Rational Disagreement Defended

Earl Conee (Contributor Webpage)

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199226078.003.0005

[-] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter formulates a rational uniqueness principle holding that those who are epistemic peers on a proposition, in that they know that they share all rational considerations concerning the truth of the proposition, cannot be justified in having different attitudes toward it. It then argues against the principle, primarily on the grounds that such peers may rationally regard themselves as differing in their basis for rational belief, or their evidence, on the topic. The rationality of their differing perspectives can justify having different attitudes toward the disputed proposition.

Keywords: disagreement, epistemic peers, rational uniqueness, evidence, rationality

1. Introduction

We are rational only if we heed the dictates of reason. We heed our epistemic reasons by taking the doxastic attitudes that align with their support. If the bearing of our reasons on the truth-value of a proposition is unequivocal, then just one doxastic attitude is
epistemically rational for us to take toward the proposition. Rational uniqueness principles imply that our epistemic reasons determine the doxastic attitudes that are uniquely epistemically rational for us to take.¹ The most defensible of these principles are restricted to cases of extreme duplication among those whom the principles imply to have the same justified attitudes. These epistemic peers must have identical total evidence, or they must have identical reasons, reasoning abilities, and inclinations to reason. Such restrictions are apparently excessive. It seems equally credible to require only a sharing of all that is rationally relevant to a proposition’s truth-value.

Are some such relaxed uniqueness principles correct, or can thoroughly reasonable people share everything relevant to a disputed proposition and still rationally disagree? It will be argued here that the relaxed principles are not correct. Sharing the relevant reasons allows that the parties involved (p.70) rationally hold certain views about rational differences. Some such views can yield actual rational differences among them.

A few terminological stipulations will refine the issue. Someone has a rational doxastic attitude toward a proposition when the person’s belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment on the proposition is fully epistemically reasonable under the circumstances. For instance, in an evidentialist view, an epistemically rational doxastic attitude is one that fits with the person’s evidence concerning the proposition. Other views of epistemic rationality have it depend on coherence or probability, given the person’s beliefs or knowledge. No theory of rationality need be employed, though. The notion of being fully epistemically reasonable is well enough understood pre-theoretically for it to be applied directly.

We seek a notion of epistemic peers that is less restrictive than that of having exactly the same total rational bases. We do want to require of the peers a mutual possession of all that seems rationally relevant, in the interest of preserving maximal plausibility for the resulting uniqueness principle. To this end, a first requirement is that the peers have a thoroughly “shared” basis for reasonable attitude formation. People have thoroughly shared rational bases when either their bases do not differ, or, if they do, the differences are mutually known.²

Requiring epistemic peers to have mutual knowledge of any differences in their bases for rational attitudes gives us a demanding notion of a shared basis. A demanding notion makes plausible the idea that the same attitudes would be rational for epistemic peers. On the other hand, requiring mutual knowledge of any differences in bases for attitudes, rather than identical bases, allows for the virtually inevitable differences in details of some relevant experiences.

This sort of sharing also avoids the issue of whether all bases for rational belief can be identical across individuals. It may be, for instance, that we can have what Peter van Inwagen calls “incommunicable insights” in support of propositions.³ It may be that some can receive some such special reason (p.71) in support for a given proposition by having an incommunicable insight while others cannot. Even though the specific reason acquired by having any such insight cannot be communicated, the fact that one is having
an incommunicable insight favoring some proposition can be reported. This fact about someone can be known by another on the basis of sufficiently trustworthy testimony. Having such knowledge is “sharing” the reason in the intended sense. The rest of what is required by the current notion of epistemic peers is that they have the same abilities to form reasonable doxastic attitudes.\(^4\)

We all differ in the details of our bases for rational attitudes, and none of us knows all about the differences in anyone else's rational bases. So genuine epistemic peers are ideal cases. But there may be experts who are epistemic peers on topics of their expertise. And it is likely that many people share their limited information on a given topic. People are *epistemic peers on the topic of a proposition* when they have a thoroughly shared basis and capacity for reasonable doxastic attitudes concerning the proposition. An evidentialist thinks of topical epistemic peers as having thoroughly shared the evidence that they have that bears on the truth-value of the proposition and having equal capacities to respond to that evidence with fitting doxastic attitudes. Other theories have other things shared by topical peers. Again, no theoretical conception of the basis for peerage is needed.

Finally, people and their doxastic attitudes disagree about a proposition when their doxastic attitudes toward the proposition differ. Disagreements, in this sense, go beyond belief versus disbelief. They include a suspension of judgment on a proposition by one and belief for disbelief in the proposition by another. They also include differing strengths, or degrees, of belief in the same proposition, if belief varies in that way.

Here is a credible thesis that requires agreement among epistemic peers.

\begin{itemize}
  \item *(RU) Rational Uniqueness.* If A and B are epistemic peers on the topic of proposition X, then the same doxastic attitude toward X is epistemically rational for A and B.
\end{itemize}

\begin{itemize}
  \item *(p.72)*
  \item *(RU)* is plausible. Epistemic peers on the topic of a proposition share epistemic reasons on the topic. It is reasonable to think that, on balance, any given batch of reasons either supports a proposition, or supports its negation, or does neither. It is reasonable to think that having on-balance support of a proposition makes belief the uniquely rational attitude toward it, having on-balance support of the negation makes disbelief uniquely rational, and in the absence of either sort of support, suspension of judgment is the uniquely rational attitude. It is reasonable to conclude that a unique attitude toward a proposition is rational for all topical peers. That is what *(RU)* asserts.
\end{itemize}

Objections to *(RU)* will be presented here. The objections use the perspectival nature of rational support against the thesis. More specifically, the objections use the thought that among the propositions that can be rational from someone’s perspective are views that differentiate the rationality of attitudes among one’s epistemic peers. It will be contended that sharing such views rationally distinguishes among the peers. Shared reasons can
imply that individual differences affect the rational force of those reasons.

