Two theses are central to recent work on the epistemology of disagreement:

Uniqueness (‘U’): For any given proposition and total body of evidence, some doxastic attitude is the one the evidence makes rational (justifies) toward that proposition.

Equal Weight (‘EW’): In cases of epistemic peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the attitude of a peer and to one’s own attitude.

Roger White [2005] and Richard Feldman ([2003: 185-6] and [2007]) offer arguments for U. A version of EW for all-or-nothing belief is defended by Feldman ([2003], [2006], [2007]), while versions applicable to degree-belief are championed by David Christensen [2007] and Adam Elga [2007].

We shall focus on U. Endorsing it, we’ll argue, commits one to the highly controversial thesis that whatever fixes your rational attitudes can do so only by fixing what evidence you have. This commitment imposes a relatively demanding requirement on justified belief in U, one that we argue isn’t satisfied by what is currently the strongest available case for U. Our challenge to U makes more trouble for its proponents than do the worries about U expressed by Gideon Rosen [2001: 712-72] and Thomas Kelly [2010: 117-121]. Moreover, if Kelly [2010: 121] is correct in thinking that EW “carries with it a commitment to” U—a claim which we accept for reasons similar to Kelly’s but is beyond this paper’s scope—then our challenge to U bears importantly on EW: to the extent that our challenge to U succeeds, EW also suffers.

1. Uniqueness

U is a thesis about the relationship between rationality (justification) and evidence. We’ll focus on what is arguably the most tenable version of it (cf. Kelly [2010: 120])—namely, one that involves the all-or-nothing attitudes of belief, disbelief, and withholding.
A point of clarification. The expression ‘total body of evidence’ in U should be read as referring to something that different thinkers can share. As friends of U have noted, U excludes the possibility of rational disagreement between thinkers who have the same total evidence. According to White, one way to reject U is to endorse the view that two thinkers who have the same evidence yet disagree “needn’t display any failure of rationality” [2005: 446]. So, the possibility of rational disagreement between thinkers who have the same evidence conflicts with U: U rules out that possibility. Feldman is even more explicit about this consequence: “If the Uniqueness Thesis is correct, then there cannot be any reasonable disagreements in cases in which two people have exactly the same evidence” [2007: 205]. U has this implication only if ‘total body of evidence’ refers to something that different thinkers can share.\(^6\)

We should note in passing that no matter your preferred ontology of evidence, such a reading of ‘body of evidence’—again, one on which thinkers can share a body of evidence—will be available to you. Such a reading will be the natural one for those who hold that all evidence is propositional (e.g., Williamson [2000]). Theorists who instead or also count as evidence subjective experiences lacking propositional content (e.g., Conee & Feldman [2008]) may distinguish between a “type” reading and a “token” reading of ‘total body of evidence’. Whereas token bodies of evidence are individuated by the different subjects who possess them, types of bodies of evidence are individuated by their content (at least some of which will be non-propositional).

U is reminiscent of what is often called Evidentialism about epistemic rationality. By comparing U to Evidentialism, we’ll see just how strong a thesis U is. Here’s Evidentialism:

Doxastic attitude \(D\) toward proposition \(p\) is epistemically justified for \(S\) at \(t\) if and only if having \(D\) toward \(p\) fits the evidence \(S\) has at \(t\). (Feldman & Conee [1985: 15])

It turns out that U is logically stronger than Evidentialism: U entails Evidentialism, but the latter doesn’t return the favour. To see why, suppose you’re rational in taking doxastic attitude \(D\) toward proposition \(p\). By U, \(D\) is the only attitude toward \(p\) your evidence justifies. So, taking \(D\) toward \(p\) would be a (indeed, it is the) fitting response to your evidence. So, U entails the left-to-right direction of Evidentialism. Now suppose that taking \(D\) toward \(p\) would be a fitting response to your evidence. By U, your evidence makes rational only one attitude toward \(p\). Since (by hypothesis) taking \(D\) toward \(p\) would be a fitting response to your evidence, \(D\) must be the attitude toward \(p\) that your evidence makes rational. So, U entails the right-to-left direction of Evidentialism. U thus entails Evidentialism.

But Evidentialism doesn’t entail U, and there are at least two ways to show it. As we’ve seen, U excludes the possibility of reasonable disagreement between thinkers who have the same evidence. Evidentialism allows this possibility, however, and so does not entail anything that excludes it. For Evidentialism is compatible with the view that there’s a body of evidence such that more than one attitude toward \(p\) fits that evidence. But if there is such a body of evidence, there can be thinkers who take different rational attitudes to \(p\) on that evidence: there can be reasonable disagreement in attitude between thinkers who share the same evidence. So, Evidentialism doesn’t entail U.

