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**Philosophy or Philosophies? Epistemology or Epistemologies?**

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What do we mean when we talk about *philosophies* or *epistemologies* in plural? Are “epistemology” and “philosophy” as coherent projects—in the singular—threatened if we recognise the global diversity of “epistemologies” and “philosophies”? Are the meanings of the terms blurred, or do they lose normative force? Then again, what do we gain by using the plural forms? Is it easier to accept “philosophies” in plural than “epistemologies” in plural? While editing this book, we realised that the answers are not clear and that we disagree: so we decided to write a dialogue.

**David:** Hi Inkeri, thank you so much for suggesting this dialogue. The global heterogeneity of knowledge systems raises complex meta-philosophical questions. Do “epistemology” and “philosophy” as coherent projects—in the singular—disappear when recognizing the global diversity of “epistemologies” and “philosophies”—in plural? Does it remain important to reflect on the nature of epistemology and philosophy in more general terms? Does aiming for generality entail a projection of contingent Western standards onto “the rest of the world”? It looks like we disagree on how to answer these questions. I'm happy to emphasize plural forms, and it seems to me that the singular creates a risk of policing the boundaries of “epistemology” and “philosophy” that is both theoretically shallow and politically problematic.

**Inkeri:** Hi David, thank you for agreeing to this dialogue. Our topic is something that has been worrying me for some time, and I'm glad to be able to discuss it here. Indeed, I think that the move from singular to plural forms creates at least as many problems as it solves. Talk about “epistemologies” and “philosophies”—in plural—has become increasingly popular. I fear this risks broadening or diluting the terms so far that they will hardly have any meaning left—especially “epistemology”—or that they will be reduced to gestures. There are understandable motivations for deconstructing both of these concepts, but there is also the risk that we are left without a clear understanding of what exactly we are claiming when we talk about philosophies and *particularly* epistemologies.

**David**: Before we turn to our disagreements, let's try to clarify our common starting point. I think we both agree that knowledge and expertise are widely distributed across the globe. Sure, professors in Oxford are experts in their domain of inquiry. But the same is true for university lecturers in Kinshasa, Indigenous elders in the Amazon, or union workers in Mumbai. Furthermore, there are issues on diversity that surpass differences in propositional knowledge about the world. Different forms of expertise come with different methodological standards and material practices of producing and validating knowledge: they are also embedded in different ontologies and metaphysical assumptions about how the world works. In this sense, there are many epistemologies and philosophies. Hence the title of our book—*Global Epistemologies and Philosophies of Science*.

**Inkeri**: You are right, expertise does indeed take many forms and can be found all around the globe, and the different forms of expertise come with different epistemic strategies, ontological views, and metaphysical assumptions—we would hardly be collaborating if we disagreed on this. However, I'm not convinced that it follows that we should talk about “philosophies” or “epistemologies” in plural. As I said, the plural form that I'm really apprehensive about is “epistemologies.” The singular form “epistemology” does not disappear when we use the plural one. What is it of which we have many? Do we in fact have many of them? I worry that by using the plural form in today’s very popular, undefined way, we are evading these questions.

**David**: To be honest, I’ve been quite happy to evade these questions. It seems to me that the concepts of “epistemology” and “philosophy” are a bit like the concept of “game.” Sure, there are family resemblances between different “games,” but they have no hidden essence to be discovered by philosophers (Wittgenstein, 1953). There is a lot to understand about “games” in plural, but a philosophical debate about the nature of “game” in singular would be at best boring and at worst deeply confusing. So, why should we be concerned? Why not learn from the fascinating plurality of epistemologies and philosophies without worrying about their nature in singular?

**Inkeri**: I see, here our views differ somewhat. With regards to philosophy, I have no strong need to argue for the singular form. It is clear that Taoist philosophy is something quite different from philosophical logic (but for Buddhist logic, see Tanaka, chapter 24), yet both can be called philosophies—like Go and tag are both games. That is why I’m not so worried about “philosophies” in plural; though I do not see a particular need for the plural form, as we can easily say that Taoist philosophy and philosophical logic are both “philosophy.” But I’m not sure that the same applies to “epistemology.”

