Epistemic Pluralism*

J. Adam Carter and Anne-Kathrin Koch

Epistemic pluralism is a form of pluralism whose object is knowledge, a substantial component or prerequisite of knowledge, or a process of knowledge acquisition. It assumes that this target notion can be realised in not one, but many ways, and that this plurality is non-trivial.

Key words: pluralism, knowledge, justification, inquiry, relativism, epistemic values

1 Introduction

Positions under the description of 'epistemic pluralism' have enjoyed central roles in the Western intellectual tradition, though there is very little consensus over what precise features a view must have in order to warrant use of the term. This entry will first introduce two ends of a spectrum on which epistemic pluralism is usually situated: (i) **descriptive epistemic pluralism,** and (ii) **epistemic relativism;** it will then focus on two debates that have been closely associated with the moniker 'epistemic pluralism' and that illustrate how epistemological pluralism might insert itself as a challenge into processes of public deliberation: the debates concerning (iii) **epistemic permissivism**; and (iv) **epistemic value pluralism.**

J. Adam Carter
University of Glasgow e-mail: adam.carter@glasgow.ac.uk

Anne-Kathrin Koch
University of Vienna, University of Glasgow e-mail: anne-kathrin.koch@univie.ac.at

2 From empirical description to a normative position

This section will introduce the two ends of a spectrum on which epistemic pluralism can be situated. On one end of the spectrum is a description of empirical observations, on the other end of the spectrum we find positions that make substantial philosophical assumptions about reason and the evaluation of reasoning.

2.1 Descriptive Cognitive Pluralism

Epistemic pluralism often starts from the observation that not all communities accept the same epistemic principles – where epistemic principles are (roughly) general normative statements about what kinds of reasoning are permissible and impermissible. For example, the principle "Beliefs based on direct experience confirmed by the senses" is an example of an epistemic principle that most of us accept.

Descriptive cognitive pluralism is a form of epistemic pluralism that maintains that the existence of at least some radically different epistemic systems composed of radically different epistemic principles can be empirically observed (Stich 1990). To take a famous example, consider Evans-Pritchard's (1937) seminal work on the Azande tribe in North Central Africa, whose decisions about planting crops are, according to Evans-Pritchard, guided not by Western scientific methods, but by means of consulting a Poison Oracle. According to Evans-Pritchard's portrayal, it is not *merely* that the Azande hold some beliefs that diverge from that of the observer, where this divergence can be understood against a shared background of agreement about permissible ways of forming beliefs; it's that the underlying system is *itself* a radically different alternative to an alleged Western epistemic system, even if not entirely disjoint.

As many philosophers have maintained, if descriptive cognitive pluralism is true, then this raises vexing questions about how to assess definitively which system is right (see **epistemic relativism** in §3). However, it's not clear that any interesting philosophical claims simply *follow* (without additional premises) from descriptive cognitive pluralism, which is itself strictly compatible with epistemic absolutism – viz., the idea that in cases of deeply divergent epistemic systems, at least one of these systems is incorrect. Such additional premises could maintain that a plurality of approaches to inquiry is to be actively maintained (a famous example being active normative epistemic pluralism (Chang 2012)), or be concerned with the rejection of absolutism (see next section).

2.2 Epistemic Relativism

Epistemic relativism is a philosophical position that is sometimes described as a form of epistemic pluralism. Epistemic relativism is best described as the conjunction of *descriptive cognitive pluralism* along with a further pair of much more provocative philosophical claims, one negative and the other positive. The negative philosophical claim maintains that – in at least some cases where epistemic systems diverge as the descriptive epistemic relativist maintains – there is simply no *system-independent* perspective from which we can evaluate either as absolutely right. Rather – and here is the positive claim – both sides are right *relative* to their own mutually incompatible perspectives.

For example, in the case of the scientific disagreement between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine about the truth of geocentrism (viz., whether the Earth is the fixed centre of the universe), an epistemic relativist (Rorty 1979; cf., Boghossian 2006, chap. 5) could insist that Galileo is right that geocentrism is false, relative to the epistemic principles that make up the system of Western science, but Cardinal Bellarmine is right that geocentism is *true* relative to what is revealed in Scripture. And neither is right *absolutely*; both are right relative to, and only relative to, their own local system.

While descriptive cognitive pluralism can be understood as simply expressing an observation, epistemic relativism is a highly debated philosophical position that makes contested normative assumptions. It does thus by itself, without having any obvious normative consequences, epistemic relativism does obviously have normative impact.

Some epistemologists and philosophers of science have argued for epistemic relativism on the basis of considerations to do with *epistemic circularity.* As Michael Williams (2007) has argued, the key move the relativist adverts to is this: when faced with a disagreement about which epistemic principles are right, all each side can do is to attempt to justify their own principles by appealing to those very principles, or at least, by implicitly taking them for granted. But once this is appreciated, it looks as though the best either side can do is to offer a *circular justification* for the standards each is appealing to, and it's not clear (initially, at least) that any one circular justification is better, objectively speaking, than any other.

A second line of argument for epistemic relativism appeals instead to the ancient Pyrrhonian problematic (Sankey 2010; 2011). The argument here goes as follows: when one attempts to justify one's own epistemic principles, such a justification will either be (i) circular (e.g., it will appeal to those principles to justify them), (ii) it will be unacceptably arbitrary (e.g., it will appeal to some claim that is itself not justified), or (iii) it will fall pretty to infinite regress. Each of these three options is epistemically problematic in its own right; and so, the only remaining choices are skepticism and relativism; skepticism is unacceptable, so relativism must be true.