\(^6\) Of course, U isn’t supposed to rule out reasonable disagreements between evidential peers by entailin that no two thinkers can have the same evidence.
Here’s a second way to appreciate that an Evidentialist can coherently deny U. Evidentialism is compatible with

Relative Fit (‘RF’): For some proposition \( p \) and total body of evidence \( E \), \( p \) fits \( E \) relative to one thinker but not some other thinker.\(^7\)

Granting that RF is true, two thinkers could have the very same evidence yet differ with respect to which propositions they are rational to believe—that is, some proposition fits the evidence relative to one thinker but not the other. In short, RF allows for the possibility of thinkers who are “evidentially identical” yet “rationally different”. Clearly, then, RF allows for reasonable disagreement between thinkers who have the same evidence. So, we see again that Evidentialism is compatible with something inconsistent with U, and thus doesn’t entail U. As we saw above, though, U entails Evidentialism. So U is logically stronger than Evidentialism.

Why think U is true? What reasons have been given in its favour? Currently, the strongest case for U is due to White [2005], with support from Feldman [2007].\(^8\) Denying U, White argues, accrues high costs that pressure us to accept U. White highlights these costs by exploiting an apparent conflict between \textit{rational belief} and \textit{arbitrariness}.\(^9\) In what follows, we aim to establish that we currently lack sufficient reason to believe U. We shall begin by arguing that accepting U comes with significant costs of its own [§2]. Accordingly, U is rationally acceptable only if there is a good argument for it. We will then carefully reconstruct and assess White’s argument for U to see whether it can deliver, concluding that it fails to render U rationally acceptable [§3].

2. What would it take to rationally accept U?

Our first goal is to show that U is rationally acceptable only if there is a good argument in its favour. Let’s begin with a quick sketch of our case for this condition on U’s rational acceptability; we develop it in detail below. If U is true, then your simply possessing a particular body of evidence completely determines what you’re justified in believing. So, “propositional justification” facts supervene entirely on “evidence possession” facts: anything that helps determine what you have justification to believe also helps determine what evidence you have. But this supervenience thesis forecloses numerous plausible and popular approaches to evidence and rationality. Thus, providing good reason to accept U will involve an argument for a rather particular and contentious view about the relationship between evidence and rationality.

It is worth observing at the outset how this section’s argument goes beyond the main one like it in the literature—White’s case that “there is much to be said for [certain] challenges to Uniqueness” [2005: 447].\(^10\) White tries to convey an accurate sense of the degree to which U is controversial in two ways. First, he lists specific positions and approaches that appear to conflict with U: van Fraassen’s epistemology, Harman/Lycan-

\(^{7}\) For arguments that RF is (at least) metaphysically possible, see Bergmann ([2004] and [2006]) and Markie [2004]. Notably, whoever explains what’s involved in a proposition’s fitting a body of evidence in terms of reliable indication of truth (Dretske [1981]) or proper function of cognitive faculties (Bergmann [2004] and [2006]) or conceptual sophistication (Conee & Feldman [2008]) is committed to the possibility of RF.

\(^{8}\) Cf. Kelly [unpublished].

\(^{9}\) Cf. Feldman [2006: 226].

\(^{10}\) Kelly [2010: 120-121] substantially repeats the considerations against U that White offers.
Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality

style conservatism, Foley’s account of epistemic rationality, the Rawls/Goodman-style reflective equilibrium approach, subjectivist Bayesianism, and coherentism. Second, White recounts the following passage from Rosen:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with the same body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. [2001: 71]

According to us, White’s discussion does not fully express the degree to which U should be controversial. For starters, the consideration from Rosen is suggestive, but little more. It isn’t developed in the detail required for a strong objection to U. As White himself correctly notes,

whether jurors really do possess the same evidence in a case like this is questionable. Even if they have seen the same data presented in court, different judgments may be due to different background beliefs, which in turn are due to different past experiences. [2005: 458, n 6]

White’s list of epistemological positions that conflict with U is supposed to be a problem for U. But an objection based on that list is not particularly illuminating or threatening. For starters, White’s list is quite heterogeneous: it’s hard to discern what brings U into conflict with its items. Hence, this list can’t help us understand what the deeper trouble with U might be. But more importantly, the kind of criticism White suggests can succeed only if the list features views that are widely regarded as plausible. Unfortunately, White’s list does not satisfy this condition: we doubt whether any of its entries will be deemed viable by many. And so it’s unclear whether the fact that U excludes White’s disjunction of positions casts any real doubt on U. Merely highlighting the incompatibility does not suffice to convey that U rules out broad sweeps of populous and plausible epistemological territory—which was, we assume, White’s intention. Indeed, White’s criticism may backfire: at least some theorists may find the disjunction he identifies implausible enough to take U’s incompatibility with it as a point in U’s favour, as some confirmation for U.

We think Rosen’s brief consideration and White’s heterogeneous list do suggest some reason for concern about U. But that reason is slight. Our approach to challenging U is different: we will move from the level of specific positions and approaches to rationality—where White’s list finds its entries—to the more general level of categories of theories of epistemic rationality and evidence. Taking up this more abstract viewpoint will make clear that U rules out a wide and populous epistemological territory, thereby revealing that strong argumentation is needed to make U rationally acceptable. In effect, the viewpoint helps us appreciate how work on justification and evidence from the 1970s down to the present day bears on U. Ignoring the import of these lessons for U risks investigating U without critical tools from recent epistemology.