2. A First Version
A first version of an objection to (RU) will get us most of the way. It begins with an assumption to the effect that a rational case can be made for a certain sort of epistemic difference between peers. The difference concerns how they are rationally affected by an experience that is had by only one of them. The case for a difference in rational impact of an experiential difference may be refutable in the end. That is compatible with the assumption.

Let us develop the objection with an example. Suppose that Smith has an intuition of the truth of a principle of mereology—namely, the universal fusions principle:

\[(X1)\text{ For any things, there exists a fusion of those things.}\]

Smith's epistemic peer about mereology, Jones, considers (X1) and fails to have any such intuition. Both Smith and Jones know that Smith has this intuition and Jones does not. Furthermore, Smith and Jones have been rationally convinced by an argument about intuitions. The argument concludes that intuitions offer essentially private rational support. More precisely, the argument concludes that one who is having an intuition gets strong reason from it for the intuited proposition, making the proposition rational for the person to believe in the absence of defeaters, while one who considers the proposition and does not have the intuition gets no reason to believe the proposition from knowing that another intuits it.

Many find this claim about the privacy of intuitive support plausible. What the current objection to (RU) assumes is stronger. The assumption is that a sufficiently strong case has been made to Smith and Jones for this private support claim for it to be rational for them to believe the conclusion about how an intuition had only by one of them affects rational belief.

The objection continues. Suppose that Smith and Jones know that, apart from the intuition by Smith in favor of (X1), they have no reason to regard (X1) as true or as untrue. Now the reasoning against (RU) draws an inference. Their knowledge that their differing intuitive response to (X1) is their only basis for a rational difference concerning (X1), together with their rational belief in the claim about the private support of intuitions, makes it fully reasonable for each of them to believe that they differ in what doxastic attitude it is rational to take toward (X1). They are both fully reasonable in believing this.

\[(D)\text{ It is rational for Smith to believe (X1) and it is not rational for Jones to believe (X1).}\]

So each of these two topical peers about (X1) quite reasonably believes that (X1) is rational for Smith to believe and (X1) is not rational for Jones to believe.

Now for the next step in the objection. Here is a credible epistemic claim. It is rational for us to have, or to lack, any attitude that we rationally regard as rational for ourselves to
have, or to lack. (A more careful version of this claim will be formulated and given critical scrutiny soon.) If this plausible claim is true, then, in our example of Smith and Jones, their rational beliefs in (D) suffice to make (D) true. That is, their rational beliefs in (D) make it rational for Smith to believe (X1) and not rational for Jones to do so. (p.74)

Finally, suppose that Smith and Jones do what we just inferred to be rational for each to do. Smith rationally believes (X1) and Jones rationally refrains from believing (X1). We have arrived at the conclusion that there are epistemic peers about the topic of (X1) who rationally disagree about (X1). This contradicts (RU).

3. Problems with the First Version

There is trouble for this objection. Suppose that we can legitimately get as far as the inference to the rationality of Smith and Jones believing (D). The next step relies on this principle:

(RR) Rationality from Rationality. If S is rational in believing that X is rational for S to believe, then X is rational for S to believe, and if S is rational in believing that X is not rational for S to believe, then X is not rational for S to believe.

(RR) is the principle by which we went from Smith and Jones having a justifying argument for a rational difference to Smith and Jones actually rationally differing.

(RR) is doubtful. One source of doubt arises from the apparent possibility of radical mistakes about what is rational. The doubt can be developed as follows. There are cases in which someone makes a reasonable mistake about what is required for a concept to apply. For instance, someone might reasonably think that gold has to be yellow, or that an ordered sequence has to have a first member. If some such reasonable mistake is used in an argument for an application of the concept, it can justify some more or less radical mistake about the application of the concept.

For an example involving the concept of rationality, let us suppose that one of our epistemic peers, Smith, is told by a seemingly quite reliable source that a rational belief is any belief that is not irrational. Smith is as credibly told that an irrational belief is any belief that is silly to hold. Using these rational beliefs, Smith judges that it is rational for her to believe a certain proposition that from her viewpoint is merely as likely as not, though she has guessed that it is true. For instance:

(E) An even number of stars went nova in our galaxy in the first millennium AD.

(E) is not downright silly for Smith to believe. It is a guess with even odds of being correct. If we assume that Smith rationally believes that not being silly is sufficient for a belief to be rational, then we can infer that it is rational for Smith to believe that it is rational for her to believe (E). From this, by (RR), we can further infer that it is rational for Smith to believe (E). Yet clearly (E) is not rational for Smith to believe under the circumstances. (E) is a guess on Smith’s part.
Smith is seriously wrong about rationality. Being rational is being fully reasonable. It is not nearly enough for a belief to be fully reasonable that it is not silly. The belief must at least be favored by reason. Yet for Smith (E) is merely not silly. This argument seems to show that (RR) is untrue.

