

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[3] Friedman (2013) argues that more than just considering is required. For example, you might be interrupted while considering and so not reach any conclusion. If suspending judgement is a substantive attitude, *pace* Friedman, then it it might be easier than I am supposing to end up in no doxastic state whatsoever.

no difference by dint of reason. If one is persuaded by White's worries about arbitrariness to reject Permissivism, then one also ought to reject Nihilism.

Note, however, that the parity only holds between Nihilism and Strong Permissivism. For a more modest Permissivism which identifies some doxastic states as irrational, the parity fails. There are at least two ways this might go.

First, suppose that the evidence unambiguously but weakly supports p, and that how much evidence would be sufficient to establish p is vague. Perhaps in such a case one might rationally believe p or suspend judgement, while disbelieving p would be ruled out. This would still be Permissivism, but without the complete ambivalence of Strong Permissivism or Nihilism.

Second, it might be that rational belief is determined by more than just evidence. For example, take a subjective Bayesian account.[4] The Bayesian parses the possible attitudes as credences (degrees of belief) rather than as categorical belief and disbelief. What degrees of belief are rational will depend both on the evidence and on one's prior probabilities. Rationality does not require any specific set of prior probabilities. Moreover, since subjective priors need not reflect the world in any way, it is implausible to think of them as evidence. So there many credences in p that might rationally be adopted given e. Permissivism holds, but Nihilism does not.

To sum up, many reasons for Uniqueness and many kinds of Permissivism demand rejecting Nihilism. So it is best to distinguish Nihilism as a third possibility. Yet, one may still ask, are there any cases in which Nihilism obtains?

3. Does nihilism ever obtain?

Michael Caie (2012: 10) suggests, as a principle of rationality, that someone is subject to rational criticism only if they selected a belief or action inappropriately. In order for someone to be *irrational* there must have been some other selection such that, if they had made it, they would not be subject to criticism.

It would follow from Caie's principle that Nihilism never obtains, because someone faced with a case of Nihilism would have no options but irrational ones. If there were nothing one could have done to avoid being irrational, then there is a sense in which one cannot be criticized for failing to be rational. Yet one might simply turn this around and say that cases of Nihilism would undermine Caie's principle.

Settling this would require a fuller story about rationality. My point here is simply that Caie's principle should not be taken as an intuitive datum.

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[4] Although I develop this point in the Bayesian way, making prior probabilities the non-evidential factor, other versions of this approach might appeal to epistemic standards (Schoenfield 2014), cognitive abilities (Simpson 2017), or practical circumstances (Jackson forthcoming).

Consider an analogy with ethical normativity: There are situations in which moral obligations seem to conflict. Some philosophers accept these as genuine moral dilemmas. Others argue that any would-be dilemma must ultimately dissolve under examination— one obligation or principle must override the other such that there is at least some way to meet the demands of ethics. Moral dilemmas are argued to be incompatible with various principles of deontic logic, but the general principles do not show how to resolve particular would-be dilemmas. (For discussion of these issues, see McConnell 2018.)

The evidential situation is similar. If there are cases in which Nihilism seems to hold, then general principles may not be enough to defeat them. I consider two kinds of cases. First, Matheson (2011) suggests that there is no rational attitude to adopt toward a proposition in cases of incomplete understanding. I argue that such cases do not provide compelling instances of Nihilism (§3.1). Second, paradoxes. I discuss one recent paraconsistent treatment of paradox and suggest that it might offer cases where Nihilism holds (§3.2).

3.1 Incomplete understanding

Take a case posed by Matheson. He argues that "it may be that no doxastic attitudes are rational to adopt towards a proposition which one does not or cannot understand" (2011: 361). Matheson poses this kind of case as a reason to define Uniqueness in 'at most' rather than 'exactly' terms— as what I label U in section 1. Distinguishing Nihilism as a third possibility, however, this seems to be a case of it. If one does not understand the content of p, then one cannot rationally adopt any attitude toward it.

One cannot adopt any attitude toward a proposition one does not understand— not rationally, but not irrationally either. As Friedman observes, "One cannot count as agnostic about p if one cannot even grasp p" (2013: 167). So one never ends up in the situation of irrationally holding one attitude or another. So this kind of Nihilist case escapes the worries about arbitrariness posed in section 2.

However, the questions of Permissivism, Uniqueness, or Nihilism are only *interesting* in situations where someone confronts a question and might adopt an attitude. So it is tempting to reconstrue the question in a way so that Nihilism does not automatically hold in the cases that Matheson poses.