Now for the details of our argument. Suppose that you endorse U. You then wish to pick out theories of evidence and rationality; you want one of each. Browsing the journals and talking to your colleagues, you meet with a plethora of theories—you’re inclined to call it a “blooming, buzzing confusion”. The theories on offer may be sorted as follows:
Evidence internalism: internal duplicates can’t differ with respect to their evidence.

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Rationality internalism: internal duplicates can’t differ with respect to their rational attitudes.

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Let’s suppose you pick out an evidence-rationality bundle. It will be one from among the following combinations: (a) evidence internalism and rationality externalism; (b) evidence externalism and rationality internalism; (c) evidence internalism and rationality internalism; or (d) evidence externalism and rationality externalism. Our argument assesses the prospects for each of (a)–(d), given your supposition of U.

If U is true, no bundle that joins any version of evidence internalism with a version of rationality externalism, that is (a), can be true. All such bundles are off limits. You can’t, for example, take one popular sort of bundle (endorsed by Alston [1988: 267-269], among others): a “phenomenal” conception of evidence (on which your evidence is, roughly, your current experiences and beliefs) (e.g., Lewis [1996] and Conee & Feldman [1985] and [2008]) plus some form of externalism about rationality (e.g., Sosa [1980], Goldman [1986], Bergmann [2006], Gibbons [2006]). In short, no bundle of evidence internalism and rationality externalism is available to you.

Why exactly does U entail the falsity of evidence internalism together with rationality externalism? According to U, your evidence makes rational precisely one attitude toward proposition \( p \). The idea is that your evidence fixes the rational attitude to \( p \). In other words, the rational attitude for you to take toward \( p \) supervenes on (is fully determined by) your evidence. But supervenience is transitive: if \( A \)-properties supervene on \( B \)-properties and \( B \)-properties supervene on \( C \)-properties, then \( A \)-properties supervene on \( C \)-properties. By transitivity of supervenience, since rationality supervenes on evidence, whatever determines evidence also determines rationality.

Now assume that evidence internalism—internal duplicates can’t differ with respect to their evidence—is true. Then the facts that determine what one’s evidence is will be “internal” facts (i.e., facts with respect to which internal duplicates can’t differ). And by supervenience, those very same internal facts will also determine what attitude is rational for one. Thus, if U is true, then evidence internalism entails rationality internalism. But then, given U, it is not possible that evidence internalism plus rationality externalism—internal duplicates can differ with respect to their rational attitudes—is true.

How do things look for other evidence-rationality bundles? We shall argue that, given U, many bundles taken from the remaining classes aren’t available: (b) evidence externalism and rationality internalism, (c) evidence internalism and rationality internalism, and (d) evidence externalism and rationality externalism. The upshot is that relatively slim pickings remain for the friend of U—a fairly limited selection of bundles from classes (b) through (d). We’ll now discuss each class.

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11 See footnote 12 below for considerations suggesting that Conee & Feldman [2008] endorse such a bundle.
Suppose you accept U and are looking for a bundle from \((b)\), that is, the class of externalist theories of evidence and internalist theories of rationality. It turns out that the only bundles from \((b)\) available to you are ones with weak and implausible species of evidence externalism. As we observed earlier, U entails that rationality supervenes on evidence. Now suppose that rationality internalism is true. Then if two thinkers, T1 and T2, rationally take different attitudes toward a proposition, T1 and T2 must \((i)\) differ with respect to evidence (by U) and \((ii)\) differ internally (by rationality internalism). So, given U and rationality internalism, if T1 and T2 differ with respect to rationality due to an evidential difference, then they’ll also differ internally. In short: any rationality difference due to an evidential difference will be accompanied by an internal difference.

Assuming U and rationality internalism, then, there can’t be a “rationally significant” evidential difference without an internal difference: fixing your internal facts suffices to fix all the features of your evidence save only those irrelevant to what’s rational for you to believe. If you endorse U and rationality internalism, the only species of evidence externalism available to you are ones on which all the “rationally significant” features of your evidence supervene on your internal features. Supposing, plausibly enough, that U implies that rationality facts are fixed downstream from (or, are logically posterior to) evidence facts, then the envisaged overall position is incoherent: the combination of rationality internalism and evidence externalism implies that rationality facts aren’t fixed downstream from (or, logically posterior to) evidence facts.