At best, this argument against (RR) needs tightening. It is a mild assumption that it is possible for some mistakes about the application of concepts like rationality to be reasonable. For the case to be a counterexample to (RR), more than that is required. It is required that, even though Smith is making severe errors about rationality, she still might be rational in the thought that her belief in (E) is rational. Yet Smith is so far off about what makes for rationality that it is difficult to be sure that Smith’s thought is really about rationality. She is inferring the thought from the mere fact that (E) is not silly for her to believe. In actuality, that fact is far from enough to imply that (E) is rational for her to believe. To carry conviction as a counterexample to (RR), Smith’s reasons would have to be bolstered. It would have to be argued that Smith is getting fully justifying reason to think that fully reasonable belief is nothing more than belief that is not silly. It is not clear that this could be done.

Exactly why not, though? What upper limit on conceptual mistakes would Smith have to exceed?

In any event, there are other grounds to doubt (RR). The rationality of a belief is an all-things-considered evaluation. Having strong reason to accept a proposition is not enough. The reason might be defeated. When someone, Jones, has a fully reasonable belief that Jones’s belief in X has the status of rationality, this may occur because Jones sees a strongly supporting reason that Jones has for X, and misses the fact that Jones also has some less-than-obvious defeater for the reason. Not only might Jones fail to notice a defeater, but also Jones might fail to appreciate a noticed defeater as such. An argument that rationally persuades Jones of the rationality of Jones’s believing X may make erroneous though reasonable (p.76) claims either about the role of defeat in general or about the epistemic relevance of a particular defeater. Whether from such an argument, or from a failure to recognize a defeater, it could be rational for Jones to believe that Jones’s believing X is rational, when the support Jones has for X is in fact defeated and hence Jones’s believing X is not in fact rational.

To highlight this problem for (RR), it is helpful to contrast (RR) with the following principle about evidence:

(EE) Evidence for Evidence. If S has evidence for the proposition that evidence exists in support of X, then S has evidence for X.6

The idea behind (EE) is that any evidence that supports to us the proposition that some evidence exists for X in effect tells us that X has something to be said in its favor. When a person has evidence that something favors the truth of X, the person has reason to think that X has something epistemic going for it. This reason is intuitively one epistemically rational consideration in favor of X’s truth. That confirms (EE).
(EE) does not imply that someone who has evidence of evidence for X is justified in believing X. A belief’s being justified is a summary evaluation. Defeat can prevent the justification to someone of a proposition for which the person has evidential support. (EE) allows this. Again, it asserts only that one who has evidence of evidence for X has some evidence for X, whether or not the evidence for X is defeated.

In contrast, (RR) asserts that, when a proposition of the form—X is rational for S to believe—is rational for S, X has for S the summary epistemic status of being rational to believe. Yet neither the dependence of rationality on lack of defeat, nor the ways in which defeat can occur, are inescapably obvious. An actually defeated proposition could be fully reasonably regarded as rational to believe.

4. A Revised Version of the Objection

(RR) is stronger than is required to make a case for rational disagreement between epistemic peers. A principle closer to (EE) is sufficient. The (p.77) rationality of a rational difference need only differentiate the strength of the shared reasons.

Suppose that Smith and Jones heed some argument that makes it rational for them to believe:

(D) It is rational for Smith to believe (X1) and it is not rational for Jones to believe (X1).

We have lately noted that (D) could be rational to someone who overlooks, or fails to appreciate, a defeater that makes the content of (D) untrue. But it seems that whatever support makes (D) fully reasonable for Smith would at least give Smith a reason to believe (X1).

It seems clear that the support that Smith has for the rationality of her believing (D) gives her reason to believe (X1), whether or not it is a defeated reason. Further, in our example it is reason for Smith to believe (X1) that Jones does not have, since (D) relates Jones to (X1) only by denying that it is rational for Jones to believe (X1). Finally, it seems that, in the absence of a defeater, the support of that differentiating reason for (X1) to Smith, and not to Jones, would make it fully reasonable for Smith, but not Jones, to believe (X1).

This reasoning replaces (RR) with a principle about a reason. The new principle is this:

(RE) Reason from Rationality. If S is rational in believing that it is rational for S to believe X, then S thereby has a reason to believe X, and if S is rational in believing that it is not rational for S to believe X, then S does not thereby have a reason to believe X.

(RE) is more defensible than is (RR). The first conjunct of (RE) requires S to have some reason for thinking that S’s belief in X is rational. S must have some such reason, if the rationality of S’s believing X is to be supported by S’s reasons on balance, as the rationality of the belief requires. Whatever reason does this, it indirectly bears positively
on the truth of X. The reason in effect argues that S is in a good position to affirm X. Anything arguing for that would seem at least to enhance S’s epistemic position for regarding X as true. Things that enhance someone’s epistemic position for taking this attitude are epistemic reasons for the person.

The reason that S gets for X, when rational belief in X is supported to S, might be the supported rationality of the belief itself. The rationality of S’s (p.78) believing X intuitively bears positively on the truth of X. It is thus plausible that a proposition of the form—X is rational for S—is itself qualified to be a reason for S to think that X is true. If S always gets a reason to believe X, either from this proposition, when it is rational for S, or from S’s reason for believing it, or from both, then the first conjunct of (RE) is correct.