**David**: I’ve been more worried about the singular in “philosophy” than in “epistemology”. So maybe our dialogue will lead to the conclusion that the situation is different. In the case of “philosophy,” I think there is clear evidence that the singular has led not only to theoretically shallow but also politically deeply problematic boundary disputes. The recent history of African philosophy is a striking example, as African philosophers have been under constant pressure to prove that their intellectual traditions count as “proper philosophy.” While a volume on French or German philosophy can immediately start with substantive philosophical issues, volumes on African philosophy have often been started with lengthy discussions on the very existence of African philosophy: from the status of African Indigenous knowledge systems to the legitimacy of calling an African sage a philosopher (see Mosima, 2016 for an excellent overview). There is a clear hierarchy built into this setup: While the status of European thought as philosophy is taken for granted, the status of African thought as philosophy has to be *proven*. Second, this often results in shallow boundary disputes about definitions of the term “philosophy.” Emphasizing philosophies in plural helps to shift attention to the many relevant contributions of African philosophers on a wide range of topics such as environmental philosophy (Chimakonam, 2017; Chimakonam & Uchenna Ogbonnaya, chapter 17) or political theory (Ramose, 1999). But even if all of this is true in the case of “philosophy,” you suggest that the situation may be different in the case of “epistemology”?

**Inkeri**: Yes, I think so. I’m not sure whether the plural form really helps in the boundary disputes about philosophy, as it can easily become just another bone of contention in them, but at least it’s not harmful. In the case of epistemology, I get the uncomfortable feeling that we are turning a useful philosophical notion into an “elevator word.” Hacking (1999, p. 22–23) describes elevator words as words we use to move the discussion to a “higher” level when discussing our thoughts about the world, and notes that their meanings are “remarkably free-floating.” I fear the plural form, or the way in which it is currently used, is turning “epistemology” into a word that mainly indicates the importance of something. Sometimes it seems to be used almost as an honorary title; which I find unfortunate.

**David**: Maybe we can tease out this worry a bit more? I have been using the notion of epistemology quite broadly to refer to reflective epistemic practices. People around the world produce knowledge *and* reflect on the ways they produce knowledge. In this sense, epistemologies in plural seems rather innocent a strategy for acknowledging there is not a singular essence of epistemology, but many different intellectual endeavours that are connected through family resemblances.

Inkeri: We clearly see this differently. I’m certainly not looking for the hidden essence of epistemology, but for me “epistemology” is a word that, though used in different philosophical traditions, tends to have a fairly clear meaning—something along the lines of "theory of knowledge," or more often “theorising about knowledge.” It is a much younger term than “philosophy,” coined as recently as in the 19th century; though it was immediately applied to describe other, much earlier, theorising (Woleński 2004). The plural form has rarely been used; and when used, it has been synonymous with “theories of knowledge” or “epistemological theories”: that is, different and often competing stances in debates about knowledge, belief, epistemic justification, and other related notions. Meanwhile, using it in the undefined way we are talking about here, the one that embraces the plural form, is quite new. And now, “epistemologies” does not appear to simply mean “epistemological theories.” I fear that if we have, firstly, an established way to use the term where the plural form is quite unnecessary; and secondly, discussions about epistemologies in plural, without clarity about what exactly is meant, this creates confusion. I think very often much ambiguity could be avoided by talking about “knowledge systems,” instead of epistemologies. But it’s quite clear that many would argue against such a clarificatory move.

David: You’re right that “epistemology” has been historically used mostly in singular. However, talk about “epistemologies” in plural still seems like an attractive option for challenging some of the more problematic aspects of this history. Mainstream epistemology has been—and often continues to be—rather limited by a universalism (implicit or explicit) that remains ignorant towards the global diversity of epistemic practices; this is expressed through the singular notion of epistemology. Moving from singular to plural seems like a useful rhetorical move in addressing these shortcomings of mainstream epistemology as it has become institutionalized in Europe and North America.