Even if U doesn’t have the relevant implication, the position at issue (U plus rationality internalism and evidence externalism) remains exceedingly dubious. The position has it that once the internal facts are settled, so are the rationality facts. Rationality facts are fixed independently of external facts and thus independently of evidence facts. It follows that you needn’t fix one’s evidence in order to fix which attitudes are rational for one: you can fix one’s rational attitudes without fixing what evidence one has. So, this position implies that your evidence needn’t play any role in fixing which attitudes are rational for you. This implication rules out a common pretheoretical characterization of evidence: evidence, whatever else it may be, is the kind of thing that makes a difference to what one is rational in believing (cf. Kelly [2008: §1]). And so, even if U turns out to be compatible with bundles in \((b)\), the position that follows will run afoul of a plausible theory-neutral characterization of evidence.

Unlike class \((b)\), classes \((c)\) and \((d)\) contain some potentially suitable bundles that are available to you as an advocate of U. Here is a way to think about what’s available. U says that, for every proposition \(p\), your total body of evidence completely determines the single attitude you could rationally take toward \(p\). Supposing that bodies of evidence are individuated by their content (some of which may be non-propositional), U has it that, for any \(p\), the content of your total body of evidence alone fixes completely the one attitude you could rationally take toward \(p\). So, U is among the strongest possible forms of Evidentialism about rationality. Let’s look at some bundles from \((c)\) and \((d)\) available to such Evidentialists.\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) It is doubtful whether even Conee & Feldman [2008] can plausibly endorse the kind of Evidentialism at issue (i.e., the kind on which your total body of evidence completely fixes your one rational attitude toward \(p\)). Briefly: according to Conee and Feldman, whether your ultimate evidence—which is experiential and fixed by internal factors [2008: 87-8]—rationalizes or justifies \(p\) for you depends on whether \(p\) is available to you as an explanation of (facts about) your ultimate evidence (for more discussion, see §3 below). But supposing content externalism is plausible, which concepts you have—and thus, which propositions are available to you—is in
To start, here are two bundles from \((c)\) that are consistent with \(U\). Begin with a form of evidence internalism on which your ultimate evidence consists of internally-fixed phenomenal facts (Conee & Feldman [2008]). Then take your pick between one of two internalist theories of rationality. The first is an acquaintance theory of justification (Fumerton [1995]): (i) you can only be acquainted with internal phenomena and (ii) justification for \(p\) is constituted by acquaintance with (minimally) the fact that \(p\). The second theory of rationality is what’s usually called ‘Evidentialism’ (Feldman & Conee [1985: 15]): doxastic attitude \(D\) toward proposition \(p\) is epistemically justified for \(S\) at \(t\) if and only if having \(D\) toward \(p\) fits the evidence \(S\) has at \(t\). It is consistent with—though not entailed by—either bundle that, for any \(p\), there is exactly one attitude you could rationally take toward \(p\).

Moving along to a bundle in class \((d)\), we observe that commitment to \(U\) comports with membership in the so-called “knowledge first” movement (Williamson [2000], Sutton [2007]). In fact, the paradigmatic positions in that movement cohere with—and even entail—\(U\). Consider one such view (Sutton [2007]): (i) endorse evidence externalism by equating evidence with knowledge; (ii) endorse rationality externalism by equating propositional justification with positioning to know; and (iii) add that, for any \(p\), whether you’re positioned to know \(p\) supervenes on what you currently know. Since knowledge is factive, this overall position entails that any thinker’s evidence justifies a single attitude toward \(p\).

So, there are some evidence-rationality bundles in \((c)\) and \((d)\) from which \(U\)’s proponent can select. Unfortunately, many popular evidence-rationality bundles in \((c)\) and \((d)\) conflict with \(U\). A bundle conflicts with \(U\) if it allows, for some proposition \(p\), that your total evidence taken all by itself fails to single out an attitude as the one you could rationally take toward \(p\). Bundles that conflict with \(U\) come in two general varieties: Evidentialist and Nonevidentialist. We shall treat each in order.

According to Evidentialist bundles, though what is rational for you to believe supervenes on your total evidence, there is at least one proposition \(p\) such that your evidence makes rational at least two attitudes toward \(p\). Let’s consider examples of such bundles. Included here are Evidentialist bundles that feature an internalist account of evidence plus a typical coherence theory of rationality (cf. White [2005: 446]). On coherentism, there can be thinker-proposition pairs such that multiple attitudes toward \(p\) cohere with that thinker’s evidence. And so a standard coherence theory of rationality allows cases in which a thinker’s evidence rationalizes multiple attitudes to \(p\). Here we have an Evidentialist bundle in \((c)\) that conflicts with \(U\). Second, there are bundles in \((c)\) as well as \((d)\) featuring theories of rationality that imply some form of conservatism. These also conflict with \(U\) (cf. White [2005: 446]). According to conservatism, by simply believing \(p\), you thereby have prima facie justification for believing \(p\) (Lycan [1988], Harman [1986]). That is, by simply believing \(p\), you are justified in believing as you do, absent defeaters. Consider a case where you believe \(p\) on the basis of some evidence, but could have easily disbelieved it instead. Absent defeaters for your belief that \(p\), you are justified in believing \(p\) even though you could have easily been justified in part an external matter not determined by your ultimate evidence. Though this thought needs elaboration, we expect its upshot is that \(U\) has even fewer proponents than initially appears.