It is compatible with always having some such reason, as (RE) implies, that something else always defeats it. For instance, in the example of Smith and the proposition about stars going nova, (E), Smith receives testimony that apparently makes it rational for her to think that beliefs are rational when they are not silly. If the testimony does this, then (E) qualifies to Smith as one of her rational beliefs, since she knows that (E) is for her a 50–50 guess and thus not silly. By (RE), Smith thereby has a reason to think that (E) is true. Yet the basis of the rationality for her of believing (E) includes that she is just guessing that (E) is true. It is plausible that her awareness that (E) is a guess defeats the support that she has for (E) from its rationality for her. With the support defeated, the balance of Smith’s reasons that bear on (E) does not favor (E). If all of this is correct, then (RR) is mistaken about this situation whereas (RE) is not.7,8

In all of this, (RE) is in the spirit of (EE). Just as evidence for evidence is plausibly thought to be evidence, whatever defends the rationality of thinking a proposition to be true seems to constitute a defeasible reason in support of the proposition’s truth.

(RE) says more. The rest is also broadly similar to (EE). If S is fully reasonable in thinking that X is not rational for S to believe, then S thereby has reason to doubt that one is in a good position to affirm the truth of X. Accordingly, (RE) denies that one gets reason to believe X on this basis.

(RE) thus seems reasonable. (p.79)

It is important to note that for S to meet the antecedent conditions in the second conjunct of (RE)—for S to have grounds on which it is rational to deny that X is rational for S to believe—is for S to have a potential defeater of any reason in support of X that S might also have. To see this, suppose that one peer has knowledge of the existence of an undefeated reason for X that another peer has. Suppose that this knowledge of the other’s reason for X gives the one peer a reason of her own for X. Yet suppose further that it is rational for the one peer to think that her belief in X is not rational. From such a person’s perspective, there must be something flawed or counterbalanced about the reason that she gets from the other peer’s reason to believe X. It must be a reason that misfires in her own case, since she fully reasonably thinks that it fails to make X rational for her. Since that is what her perspective indicates to her, she is thereby made less
reasonable in believing X. The same defeating effect occurs in the case of whatever positive reasons for X that she possesses. Each time, her reasonable doubt that X is rational for her casts doubt on the support to her of the reason. We can state this defeating effect in a further principle:

(DD) Defeat from Doubt. If S is rational in believing that X is not rational for S to believe, then S thereby has a defeater that at least weakens the support of any reason that S has to believe X.  

The revised reasoning begins in much the same way as the original. Again, Smith and Jones, who are epistemic peers on the topic of proposition (X1), are presented with some supporting argument for this:

(D) It is rational for Smith to believe (X1) and it is not rational for Jones to believe (X1).

Again we assume that the supporting argument for (D) is good enough to make it rational for Smith and Jones to believe (D).

Now the new principle (RE) comes into play. Given this rationality of (D) for Smith, it follows by (RE) that Smith has a reason to believe (X1). This reason is not defeated, since we are assuming that Smith and Jones have no reasons for or against (X1) apart from Smith's intuition and whatever that implies. Nothing in (RE) suggests a defeater for the reason. (RE) further implies that Jones lacks this reason to believe (X1).

It is possible that Jones gets a reason to believe (X1) from Smith’s intuition. Jones, being Smith’s epistemic peer on the topic of (X1), knows that Smith has the intuition. This knowledge might be a reason for Jones to believe (X1).

The existence of a reason that Jones gets for (X1) from knowledge of Smith’s intuition of (X1) is not clear. The supporting argument that Jones has for (D) itself asserts that another’s intuition is not a reason for Jones. So, from Jones’s point of view, what gives Smith a reason does not do so for Jones.

But let us suppose that Jones's knowledge of Smith's intuition is a reason for Jones to believe (X1). Still, as we noted in proposing (DD), the rationality for Jones of this proposition—(X1) is not rational for Jones—at least somewhat defeats any reason that Jones might get for (X1). Whatever reason supports that proposition to Jones creates a doubt about her having support on balance for (X1). This doubt prevents any new reason, including knowledge of Smith’s intuition, of (X1) from making belief in (X1) fully reasonable for her. So, even if Jones does get a reason for believing (X1) from knowledge of Smith’s reason, it is weakened, if not entirely neutralized, by the rationality for Jones of the proposition that (X1) is not rational for Jones to believe. Thus, (X1) is less well supported to Jones than it is to Smith.

If belief comes in degrees, then refuting (RU) does not require the complete defeat of any reason that Jones gets for (X1) from her knowledge of Smith's intuition. As long as
Jones is less rational to any extent in believing (X1) than is Smith, Jones's fully rational degree of belief is less than that of Smith. So we have a difference in rational attitudes between epistemic peers. Whatever reason Jones gets from knowledge of Smith's intuition, it seems clear that Jones's grounds for believing that (X1) is not rational for her would at least make a more tentative belief in (X1) fully reasonable for Jones than for Smith. (RU) mistakenly implies that the same attitude is fully rational for both.\footnote{RU} (p.81)

If belief does not come in degrees, then we have only that belief in (X1) is less well supported for Jones than for Smith. Differing support among peers goes against the spirit, if not the letter, of (RU). Furthermore, we can adjust the case to induce a difference in fully reasonable attitude. We can add some other defeater that both Smith and Jones possess of the support for (X1) from Smith's intuition and Jones's knowledge of it. The other defeater can be calibrated so that the difference in support between Smith and Jones places Smith beyond whatever minimum support is needed for fully reasonable belief in (X1). The effect of this other defeater on Jones, with her support for (X1) weakened by the defeater (D) as it applies to her, is that her support for (X1) does not reach the minimum. The identity of such a supplemental defeater depends on details about when support suffices for belief and how strongly (D) defeats Jones's support for (X1) from knowledge of Smith's intuition (if indeed Jones gets any such support to defeat). The result is that (RU) is refuted by such a case.