There are at least two ways to do this. First, we could revise the definitions of the various positions so that they only apply to agents who understand p. Then none of the three would apply to such cases. Second, we could construe rationality as an ideal which is beyond the reach of a cognitively limited agent who does not fully understand the question before them. Then it could still be that Uniqueness holds in such cases; reason would demand more than the agent could actually do.

By adopting either or both of these measures, we avoid treating cases of incomplete understanding as ones where Nihilism holds.

3.2 Paradoxes and indeterminate beliefs

Return to the analogy with moral dilemmas. The obvious doxastic analog is a paradox— a proposition which we have compelling reason to believe and compelling reason to disbelieve. Understood in those terms: To believe would ignore the rational demand to disbelieve, to disbelieve would ignore the demand to believe, and to suspend judgement would ignore both. Any option would be irrational. So one might say that a paradox is a case where Nihilism holds.

Of course, there are many philosophical approaches to handling paradoxes. Here I will just consider one— paracomplete resolutions according to which paradoxical propositions are neither true nor false.

Paracomplete resolutions require that there are some propositions which are neither true nor false; that is, which have an indeterminate truth value. Suppose you know or at least believe that a proposition p is indeterminate in this sense. It would be inappropriate to believe p, because p is not true. Similarly, it would be inappropriate to disbelieve p, because p is not false. Michael Caie argues further that one ought not suspend judgment about p in such a case. His reason is that "agnosticism is the correct attitude to take toward a proposition about which one takes oneself to be ignorant" (2012: 26–27). When you know that a proposition is indeterminate, you are not ignorant about it. Rather, you know precisely what to say about it. You should say that it is indeterminate. (Note that nothing in this argument requires the principle discussed above which put Caie at odds with Nihilism.)

Caie poses his argument primarily in relation to semantic paradoxes like the liar sentence, where evidence seems irrelevant, but he also intends it to apply to paracomplete treatments of vagueness (2012: 19). Whether or not one should believe that a vague proposition is indeterminate depends on evidence. So consider a case where evidence e supports the conclusion that p is a vague boundary case. One ought to conclude that p is indeterminate. According to Caie, one ought not believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgement about p. This (by definition) is what it is for Nihilism to obtain.

One might reply: Caie's ultimate conclusion is that indeterminate truth calls for indeterminate belief. If one believes that some proposition p is indeterminate, the only room left is for it to be indeterminate whether one believes p. In fact, he argues for the stronger conclusion that rationality requires that it must be indeterminate whether one believes p if and only if one believes that p is indeterminate. He is arguing that rationality requires something rather specific, which sounds more like Uniqueness than Nihilism.

We can reconcile this by revisiting the presupposition that there are three possible doxastic attitudes (believe p, disbelieve p, suspend judgment about p) and adding a fourth. Add the possibility of having it be indeterminate whether one believes p. With this new, enlarged set of possible doxastic states, Caie's conclusion is an instance of Uniqueness. He argues that precisely one of the four possibilities is required by rationality.

Caie suggests that rationality requiring indeterminate belief shows *ipso facto* that indeterminate belief is a doxastic state (2012, 19–20 fn. 27). However, it seems odd to say that one adopts a doxastic attitude toward *p* when it is indeterminate whether one believes *p*. A case where it is indeterminate whether one believes is a specific doxastic state only if *being indeterminate* is a way that your belief can be. This requires in turn that indeterminate truth be another truth value, rather than a genuine gap. That is contentious at best.

I only want to argue for this disjunction: If we allow only the three possible attitudes which we supposed at the outset, then Caie's argument leads to Nihilism. If we add to the set of possible attitudes, it leads to Uniqueness.

This illustrates a maneuver which I think is more general: Facing a *prima facie* case of Nihilism, a counter-strategy is to add a new possibility to the list of possible doxastic attitudes. One may then say that rationality requires this new outlier attitude and that Uniqueness holds. Whether this maneuver is plausible in particular cases will depend on the broader issue of what counts as a doxastic state— an issue which I won't pretend to resolve here.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that there is a third possibility besides Uniqueness and Permissivism when we consider them as features which might hold of particular cases, and I've called this third possibility Nihilism. I have argued that considerations which lead some philosophers to favor Uniqueness over Permissivism should also lead them to reject the possibility of Nihilism. And some accounts which favor Permissivism over Uniqueness should also reject Nihilism. Finally, I have argued that there are at least some construals of paradox according to which Nihilism holds.[5]

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