13 On this position, having justification to believe \(p\) (or \(\neg p\)) is being positioned to know \(p\) (or \(\neg p\)), while having justification to withhold \(p\) is being positioned neither to know \(p\) nor to know \(\neg p\). It is easy to see that, given such a view, you’re justified in taking one of the three all-or-nothing attitudes toward \(p\) only if neither of the other two is justified for you.
disbelieving \( p \) in response to the same evidence. Thus, conservatism allows that your evidence could make rational multiple attitudes toward \( p \).

Furthermore, from either (c) or (d), there are at least two additional sorts of Evidentialist bundles that conflict with U, given an assumption about the relationship between degrees of belief and the all-or-nothing attitudes. The assumption is that there's a threshold short of 1 reaching which is required and enough for a credence to count as an outright belief. First, there will be views on which your credences are sometimes too coarsely grained to mirror exactly the degree to which your evidence supports \( p \). These sorts of views admit cases in which your evidence rationalizes multiple all-or-nothing attitudes toward \( p \). Suppose, for example, that some body of evidence supports \( p \) to a precise degree \( n \). You're able to form credences in \( p \) having precise degrees, but not degree \( n \). You can form a credence in \( p \) that is slightly higher than \( n \) and also one that is slightly lower. The ‘high-end’ credence suffices for outright belief, whereas the ‘low-end’ credence doesn’t. As it happens, though, your evidence bearing on \( p \) rationalizes both of these formable credences. If you can form the ‘high-end’ or ‘low-end’ credence but can’t form a credence perfectly matching \( n \), you’re permitted to take up either one. It follows that your evidence rationalizes different all-or-nothing attitudes toward \( p \), and so that U is false.

Second, following a proposal due to Christensen [2009: 764], particular theories of rationality might be motivated by the idea that rational belief can’t require “god-like epistemic perfection”. Suppose a thinker’s credence in \( p \) is rational if (i) it is close enough to the ideal evidential probabilities given her first-order evidence and (ii) the thinker lacks independent reason for suspecting her credence is too high (or for suspecting it is too low) relative to the ideal credences. Such a view permits a case much like the one just described: \( p \)’s ideal evidential probability on your first-order evidence is \( n \); but rationality permits credences in \( p \) slightly higher or lower than \( n \), where some of the ‘high-end’ credences suffice for belief but not all the ‘low-end’ ones do.

By contrast, Nonevidentialist evidence-rationality bundles imply that which attitudes are rational for you is determined—at least partly—by something other than your total evidence. There are many such bundles to choose from. For example, take any bundle whose constituent theory of rationality allows that rationality is at least partly a matter of reliability factors (Goldman [1979]); deontological factors, taken either internally or externally (Chisholm [1977], Meeker [2004]); proper function factors (Bergmann [2006]); virtue factors (Greco [2010]); pragmatic-theoretical factors (à la Quine and Harman); or practical interests (Fantl & McGrath [2009]). All of these accounts of rationality yield Nonevidentialist bundles in either (c) or (d) that conflict with U. We'll briefly describe two bundles.

Consider first Kevin Meeker’s deontological theory of justification according to which justification supervenes in part on what you can be “legitimately socially expected to believe” ([2004: 165]). Since what you can be legitimately socially expected to believe is fixed partly by your “societal relationships” [2004: 161], this theory clearly permits cases in which “evidential twins” aren’t also “rationality twins” due to a difference in their social circumstances. Join Meeker’s theory to an externalist theory of evidence and you get a Nonevidentialist bundle in (d) that is incompatible with U.

A second example: some have argued that rationality supervenes in part on a thinker’s practical interests (Fantl & McGrath [2009]). This position allows cases in which “evidential twins” are not also “rationality twins” due to a difference in practical interests (cf. Christensen [2009: 764]). If a thinker’s practical interests supervene on internal factors, then combining such an approach to rationality with some version of evidence internalism yields a
Nonevidentialist bundle in (c) that conflicts with U. On the other hand, if a thinker’s practical interests are partly determined by external factors, then we can combine the relevant approach to rationality with a version of evidence externalism to yield a Nonevidentialist bundle in (d) that violates U.

Take stock. After identifying bundles in (c) and (d) that comport with U, we pointed out other bundles from those two classes that are off limits to a proponent of U. Earlier, we argued that the friend of U cannot sensibly endorse either (a) evidence internalism and rationality externalism or (b) evidence externalism and rationality internalism. So it’s now clear that U rules out a wide disjunction of competing approaches to evidence and rationality—many of which are quite popular. Anyone with good reason to believe U will therefore be poised to resolve some persistent debates over the nature of evidence and rationality. But then you’ll need a strong argument for U to be justified in believing it. As noted earlier, the strongest available case for U is the one developed by White [2005]. Can it provide the needed support for U?