**Inkeri**: I see what you mean, but I'm not convinced that the move is useful. You see, I also had some discussions in mind when suggesting this dialogue: ones with students who want to embrace, for instance, the idea of Indigenous epistemologies, and who end up believing this entails accepting some fairly strong form of epistemic relativism. Unfortunately, they remain unable to defend such a view in a way that would be compatible with their critical, political and epistemic, aspirations. I think we are doing a disservice to those students if we do not try to clarify the notion, or notions, of epistemology we use. And currently, we rarely do. For instance, compare the current *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on *Epistemology* (Setup and Neta, 2020) with the article on *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science* (Anderson, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the plural form is not used in the first one—not even when discussing feminist epistemology. And it is used in the second one—without really clarifying what is meant by it. Could the latter article be written without using the plural form? Epistemologists are certainly capable of writing a whole book about epistemic pluralism without ever using the plural form “epistemologies” (Coliva & Pedersen, 2017). Do pluralist epistemologists who argue that there are several ways of being epistemically-justified, or rational, have different “epistemologies” than the epistemologists who defend monist views? If yes, why do they not claim that they do, or why do they not use the plural form? And if they do not have different epistemologies— if one wants to argue that these epistemologists are all academic philosophers trained in a way that ensures that their theories are all “Western epistemology”—then what precisely is the qualitative aspect about the differences here? The epistemological views defended by academic epistemologists differ from each other; and the epistemological views held in some Indigenous knowledge system differ from the views of many academic epistemologists. Why would the Indigenous views constitute a separate epistemology—thus necessitating the use of the plural form—if the different epistemologists’ views do not? I’m not asking these questions only because of some potential misunderstandings between feminist or postcolonial thinkers and more traditional epistemologists. Rather, I suspect that there might be several notions of epistemology in use here.

**David**: I don’t doubt that one can write a wonderful and even pluralist book about knowledge without ever using the plural form. I’m also pretty sure that one could write an equally wonderful book with the plural forms. It is certainly possible to use different framings that come with different opportunities and risks. In the case of the plural form, I can certainly get on board with the need to clarify talk about epistemologies and I agree that the term is often used as a fashionable buzzword without a clear meaning, especially in critical theory and postcolonial humanities. That being said, I see strong reasons to preserve the plural form, as it reflects a core insight from debates about decolonization (Smith ,1999; Harding, chapter 3). While it is trivial to say that people around the world have first-order knowledge about the world, concepts such as “epistemology” (or “philosophy,”  
 “methodology,” “research,” “science,” etc.) have often been used as if only Western actors are capable of higher-order reflexivity. Prioritizing epistemologies in plural is a useful rhetorical move to remind ourselves of the many existing forms of reflexive reasoning. This does not mean that “epistemologies” has to become a meaningless term that becomes indistinguishable from “knowledge systems.” On the contrary, it seems to me that the decolonial challenge actually requires a distinction between a first-order plurality of knowledge about the world (which is trivial) and a higher-order plurality of reflexive reasoning-about-knowledge and knowledge-production (which is often denied to actors in the Global South). Talk about epistemologies in plural can actually build on this distinction and thereby emphasize what Santos (2015) has influentially named “Epistemologies of the South,” which remain widely marginalized in philosophical and scientific debates.

**Inkeri:** But do we really need to talk about epistemologies in plural to do that? Would it not be sufficient to say that there are many different epistemological stances or views, often critical of each other? And that globally some forms of reflexive reasoning on epistemological issues have wrongly been disregarded?

**David:** You’re right, we probably don’t *need* the plural form to make this argument. But we probably don’t *need* the singular form, either. Whether we foreground “epistemology” or “epistemologies” seems to be a strategic choice of emphasis. Furthermore, the marginalization of epistemological stances in the Global South seems to provide a strong strategic reason to put emphasis on plurality in order to overcome deeply entrenched epistemic injustices (Rolin and Koskinen, chapter 9). I’m still not sure that I understand the reasons for emphasizing the singular instead.

**Inkeri**: In my view, the plural form quite unnecessarily calls into question the normative aspect of the notion of epistemology—particularly if the notion is not clearly defined. Let me give some examples to clarify why I think so. You mentioned Boaventura de Sousa Santos. He does not really define “epistemology,” but he describes epistemologies of the South as “a set of inquiries into the construction and validation of knowledge born in struggle, of ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systematic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Santos, 2015, p. x). Now, “ways of knowing” could be interpreted in many ways, but Santos clearly renounces any strongly relativistic interpretations precisely to keep these “epistemologies” normative: “If all the different kinds of knowledge are equally valid as knowledge, every project of social transformation is equally valid or, likewise, equally invalid” (Santos, 2015, p. 190). Would he need to emphasise this if he did not use the plural form?

**David**: Hm, maybe you’re right that talk about epistemologies requires some additional effort in clarifying that pluralism is not the same as “anything goes” relativism (Mncube, chapter 20). But this seems like a relatively small price to pay compared to the risk of epistemic marginalization through the rejection of plural forms and exclusive talk about epistemology, in singular.