5. Bootstrapping?
One concern about this objection is that (RE) might seem to imply an unacceptable sort of bootstrapping.\footnote{RE} (RE) seems to imply that new reasons for believing a proposition are created merely by noticing old ones. To illustrate this concern with a different sort of example, suppose that Jones has strong perceptual support for believing some ordinary observational proposition:

\[ \text{(X2) A tree stands before me.} \]

Jones thus has a perceptual reason to believe (X2). Suppose that Jones reflects on how her perceptual and background information give her reason to believe (X2), and she does not turn up anything that seems to her at all to counterbalance or undermine that support for (X2). After Jones (p.82) does this, it seems rational for Jones to believe that it is rational for her to believe (X2). (RE) implies that Jones thereby gets a reason to believe (X2). This is a new reason, a reason that arises from the considerations that make the belief rational that Jones's belief in (X2) is rational. Those considerations include her introspection of her perceptual support for (X2)—support that she already has—and they also include the more abstract consideration to the effect that the particular perceptual support is a reason that she has for believing (X2). Thus, the perceptual support for (X2) is one reason, and this new reflective outcome is something different. The outcome makes it rational for her to believe that (X2) is rational for her to believe. Therefore, according to (RE), the reflective outcome is also a reason for Jones to believe (X2). Thus, it seems that according to (RE) Jones can in this way get a new reason in support of (X2) that enhances (X2)'s rationality for Jones.
Yet when we stand back and consider what reasons develop from the perception, it can seem that Jones has no new evidence for \( X_2 \). It can seem that her real evidence for \( X_2 \) is just the perceptual support, in the presence of suitable background information, that makes the experience good reason to believe \( X_2 \). Jones’s simply taking note of these things can seem not to add evidence for \( X_2 \). It may thus seem that the implication of (RE) that the rationality of \( X_2 \) for Jones would be enhanced by the reflection shows that (RE) is incorrect.

No fault in (RE) has been located here, though. When things go as described in the present example, (RE) does imply that Jones has a new reason to believe \( X_2 \). But (RE) implies nothing about the reason’s strength. The new reason may constitute a minimal additional increment of rational support. In the example, the implied new reason derives from considering other, directly supporting perceptual evidence for the proposition. It is plausible that such reflections do add something to the rationality of the belief. By reflecting as described, Jones gains some appreciation of her evidential situation concerning \( X_2 \). That makes \( X_2 \) at least a bit more rationally secure for Jones than it was prior to the reflection. Coherentists about rational belief will find this thought especially congenial. But rationality need not consist in coherence for reflective rational appreciation to add a reason. Appreciating the support of an old reason is a new reason. This bears out (RE).

6. Transmutation?
Let us consider again how a defender of (RU) sees any argument about our epistemic peers Smith and Jones for the conclusion

\[
(D) \text{ It is rational for Smith to believe } X_1 \text{ and it is not rational for Jones to believe } X_1.
\]

A defender of (RU) must find some fault in any such argument. In our illustrative example, the argument for (D) depends on a claim about the essential privacy of the support given to a proposition by an intuition of its truth. A defender of (RU) will hold that this claim is mistaken. The defender is likely to point out that an epistemic peer must know that the other peer does intuit the proposition. A defender is likely to hold that this knowledge of another’s intuition gives as much support to the intuition’s content as does the intuition itself. Such a defender would conclude that any argument that depends on denying this is therefore unsound. Thus, from the (RU) proponent’s perspective, the reasoning against (RU) that we have been considering depends on an unsound argument for (D). Yet the argument is supposed to make (D) true. That may seem fishy. It may seem to imply the transmutation of a bad argument—or, at least, an arguably bad argument that has not been defended—into a good one.

The objection to (RU) does not fail in that way. The unsoundness of the defense of (D) can be granted. The way in which a proponent of (RU) faults the argument for (D) is to contend that it relies on a falsehood. The reasoning against (RU) is compatible with that. What the reasoning needs from the defense of (D) is just that it can be rational for epistemic peers Smith and Jones to conclude (D) on the basis of some such argument. To
dispute this, a proponent of (RU) would need some new consideration, beyond the falsehood of a premise. It would have to be argued that (D) could not even be made rational to epistemic peers by any such argument. The new line of argument would have to be extremely wide-ranging in its capacity to deny rationality. Peers might have highly varied bodies of evidence about what makes for rationality.

For instance, let us suppose that Smith and Jones are bright undergraduate epistemic peers on the topic of mereology who are considering (X1) in a first metaphysics course. They gain their rational belief in (D) from an argument given by their professor during a classroom discussion in which they air their differing views concerning (X1). The professor argues for (D) as follows.