3. Against White’s argument for U

White’s case for U is one of the most interesting arguments in recent epistemology. We liken it to an onion. Peel off the outer layers and you will find further layers still. As you dig in, you’ll meet intriguing claims about the relations among familiar concepts—evidence, rationality, truth, arbitrariness. But it is also an argument that is, we will recommend, too weak to justify belief in U.

White argues for U by “displaying…difficulties we get into by denying [U]” [2005: 447]. We’ve seen that there are many different ways to deny U. In White’s terminology, views about evidence and rationality that deny U are permissive; they “entail that epistemic rationality permits a range of alternative doxastic attitudes” [2005: 445]. The first step of White’s case for U is an objection to the following permissive view: “There are possible cases in which you rationally believe P, yet it is consistent with your being fully rational and possessing your current evidence that you believe not2P instead” [2005: 447]. Here is a clearer expression of White’s intended target:

Extreme Permissivism (‘EP’): Thinker T rationally believes \( p \) on evidence \( E \) where \( E \) is such that, possibly, \( T \) rationally believes \( \neg p \) on its basis.

White offers two arguments against EP [2005: §2]. Here is the first—which he calls a “quick-and-dirty preliminary” argument [2005: 447]. White observes that whatever is evidence for \( p \) is evidence for the falsity of \( \neg p \) and hence is evidence against \( \neg p \). Whatever is evidence for \( p \), then, is not also evidence for \( \neg p \). It is thus “incoherent to suppose that a whole body of evidence could count both for and against a hypothesis.” White then infers that it is “impossible that my examination of the evidence makes it rational for me to believe \( p \)” but also rational to believe instead that \( \neg p \).” On this basis, he concludes that EP is false.

In this initial argument, White clearly presumes the proponent of EP is committed to this claim:

Absurdity: Possibly, some body of evidence \( E \) makes it rational for you to believe \( p \) and \( E \) also makes it rational for you to believe \( \neg p \).
But here White is mistaken: EP does not wed its proponent to Absurdity. To be sure, EP does commit its proponent to this:

Consequence: Some body of evidence E is such that (i) it is possible that E makes it rational for you to believe p and (ii) it is possible that E makes it rational for you to believe not-p.

Consequence implies Absurdity only if the following inference rule is correct (where we read “→” as ‘entails’):

\[(\diamond p \& \diamond q) \rightarrow \diamond(p \& q)\]

As this rule is notoriously incorrect, Consequence does not imply Absurdity. White’s initial argument won’t threaten EP and thus provides scant support for U.14

How about White’s other objection to EP? Does it go further than the preliminary objection? We’ll need some terminology to set it out. Let’s say that your belief in proposition p is based on permissive evidence iff that evidence is such that (i) possibly, it rationalizes p for you and (ii) possibly, it rationalizes not-p for you. Here is our reconstruction of White’s [2005: 448-451] main argument against EP (where B is any rational belief based on some body of evidence E):

(1) If you come to believe that B is based on permissive evidence, then you think it’s possible that you rationally base the opposite belief on E. [By definition of ‘based on permissive evidence’]

(2) If you think it’s possible that you rationally base the opposite belief on E, then you should think B was formed in a way no more likely to yield a true belief than is arbitrarily choosing a belief (regarding B’s content).

In White’s words: “[I]f you believe P but maintain that you could have rationally believed not-P on the same evidence, then you should take the means by which you arrived at your belief in P to be no better than [say] arbitrarily popping a belief-inducing pill” [2005: 451].

(3) If you come to believe that B is based on permissive evidence, then you should think B was formed in a way no more likely to yield a true belief than is arbitrarily choosing a belief (regarding B’s content). [from (1)-(2)]

14 Let p be any contingently true proposition. Then the above rule implies the following (necessary) falsehood: \(\diamond(p \& \neg p)\).

15 Is this a charitable reconstruction of White’s initial argument, given that it understands the argument as depending on an obviously false modal principle? Fair question. In defence of our reconstruction, here are two points. First, we laboured unsuccessfully to discern a more promising alternative than the one we settled on. Second, we are not claiming that White’s argument obviously depends on a principle that is clearly false. That would be uncharitable. Instead, we think that White’s prima facie plausible initial argument against EP breaks down at the juncture we indicate when it’s carefully stated. According to us, White’s argument does ultimately depend on a clearly false principle, but we don’t believe that dependence is at all obvious. (We assume, of course, that there is indeed a line of argument given in support of U to be found in the passages at issue. If that’s wrong, those passages can lend no support to U.) Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing us here.
(4) If you should think B was formed in a way no more likely to yield a true belief than is arbitrarily choosing a belief (regarding B’s content), then B is irrational.