**Inkeri**: I think the problem with “epistemologies” reaches further than the need to distinguish pluralism and relativism. Let me give you another example. Harding (1987, p. 2), who uses the plural form, has suggested a distinction between method, methodology, and epistemology. She defines methodology as “a theory and analysis of how research should proceed,” and differentiates it from epistemology, which deals with “an adequate theory of knowledge or justificatory strategy.” In other words, the task of epistemology is to justify the chosen methodology. But this can be understood in two ways. It is obvious that in different situations people use different justificatory strategies—if this is all that is meant by “epistemologies,” the meaning of the plural form is quite trivial. Harding (1987, p. 3) even refers to a sociological, explicitly non-normative notion of “epistemologies” as “strategies of justifying beliefs.” But this interpretation seems to miss something quite important: epistemology aims at developing an *adequate* theory of knowledge. In other words, epistemology is a clearly normative notion. With this interpretation, the meaning of the plural form becomes less clear. We can obviously use one theory of knowledge to justify different methodologies in different contexts. And we can have and do have different epistemological views, resulting in debates about methodological choices. But what does it mean to say that we have different epistemologies? If we do, and if all existing strategies for justifying beliefs constitute epistemologies, how precisely is it possible for us to use one in order to meaningfully criticise another? Often when reading a text about “epistemologies” that uses an unspecified notion of epistemology, I cannot figure out how I should interpret it. So, I find it more than understandable that students end up with strong views they are unable to defend.

**David**: Let me see whether I correctly understand this triad of method, methodology, and epistemology. Consider an Indigenous community collaborating with academic ecologists on the conservation of an endangered species. Clearly, there will be a plurality of methods and methodologies. The ecologists may assess the size of the endangered population through a method of semi-random and stratified sampling that balances methodological concerns about representativeness of the sample, and feasibility of field methods. The Indigenous community may assess the size of the population through sightings during hunting that is methodologically justified through experiential expertise about the environment and intergenerational stories about the local habitat of the species. Why would this plurality stop at the epistemological level? For example, the Indigenous community may justify its methodological standards through its personal bond and spiritual connections with the endangered species that will look very different from an epistemological justification of sampling methodologies in academic population surveys. Why grant plurality at the level of method and methodology, but not epistemology?

**Inkeri**: Perhaps plurality can be granted also at the level of epistemology, but if one wants to do so, I would really like to understand what is meant, as it is by no means a clear claim. Are we just describing different justificatory strategies? Or are the different epistemologies different, possibly competing epistemological theories, that is, *theories* of knowledge? Or are we making a much stronger claim and saying that here we have an example of different *theorisings* about knowledge? Are we claiming that one epistemology can and should be used to criticise other epistemologies? Or that they are in some sense incommensurable? It would in fact be interesting to see some sophisticated form of epistemic relativism defended here, particularly one that would allow for criticism across the lines of the different epistemologies (Risjord, 1998; Kusch, 2021). But this must not be done by leaving “epistemology” undefined; or by defining it in a way that conflates a sociological, or even anthropological, non-normative notion with a normative one, and then just claiming that there are many epistemologies. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that in most academic philosophical traditions “epistemology” has a fairly clear meaning: theory of knowledge, or rather, theorising about knowledge. Roughly put, epistemology is the area of philosophical thought where we study knowledge from a normative viewpoint. This makes epistemology at the core a normative project. And it is clear that most people who today use the plural form wish to retain this normativity, as the different “epistemologies” are typically used for criticism. I find it unsatisfactory that the tension between a sociological, non-normative notion and the philosophical, normative notion is so often left unexamined.

**David**: Indeed, I prefer to start with a more sociological perspective on different epistemologies rather than epistemology as the “study of knowledge from a normative viewpoint.” I think there is a risk of positioning philosophers as “final authorities” who evaluate the perspectives of others through their normative frameworks, while neglecting the contingency of their own perspective. The sociological starting point can help to create a more equal dialogue between different epistemologies rather than approaching epistemology as a normative project of evaluating and validating epistemological perspectives around the world. I don’t think that normativity disappears in such a dialogue. Instead, talk about epistemologies in plural helps to recognize that normative authority is also globally distributed.

**Inkeri**: I see. And to me the unspecified plural form seems slippery in a way that doesn’t easily allow for effective critical debate. I think we might be engaged in somewhat different discussions here. I work mostly with philosophy of the humanities and the social sciences, and with fields like Indigenous studies, gender studies, and other forms of activist research, where plurality is taken for granted, sometimes in an unreflective way. Perhaps your viewpoint regarding these issues is simply quite different?