- The rational attitude is the one that the person epistemically ought to have. Epistemic ought implies can. Smith, you cannot help but believe what you intuit, including (X1). So you epistemically ought to believe (X1) and belief is therefore your rational attitude toward the proposition. Jones, you know that Smith intuits (X1) but you do not intuit (X1) yourself, you have no other reason to believe (X1), and you are able not to believe (X1). What one fails to intuit and one is able not to believe requires for rational belief a better reason than just having knowledge of the existence of someone else’s intuition in its favor. Thus, (D) is true.

This reasoning could at least make (D) rational for Smith and Jones under such circumstances. It is clear that they might have good evidence for the premises of the argument. For instance, their philosophy instructor might go on to give the premises impressive testimonial endorsement as being among the most secure of epistemic assumptions, while no doubts about the premises happen to occur to them. It is unlikely that a proponent of (RU) could establish that no such argument ever yields rational belief in the likes of (D).12

7. Arguing against Rational Uniqueness from (EE)
(RE) is plausible from a variety of perspectives about rationality. (RE) is not particularly evidentialist in its appeal or in its interest. (EE) is also broadly plausible. (EE) is entirely about evidence for propositions, rather than about epistemic rationality, whatever that turns out to be. So (EE) is of particular interest to evidentialists. Still, since (EE) is broadly plausible, an argument using (EE) against (RU) might be of wide interest too.

For this reasoning we need an evidentialist counterpart of (D). Here is one.

(DE) Smith has evidence for (X1) and Jones does not have evidence for (X1).

(p.85) We can suppose that both Smith and Jones know that Smith intuits (X1) and Jones tries and fails to do so. They know this by telling one another in a thoroughly credible way. Now we add that they also have good evidence for the claim that intuitions are evidence only for those who have them. One potential source of this evidence is that ever-handly source of good evidence for anything—testimony from a trustworthy source.
Smith and Jones have it on the authority of their metaphysics professor that intuitions work as evidence in this way and we can suppose the professor to be a paragon of integrity as far as they can tell. For good measure we can add that Smith and Jones have other evidence for the claim. Their professor offers them a best explanation argument. He argues to them that the essentially private support that is provided by evidence from intuitions best explains why eminent philosophers can reasonable disagree about issues within their expertise. Here is his argument.

- Eminent philosophers know the evidence on all sides concerning issues of their philosophical expertise, and this includes knowledge of the intuitions had by those of their peers who hold opposing views. Eminent philosophers heed the totality of their evidence about their philosophical views. Yet they retain belief in their own views. Part of the best explanation for this retention must be that knowledge of others' intuitions is not evidence for those who lack them.

This line of argument at least gives evidence for (DE) to people in the position we can suppose to be that of Smith and Jones, able undergraduates who see no weakness in the argument.

With Smith and Jones having evidence that the evidence from intuitions is private, (EE) goes to work. Since they have evidence that Smith has evidence for (X1), by (EE) Smith has such evidence. Nothing in the example implies that this evidence that Smith has for (X1) is defeated.\(^{13}\) (p.86)

Nothing in the example asserts that Jones has evidence for (X1). Also, (EE) does not imply this, because Jones has no evidence that she has such evidence. But it might be that Jones does have evidence for (X1). The evidence might consist in Jones's knowledge that Smith intuits (X1). That might be evidence for (X1) to Jones, in spite of what the reliable testimony and best explanation argument from their professor contend.

We can assume that Jones has her knowledge of Smith's intuition as evidence for (X1). Any such evidence is defeated by the testimony and the best explanation argument. They make it rational for Jones to believe that Smith's intuition is not evidence of (X1) for Jones. The basis on which that proposition is rational for her, or the rationality of proposition itself, at least weakens the support of the evidence that she has for (X1) from her knowledge of Smith's intuition.\(^{14}\) Nothing in our example suggests that Jones has any other evidence for (X1). So we can add that Jones does not have any such evidence.

Thus, assuming that one's evidence for a proposition is epistemically rational support for it, we have the implication that Smith has undefeated rational support for (X1) and Jones has at best weaker support for (X1). If there are degrees of belief, then differing degrees of belief are fully reasonable for the two, and (RU) is refuted.

If there are no degrees of belief, then it may be that the evidence of each on balance supports the proposition, though to differing extents. Because of this, it may be that belief is the doxastic attitude that is rational for both. But the difference in rational support is
again of considerable interest. Any such difference again runs contrary to the spirit of (RU). The underlying idea is that epistemic peerage implies a sharing of all rational considerations. The implications of (EE) for the present example show that this is not so. And, as with our first objection to (RU), we can supplement the example so as to refute (RU). We can adjust the rest of the evidence that Smith and Jones share with the net effect that Smith is beyond the minimum for fully reasonable belief while Jones, with her weaker support for (X1), does not reach the minimum.

8. Conclusion
(RU) is about shared reasons on the topic of a proposition. It claims the sufficiency of these reasons for a unique rational doxastic attitude toward the proposition. We have found objections to this claim. People who have shared reasons on a topic may rationally regard themselves as differing in their basis for rational belief on the topic. The rationality of this perspective is enough to differentiate the support provided by their reasons or their evidence.

The objections to (RU) would be avoided by a principle that excluded the differences that allow the objections. The objections do not apply to a principle that is about peers who are epistemically alike in certain ways beyond sharing reasons and evidence on a topic. Suppose that a principle requires that peers also have no rational basis to think otherwise about themselves. That is, the peers must also have no reason or evidence to think that they differ in any reason or evidence that either pertains to the topic or that they have reason or evidence to think pertains to the topic, or reason or evidence to think to be such reason or evidence, and so forth, all the way up. The objections would not apply to such principles.