Writes White: “[Suppose] I can recall that my belief [that Smith is guilty] was…the result of an arbitrarily chosen [belief-inducing] pill. If I am rational, recognition of this fact should surely undermine my conviction in Smith’s guilt. … [T]he only reasonable response to reflection on my pill popping is to slip back into agnosticism about Smith’s guilt” [2005: 448]. Therefore:

(5) If you come to believe that B is based on permissive evidence, then B is irrational. [from (3)-(4)]

That’s the heart of White’s anti-EP argument. But how exactly does this challenge EP? By way of the following principle [2005: 450]: “[I]f it is rational to believe P given evidence E, then it is rational to believe P given E and E’, where E’ correctly states what attitudes to P are rationally permissible given E.” We are supposing that B is a rational belief based on evidence E. Given White’s principle, then, if the evidence on which B is based really is permissive, you could come to think as much about B while still rationally holding B. But according to (5), this isn’t possible. So, B isn’t based on permissive evidence. From here, we can generalize to the conclusion that no rational beliefs are based on permissive evidence, which is to deny EP.

What to do with White’s anti-EP argument? Pick on (2), we say. The trouble is that White’s defence of (2) depends crucially on a dubious hidden premise. Carefully considering how White supports (2) will justify this verdict:

[Suppose] I believe that upon considering the evidence in court one could rationally conclude that Smith is guilty, but there is an alternative path that one’s reasoning could take arriving instead at the rational conclusion that he is innocent. Supposing this is so, is there any advantage, from the point of view of pursuing the truth, in carefully weighing the evidence to draw a conclusion, rather than [say] just taking a belief-inducing pill? Surely I have no better chance of forming a true belief either way. If my permissive assumption is correct, carefully weighing the evidence in an impeccably rational manner will not determine what I end up believing; for by hypothesis, the evidence does not determine a unique rational conclusion.

[2005: 448]

This is a critical passage in White’s overall argument for U, but it is quite dense. Bear with us as we reconstruct his case for (2) in detail.

Following White, suppose you think there can be a rational belief based on permissive evidence—that is, by your lights, there could be a body of evidence E such that you could rationally believe \( p \) on its basis and you could rationally believe \( \neg p \) on its basis. That, White thinks, commits you to the claim that E does not in fact support \( p \) over \( \neg p \). Presumably, White would say something similar about a scenario where you think you could rationally (dis)believe \( p \) on E and you could rationally withhold \( p \) on E: such a thought would commit you to the claim that E doesn’t support (dis)believing \( p \) over withholding \( p \).
White’s case for (2) thus depends on the following bit of reasoning. Call the first step *Conditional*: if you think it’s possible that E rationalizes a different attitude to \( p \) than the one you take to \( p \) on E, then you should think E doesn’t support your attitude to \( p \) any better than it supports the other attitude. But if you should think E does not support your attitude to \( p \) any better than it supports some other attitude(s) to \( p \), then you should think considering E isn’t a uniquely effective way to achieve your goal of believing the truth and avoiding error with respect to \( p \). Given your goal, considering E has no advantage over certain other ways of forming an attitude to \( p \)—for example, a coin flip or an attitude-inducing pill. So, if you think it’s possible that E rationalizes a different attitude to \( p \) than the one you take to \( p \) on E, then you should think the way you formed your attitude to \( p \)—namely, by considering E—was no more likely to achieve the aforementioned epistemic goal than is arbitrarily forming an attitude (to B’s content). *A fortiori*, if you think (about your belief B based on E) it’s possible that E rationalizes the opposite belief (to B), then you should think E supports believing \( p \) no better than it supports disbelieving \( p \).

The crucial step in this argument is *Conditional*. But there are cases which throw *Conditional* into doubt. Without further support for *Conditional*, then, White’s argument for (2) fails. The trouble is, *Conditional* appears to be an assumption for White. Thus, his overall argument for U stumbles at (2).

Here is the first of three examples that challenge *Conditional*; in a moment, we’ll state a general recipe for creating them. Imagine that Wilson endorses an evidence-rationality bundle which joins a species of evidentialism with a species of rationality externalism, on which “a body of evidence E… [rationalizes \( p \)] only if the truth of E is a reliable indication of the truth of \([p]\)” (Greco [2000: 157]). Reflecting on his total evidence E and his theoretical commitments, Wilson thinks it is possible that E rationalizes another attitude to \( p \) than the one he actually takes; perhaps, for example, he judges there’s a possible world in which E reliably indicates not-\( p \) instead of \( p \). Here, *Conditional* implies that Wilson should think E doesn’t in fact support believing \( p \) any better than E supports disbelieving \( p \).

That doesn’t follow, though, for we can easily add in details so that Wilson shouldn’t judge that E supports believing \( p \) no better than it supports disbelieving \( p \). Let’s suppose Wilson knows (or at least reasonably thinks) that, in the actual world, E is a reliable indicator of \( p \). (It is almost too obvious to note that he can know, or at least reasonably think, as much while also thinking it’s possible E rationalizes other attitudes to \( p \) in different worlds.) Plausibly, if Wilson knows that E in fact reliably indicates \( p \), then he’s not justified in thinking E supports believing \( p \) no better than it supports disbelieving \( p \). So, even though he countenances the possibility that E rationalizes a different attitude to \( p \) than belief, it’s not the case that he should think E supports believing \( p \) no better than it supports taking that other attitude. Wilson is thus a counterexample to *Conditional*.