Arguments against the first strategy generally take issue with the presumption that all epistemic circularity is equally epistemically vicious; arguments against the second strategy take issue both with (i) the Pyrrhonian strategy itself as a strategy for defending relativism (Seidel 2013); and with (ii) the final step in the argument, which licenses a move to relativism over skepticism (Carter 2016, chap. 3).

3 Epistemic Pluralism in Public Controversies

Epistemic pluralism is not only of interest to epistemologists, but it is connected to challenges that arises in connection with processes of public deliberation.

3.1 Epistemic Permissivism

With respect to a particular proposition (e.g., say, that there will be no rain in London tomorrow), there are three doxastic attitudes we might take: we may *believe* it, *disbelieve* it, or we might withhold judgment.

Suppose you have a body of evidence E that bears on whether p is true. According to what is called the Uniqueness Thesis (e.g., White 2013; Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016; Matheson 2011), your body of evidence, E, justifies *at most* one of the three attitudes of belief, disbelief, and withholding. If Uniqueness is true, then if two people, A and B, both have the same evidence E about p, then if (for instance) A believes p and B withholds judgment about p, one of them has made a rational mistake.

A philosophical position that is sometimes associated with epistemic pluralism – **epistemic permissivism** (Kelly 2005; Ballantyne and Coffman 2011; Goldman 2010) – denies the Uniqueness Thesis. One important implication of epistemic permissivism in the epistemology of disagreement is that it is compatible with the idea that two parties to a disagreement can – even if they have all the same evidence – disagree *despite* neither being irrational in doing so. Proponents of the Uniqueness Thesis who don't allow for this possibility are committed to attributing comparatively more widespread irrationality when it comes to pervasive disagreements. However, proponents of epistemic permissivism must explain why a denial of Uniqueness is not epistemically arbitrary. The stance one takes on these issues may bear on questions of political polarization or disagreement between experts.

3.2 Epistemic Value Pluralism

Another issue associated with epistemic pluralism can be found in the literature on *epistemic value*. From a purely epistemic point of view, we care about the truth. Here is a question that has divided epistemologists: is truth the *fundamental* epistemic value? Put another way: are other epistemically valuable things – e.g., having evidence, having a good memory, being a careful thinker, etc. – epistemically valuable *because* of their connection to truth? Those who answer 'yes' to this question are called 'epistemic value truth monists.' Alternatively, this position is referred to as 'veritistic monism' or sometimes 'veritism'. Epistemic value monism is committed, for example, to saying that the only *epistemic* value that understanding a scientific theory has is truth-related value.

Epistemic value pluralism is the denial of epistemic value truth monism (Riggs 1995; 2008). According to epistemic value pluralism, there can be multiple fundamental epistemic values such that the value of each is not reducible to, or explainable in exclusively in terms of, the value of the other. An epistemic value pluralist may object to epistemic value monism on the grounds that we should look at methods of inquiry more like a toolbox, and that – just like different tasks demand for different tools – our processes of inquiry are guided by different aims, thus allowing for a broader range of epistemic value than truth (Stich 1990). Stich suggests that this may have interesting consequences for how we view widely spread reasoning patterns that are commonly just written off as irrational or flawed, but might in fact just reflect the best use of our limited cognitive capacities under certain circumstances (1990). Views like this could have consequences beyond philosophy, for example for the design of education programmes.

The literature on understanding in epistemology has featured a longstanding disagreement between epistemic value monists and epistemic value pluralists – especially when what's at issue is understanding (e.g., consider the conception Ptolemy's of the cosmos) that seems to both (i) constitute scientific progress, while at the same time, (ii) being largely composed of false beliefs.[2]

4 Conclusion

Epistemic pluralism covers a range of views, from an observation about plurality in reasoning to views that severely restrict our ability to brush off certain types of reasoning as invalid. These views have wide-ranging conse-

---

quences for how one might go about resolving tensions in the public sphere, from political discourse to expert disagreement, as is illustrated by the issues raised by epistemic permissivism and epistemic value pluralism.

References

Ballantyne, Nathan, and E. J. Coffman. 2011. 'Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality'.

Boghossian, Paul. 2006. *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford University Press.

Carter, J. Adam. 2016. *Metaepistemology and Relativism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chang, Hasok. 2012. *Is Water H_2O?: Evidence, Realism and Pluralism*. Dordrecht: Springer. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science ; 293.

Dogramaci, Sinan, and Sophie Horowitz. 2016. 'An Argument for Uniqueness about Evidential Support'. *Philosophical Issues* 26 (1): 130–147.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Goldman, Alvin I. 2010. 'Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement'. In *Disagreement*, edited by Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield, 187–215. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kelly, Thomas. 2005. 'The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement'. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1: 167–196.

Matheson, Jonathan. 2011. 'The Case for Rational Uniqueness'. *Logos & Episteme* 2 (3): 359–373.

Riggs, Wayne. 2008. 'The Value Turn in Epistemology'.

———. 1995.'Epistemic Pluralism'. PhD Thesis, Dissertation.

Rorty, Richard. 1979. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Sankey, Howard. 2010. 'Witchcraft, Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion'. *Erkenntnis* 72 (1): 1–16.

———. 2011. 'Epistemic Relativism and the Problem of the Criterion'. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 42 (4): 562–570.

Seidel, Markus. 2013. 'Why the Epistemic Relativist Cannot Use the Sceptic's Strategy. A Comment on Sankey'. *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A* 44 (1): 134–139.

Stich, Stephen. 1990. *The Fragmentation of Reason: Preface to a Pragmatic Theory of Cognitive Evaluation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

White, Roger. 2013. 'Evidence Cannot Be Permissive'. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, edited by Matthias Steup and John Turri, 312. Blackwell.

Williams, Michael. 2007. 'Why (Wittgensteinian) Contextualism Is Not Relativism'. *Episteme* 4 (1): 93–114.