The intuition that underlies a uniqueness principle such as (RU) might be that our perspective on a topic settles the identity of our rational attitudes on the topic. This is not correct. At least, the epistemically relevant aspect of our perspectives is not exhausted by our reasons and shared evidence on the topic. This much leaves out our perspective on reasons and evidence. That aspect of our perspective is relevant to topical epistemic rationality too. Our reasons influence our reasons.

Appendix 1. The Merits of (EE)

(EE) may be refutable. Suppose that you have evidence that I have played a hoax on Smith. You have learned that I arranged the conference room so that it looked to Smith as though the following falsehood was true.

(JR) Jones was in the room today.

(p.88)

You have learned that I placed Jones’s coffee mug in the room where Smith knows that Jones usually leaves it, usually recovering it later before she departs campus. Having learned this, you have evidence that there is evidence, possessed by Smith, in support of
(JR). But, since you received this information about the evidence only in learning that it exists as a result of a hoax, it seems that you do not thereby have evidence for (JR). You have no other evidence for (JR). So (EE) appears to go wrong in this sort of case. (This example is quite similar to the Clever Car Thief case that Peter Klein uses against the transitivity of the confirmation relation in *Certainty: A Refutation of Skepticism*.15)

This sort of case is not conclusive against (EE). In the example you might in fact have evidence for (JR), as (EE) implies. It might be that you have evidence for (JR) in virtue of the fact that you know, among other things, that the room appeared to Smith as though Jones had been there today. We might be inclined to overlook this evidence that you have for (JR) as we consider the example, because we see that it would not amount to your having a reason to believe (JR). This is true because the evidence is given to you embedded in thoroughly defeating counterevidence. You learn that Jones had evidence of Smith’s presence in learning that it was part of a hoax about Jones’s presence.

There is no need for the objection against (RU) to determine the success of the objection to (EE). Whether or not (EE) can be thus sustained, the examples used against (RU) do not include putative evidence that is acquired in combination with its own defeat.

The hoax sort of example does refute a stronger principle about evidence from evidence that more literally implements the slogan “evidence from evidence is evidence”:

(EE*) If S has evidence, E*, for the proposition that evidence exists in support of X, then S has E* as evidence for X.

In the hoax example, some of your evidence for the proposition that evidence exists for (JR) is the whole basis of your knowledge that a hoax is being perpetrated to make it appear to Smith that (JR) is true. This manifestly supports to you that (JR) is not true and thus is not evidence to you for (JR).

A principle of intermediate strength survives the example, if the original (EE) does:

(EE′) If S has evidence, E′, for the proposition that evidence exists in support of X, then S has some evidence that is at least included in E′ as evidence for X.

(p.89) The relevant “included” evidence that you get in the (JR) example is the information that it appears to Jones that (JR) is true.

Appendix 2. Resisting the Reasoning

The lines of reasoning against (RU) seem most open to objection where they distinguish between the support that different peers get from certain reasons or evidence. (D) and (DE) deny that Jones gets rational support from a source that they affirm to work for Smith. It is plausible that these denials are in fact mistaken. It is plausible that in fact Jones gets support for (X1) by knowing about Smith’s intuition of (X1). If this is correct, then Jones differs rationally from Smith concerning (X1) only if the support that Jones gets for (X1) from this knowledge is weaker.
One way in which it would be weaker is if it were true that knowing about another's intuition must be less supporting than having the intuition oneself. But it is quite mysterious why that would be true no matter how well justified was the belief in the other's intuition.

The other way the support would be weaker is the way defended in the two lines of reasoning presented here against (RU). Having a defeater can weaken the support from knowledge of another's intuition. The two lines of reasoning assert that this happens because certain propositions are made rational to Jones that defeat the support for (X1) that derives from Jones's knowledge of Smith's intuition of (X1).

A defender of (RU) might question either that the purported defeater propositions really could be made rational to Jones, or that their rationality really makes them defeaters.

It would be ill advised for a defender of (RU) to deny that Jones could get any support for any proposition denying that Jones has some reason or evidence. Testimony and argument can support anything.

Better for the defender of (RU) to focus on the supported claims. The claims deny that one's knowledge of another's intuition is reason or evidence for oneself. In order to have rational support for those claims, one must grasp them. A defender of (RU) could maintain that possessing the concepts of intuition, reason, and evidence that are used in the claims brings with it certain conceptual knowledge. Possessing the concepts gives their bearer knowledge that another’s intuitions must give one who knows about them equally good reasons and evidence. The defender would infer that this conceptual information that one would have to have defeats the potential defeater of one’s support from knowledge of another’s intuition. So (p.90) the purported defeater, itself defeated, could not defeat the support for the intuited proposition from that knowledge. Thus, the support of a proposition, intuited by at least one peer, that is possessed by all of the epistemic peers, would turn out to be the same all the way around, just as (RU) implies.