Other counterexamples are at hand. For instance, suppose that McCoy accepts an evidence-rationality bundle that features a proper function account of rationality (Bergmann [2006]): McCoy thinks that facts about one’s proper functioning help determine what a given
body of evidence rationalizes for one. When McCoy reflects on her evidence E for her belief in $p$, she thinks it is possible that E rationalizes a different attitude for her. She may concur with Thomas Reid that “no man can give a reason why the sensations of smell, or taste, or sound, might not have indicated hardness” [1997 (1785): 57, emphasis added]. And so perhaps McCoy thinks it is possible that, in virtue of a different ‘design plan’, some other attitude is rational given E.

Notice that Conditional implies McCoy should think E does not in fact support her belief in $p$ any better than it supports the other attitude she thinks E could rationalize. But that doesn't follow. For we can suppose that McCoy knows (or reasonably thinks) believing $p$ is the response to E her actual design plan calls for. And plausibly enough, if McCoy knows that believing $p$ is the response to E mandated by her proper functioning, then she's not rational in denying that E supports believing $p$ over taking that other attitude—that is, the attitude E would rationalize for creatures with a design plan different from hers.

One more example. Let’s suppose that Kate endorses an “explanatory coherentist” account of rationality on which “[t]he coherence that [rationalizes] holds among propositions that assert the existence of the non-doxastic states that constitute one’s ultimate evidence and propositions that offer an optimal available explanation of the existence of that evidence” (Conee & Feldman [2008: 98]). When Kate reflects on the evidence E upon which she has based her belief in $p$, she judges it is possible that E rationalizes some other attitude to $p$. For instance, she might realize that if she didn’t so much as understand or grasp $p$, then $p$ wouldn’t be an available explanation of E for her. And given that possibility, E would not rationalize believing $p$ for her; rather, it would rationalize withholding $p$ (see Conee & Feldman [2008: 98]).

Now Conditional brings the following implication: Kate should think E doesn’t in fact support her belief in $p$ any better than it supports withholding $p$. But that does not follow. For we can suppose Kate knows (or reasonably thinks) that $p$ is in fact her best available explanation of E. And from here we can easily spell out the case so that, in light of her knowledge, Kate isn’t justified in denying that E in fact supports believing $p$ over withholding $p$.

What’s the general recipe for this trio of counterexamples to Conditional? Begin with a possible thinker who accepts an approach to rationality that allows something other than one’s evidence all by itself to help determine which attitudes are rational for one. Then we’re able to conjure up a counterexample to Conditional: though a thinker judges that her evidence could rationalize different attitudes from those she actually takes, she shouldn’t deny that her actual attitudes are in fact better supported by her evidence than the alternative attitudes. Why isn’t she rational in denying this? Because she knows (or at least reasonably thinks) her evidence has the “extra-evidential” features she regards as sufficient to rationalize her actual attitudes (as opposed to the alternatives that she thinks her evidence would rationalize were different extra-evidential factors in play).

In light of cases like the three described above, Conditional looks implausible. Without some further argument in favour of Conditional, we can sensibly reject it.

17 At the risk of repetition, permit us to underline once more that none of the proposed counterexamples to Conditional brings a ‘U-excluding’ evidence-rationality bundle into direct contact with U. We haven’t stipulated that any such bundle is either true or even somewhat reasonable for us to believe. Instead, our counterexamples to Conditional only need the relatively modest assumption that it’s possible someone reasonably accepts one or another ‘U-excluding’ evidence-rationality bundle.
Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality

By way of summary, then: White’s main anti-EP argument falls at (2) and his “quick-and-dirty preliminary” argument can be shown to depend on a modal fallacy. Recall that White’s case against EP is the first step of his overall case for U. Accordingly, our criticism of White’s anti-EP argument undermines what’s currently the best available case for U. We presently lack good reason to believe U.

4. Conclusion

Let us bring the discussion to a close. If our arguments here are correct, the proponent of U is bound by much more rigid theoretical constraints than a first glance reveals. Reflecting on these constraints, we’ve observed, serves to impose high standards for rational acceptance of U (see [§2]) which are not met by White’s case for U (see [§3]). As noted at the outset, Kelly [2010: 119-121] has argued that EW depends dialectically on U. If that should turn out right (and we’re inclined to think it will, for reasons similar to those Kelly presents18), our critical assessment of U would be doubly important for the epistemology of disagreement, defending the possibility of reasonable disagreement between evidential twins as well as suggesting that you need not always give equal weight to your epistemic peer’s attitude when you two disagree.19

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18 See Ballantyne & Coffman [ms] for more.
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