**David**: You are right, our disagreements probably reflect that we’re approaching the topic through different examples and contexts. I can understand your concerns about normativity and relativism in a context where plurality is widely taken for granted but remains vague and elusive. However, most communities in the Global South face very different realities in which plurality is clearly not taken for granted. From perspectives of the Global South, I don’t think that a loss of normativity or epistemological relativism are the core issues compared to the continuing marginalization of local epistemic traditions. When it comes to addressing socio-environmental issues such as biodiversity conservation, food security, poverty reduction or public health, epistemic inequity continues to be rampant between stakeholders. Recognizing heterogenous epistemological traditions is crucial in these contexts and I don’t think that it leads to a loss of normativity.

**Inkeri**: I can see that where you work, the marginalization of local epistemic traditions is a much more pressing problem than the kind of philosophical nit-picking I’m engaged in. But since one of the central questions we started from when planning this book was, how to decolonize philosophy of science without breaking epistemology apart, I feel I must insist on the nit-picking. After all, we could, as you just did, talk about “epistemological traditions” instead of “epistemologies.” If I understand you correctly, you feel that using the plural “epistemologies” is a strategically efficient move: in a way it turns the tables. Instead of trying to justify the plural, you demand a justification for the use of the singular. And obviously you are in a better position than I am to estimate whether that is a good strategy. However, such strategic moves can backfire. For instance, Spivak who suggested interpreting identity categories “strategically” in an essentialist manner, later noted that the results were not what she had hoped for: her notion “just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that” (Danius and Jonsson, 1993, p. 35). Do you not see a risk of something similar happening with “epistemologies” in plural? Is the strategic gain really so significant that it justifies turning the notion into a vacuous elevator word?

**David:** Yes, it is a strategic choice, but it does not reduce to strategy. I also very much think that there are substantive ways of talking about epistemologies in plural that highlight heterogenous ways of reasoning about methods and methodologies on a global scale. There would be a difference with anti-essentialist who adopt a “strategic essentialism” merely for political goals. The choice to highlight the plural form is strategic, but I’d say that the choice to highlight something else through the singular form is also strategic. If I understand you correctly, your main reason for highlighting the singular form is the desire “not to break epistemology apart” and to avoid slippery slopes towards epistemological relativism. Maybe we are at a point where we can agree that there is a trade-off between these concerns but still disagree on the weight of these different considerations. Indeed, I often feel that “breaking epistemology apart” can be liberating and I’m just not that worried about epistemic relativism. But I guess a full evaluation of the background concerns may be beyond what we can achieve in this dialogue?

**Inkeri**: Well, I would welcome careful, reflective analysis of any substantive ways of talking about epistemologies in plural. That would lessen my worries, as my main concern doesn’t have so much to do with any well-defined, explicit form of relativism. Rather, I dislike the ambiguity with regard to normativity, as in my view it is rendering a fine philosophical notion toothless and useless. When I say that I don’t want to break epistemology apart, I mean that I would like to at least defend the idea that we have a field—one that I would like to call “epistemology”—where we can meaningfully criticise each other and disagree. Of course, it is possible to criticise this idea too, and I'm fairly sure that not every author in this volume agrees with this want of mine.

**David**: I think we’re reaching a point where we need to acknowledge that there is no innocent terminology. When it comes to very general and abstract terms such as “epistemology” and “philosophy” there will always be plenty of room for misunderstanding and misuse. Attempts to apply these terms in heterogeneous global contexts further amplifies these risks. Shifting to plural forms can mitigate some concerns about hierarchical applications of “epistemology” and “philosophy,” but also creates space for novel misunderstandings. There are probably no elegant solutions and I don’t think we’ll reach complete agreement. However, our conversation has helped me to understand the issues at stake in making these terminological decisions.

**Inkeri:** With regards to “philosophies” our views do not seem to differ that much. Our disagreement there quickly shrunk to me being slightly more sceptical about the usefulness of the plural form; but we clearly do weigh the risks and benefits differently when talking about “epistemologies.” However, I do not really expect to convince terribly many readers of the importance of the worries I have expressed. Most likely those who tended to agree with you when starting to read this dialogue still do so, and vice versa. Hopefully, however, this might inspire someone to clarify more carefully what they mean when they talk about epistemologies in plural. I know that I have gained from our conversation a better understanding of several ways in which this could be done.

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