The objections to (RU) need not have asserted rational support for the proposition that there is special private support from intuitions in particular. The supported proposition could have been about special private support from episodes of memory, perceptual experience, or any experiential source. So the conceptual claim by a defender of the principles would have to be about all of that. The conceptual claim would have to be that the concepts of experience, reason, and evidence invariably inform their bearers, concerning any experiential episode that might be reasonably thought to be a source of reasons or evidence for a proposition to the one who undergoes the episode, that it equally supports the proposition to all who know that it occurred.

That claim seems not to be justified to all who acquire the concepts of reason and evidence and consider how they bear on intuition, experience, or the like. The view that intuitions give special support to those who undergo them has significant credibility. It is easy to consider this view at length without having any sense that it gives rise to a conflict
with something else for which we have justification, either from the very concepts involved or otherwise. It seems clear that there is at least room for rational doubt of the claim asserting that there is no such special support. Yet this room for doubt gives the reasoning against (RU) all the foothold that it needs. Strong enough support for the privacy claim can then render it fully reasonable.

Notes:

(1) Our epistemic reasons could determine which are our epistemically rational attitudes toward a given proposition, while the reasons allow that more than one attitude is epistemically rational. Rational uniqueness principles go farther. They imply that a single doxastic attitude is rationally allowed by the reasons. (I am grateful to Tim Williamson for emphasizing this distinction in a discussion of an earlier draft of this chapter.) This difference does not affect the arguments of the chapter. They oppose a uniqueness principle by arguing that differing attitudes are uniquely rational.

(2) “Mutual knowledge” is a convenient phrase. What is actually crucial for issues about rationality is not mutual knowledge but mutual fully reasonable belief. So that is the official assumption. On the topic of epistemic peers who may have differing but shared evidence, see Richard Feldman, “Some Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement,” in Steven Hetherington (ed.), Epistemology Futures (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), section IVA, “Private Evidence,” 216–36.


(4) This shared ability requirement blocks differing attitudes from being rational simply on the basis of an epistemic “ought-implies-can” principle. Such principles are contestable, but the contest can be harmlessly sidestepped here.


(6) Richard Feldman affirms this principle in “Some Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement,” 223. (EE) is critically discussed in Appendix 1 below.

(7) I am grateful to Peter Vranas for comments on a previous draft of this chapter. Among other helpful things, the comments called for me to sharpen my explanation of the plausibility of (RE) in comparison with (RR).

(8) It may be that Smith’s awareness of her guessing not only prevents her from having rational justification for (E) itself, but also disallows the testimony as justification for the epistemic proposition that (E) is rational for her. The awareness may do this by engaging
Smith's understanding of rationality and thereby excluding a guess as a rational belief. It is doubtful that grasping rationality well enough to use the concept in thought must yield this defeat, since it is doubtful that we must see that rational belief excludes guessing in order to have the concept of rationality. But, if we must, then the present objection to (RR) would not succeed because (RR)'s antecedent conditions would not be met in such cases. (I am grateful to Jim Pryor for help here.) The failure of such objections would not salvage (RR). It remains possible for there to be mistakes about defeaters that allow rational but false self-attributions of rational belief. Such cases would still go against (RR) and not (RE).

(9) The defeating effect need not be total. It would be sufficient for the doubt to make S have overall weaker support for X. My thanks to Jim Pryor for a suggestion to this effect. I am also grateful for comments from Peter Vranas that called for more attention to this issue.

(10) In fact, even if neither Smith nor Jones gets better reason to believe (X1) from the argument about the privacy of support from intuitions, Jones would have weaker overall support for (X1) than Smith. Jones would have, and Smith would lack, the doubt about the support Jones gets from Smith's intuition of (X1). That is enough to differentiate the rational status of (X1) for them. (Thanks to Jim Pryor for a suggestion to this effect.)

(11) "Bootstrapping" is used by Jonathan Vogel to describe a certain apparently illicit way in which one might get knowledge from a reliable belief-forming process of its own reliability ("Reliabilism Leveled," Journal of Philosophy, 97 (2000), 614–16). Here the idea is that the reasons for a belief might be illicitly supplemented by its being rationally regarded as rational.

(12) The prospects of otherwise resisting the reasoning are discussed in Appendix 2 below.

(13) A complication: Smith knows that Jones tries and fails to intuit (X1). Would knowledge of this failure to intuit by an epistemic peer invariably defeat the support provided by Smith's intuiting of (X1)? No. For one thing, Smith and Jones might have good evidence that intuitions are fluky. They might have evidence that people often get intuitions after failing to have them, and that one's evidence varies accordingly. So, a peer's failure to intuit might be reasonably thought to be a psychological accident with no epistemic bearing on the support for a proposition from one's own intuition. For another thing, even if the other's failure to intuit would be a defeater in the absence of further evidence about defeat, they may in fact have further evidence about defeat. They may have received good evidence that failure to intuit by a peer does not discredit the justifying power of one's own intuitions. With this further evidence about how defeat works, any defeat of Smith's intuition of (X1) by knowledge of Jones's failure to intuit X2 would be itself defeated.

(14) Or at least it weakens the support to Jones of this knowledge. The principle about evidence that is the exact counterpart to (DD) implies this. Again, to imply a difference in
rationality, any defeat for Jones and not for Smith is sufficient. But the differential enhancement by evidence for evidence also seems to occur, and the credibility of the two epistemic effects seems to stand (or fall) together.


(16) It is not at all clear that having concepts implies having *any* knowledge about them. For one expression of doubts about this, see Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), ch. 4, “Epistemological Conceptions of Analyticity.”