

# Epistemic Uniqueness and the Practical Relevance of Epistemic Practices

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**Abstract** By taking the practical relevance of coordinated epistemic standards into account, Dogramaci and Horowitz (*Philosophical Issues*, 26(1), 130–147, 2016) as well as Greco and Hedden (*The Journal of Philosophy*, 113(8), 365–395, 2016) offer a new perspective on epistemic permissiveness. However, in its current state, their argument appears to be inconclusive. I will offer two reasons why this argument does not support interpersonal uniqueness *in general*. First, such an argument leaves open the possibility that distinct closed societies come to incompatible epistemic standards. Second, some epistemic practices like the promotion of methodological heterogeneity in epistemic communities could be best explained by epistemic permissiveness.

**Keywords** Rationality · Uniqueness · Epistemic peer · Epistemic labour

Interpersonal epistemic permissiveness (or permissivism) states that it is possible, for *two or more* epistemically rational agents who share all relevant evidence and are equally competent in interpreting that evidence, to come to incompatible conclusions on whether P. In other words, the issue is whether rational epistemic peers concerning P can hold incompatible attitudes towards P. Interpersonal epistemic uniqueness is the negation of interpersonal epistemic permissiveness.

According to Greco and Hedden (2016) and Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016), interpersonal uniqueness can be inferred from the practical significance of our epistemic practices. According to such a line of reasoning, the fact that one's epistemic practices matter to another and that we criticize each other with respect to our epistemic rationality is best explained by epistemic uniqueness. Let's call this the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices (or the "Epistemic Practices Argument" for short). In this paper, my goal is to show that this argument does not provide support in favour of uniqueness. First, I will argue that such an argument leaves open the

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possibility that distinct closed societies come to accept incompatible epistemic standards, which is incompatible with uniqueness. Second, I will argue that a different datum – the promotion of heterogeneity and diversity in epistemic communities – could be best explained by epistemic permissiveness. I will explain why defenders of the Epistemic Practices Argument then face a dilemma: either there is an explanatory gap in the Epistemic Practices Argument or permissiveness can be supported by our epistemic practices.

## 1 The Argument from the Practical Relevance of Epistemic Practices

Interpersonal epistemic uniqueness (henceforth “uniqueness”) states that, if *two or more* epistemically rational agents share all relevant evidence relative to P and are equally competent in interpreting that evidence, then they cannot come to incompatible conclusions on whether P. While the debate is usually focused on arbitrariness,<sup>1</sup> truth-conduciveness<sup>2</sup> or the subjective mediation of evidential sets,<sup>3</sup> Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016) as well as Greco and Hedden (2016) bring a new perspective to the matter by considering the practical significance of coordinating our epistemic standards. In other words, instead of focusing exclusively on the nature of epistemic norms, they take the practical dimension of our epistemic practices as a starting point for supporting uniqueness.

Dogramaci and Horowitz begin by presenting a fairly common datum, namely that “our social practice of epistemically evaluating one another’s beliefs has value” (Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016, 131). Call this the “initial datum”. So far, the initial datum is ambiguous: the notions of social practices, evaluations and value are unclear. Let’s see how Dogramaci and Horowitz understand these notions.

First, social practices refer to interpersonal practices among the members of an epistemic community. Dogramaci and Horowitz think that as members of an epistemic community, we regularly argue and discuss with each other because it is valuable, as members of a group, to evaluate each other’s doxastic attitudes (ibid., 132).

Now, the epistemic evaluations Dogramaci and Horowitz are interested in are promoting rational beliefs and discouraging (or criticizing) irrational beliefs (ibid., 131). Judging that a belief is irrational typically means that such a belief wasn’t formed

<sup>1</sup> White (2005, 2014) argued that, in putative epistemically permissive situations, agents would be allowed to arbitrarily change their attitudes over time, which conflicts with basic assumptions concerning rationality. This leads White to conclude that permissive situations are implausible. *Contra* White, Sharadin (2015) and Schoenfield (2014) argued that there are diachronic norms prohibiting an agent from changing his or her attitudes without new evidence, even if distinct incompatible attitudes are initially permitted.

<sup>2</sup> White (2005, 2014), argued that epistemic standards ought to be truth-conducive, which would support uniqueness. Raleigh (2015), Kopec (2015) and Dahlback (forthcoming) defended the claim that, when P’s truth is mind-dependent, distinct incompatible attitudes can be truth-conducive. In such cases, the argument from truth-conduciveness in favour of uniqueness appears inconclusive. Relatedly, Meacham (2014) suggested that an epistemic requirement like truth-conduciveness can conflict with the calibration perspective in Bayesian epistemology.

<sup>3</sup> In defending uniqueness, Matheson (2011) seems to assume that the balance of epistemic reasons is objective or identical for everyone. Meacham (2014) and Schoenfield (2014) reject this assumption. They suggest that an agent’s evidence is evaluated in accordance with a set of epistemic standards such as priors, updating rules or attitudes towards epistemic risks, and that these standards may vary from one agent to another. In accordance with Meacham and Schoenfield, Titelbaum and Kopec (m.s.; forthcoming) argue that epistemically rational agents can entertain distinct incompatible standards of reasoning.

in accordance with the requirements of rationality. In view of the foregoing, Dogramaci and Horowitz think that, in promoting and criticizing each other's attitudes, we are in fact evaluating the *rules* licensing certain beliefs relative to a body of evidence (ibid.). We can understand these rules as *epistemic standards*. For example, suppose that an agent believes P every time he or she has a rational credence of more than 0.95 in P. This means that he or she follows an epistemic standard such as "if I judge that P's probability is greater than 0.95, then I should believe P." If a community judges that such an epistemic standard is incorrect, they could criticize the agent for believing P, but what they are ultimately criticizing is the epistemic standard underlying the belief that P.

It should be noted that, according to Dogramaci and Horowitz, there is a strong connection<sup>4</sup> between reliability and rational epistemic standards (ibid., 135). A belief-formation process is reliable when following such a process makes it more likely that agents will end up with true beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Since Dogramaci and Horowitz think that there is a strong connection between rational epistemic standards and reliable processes, they conclude that promoting rational epistemic standards "make it more likely that one another's beliefs will be true" (ibid., 135).

The last notion to clarify is the value associated with such epistemic practices. Dogramaci and Horowitz think that there is a *practical purpose* to promoting rational epistemic standards (ibid., 136). Reliable testimony has practical value, since epistemic communities are interested in getting significant truths (or truths about matters of interest).<sup>6</sup> An efficient way of getting these significant truths is to divide the epistemic labour of collecting evidence, reasoning and drawing conclusions among members of an epistemic community (ibid., 136–7). For example, if I am rational to conclude that P and you are rational to conclude that P implies Q, we could share our respective conclusions to reach a new rational conclusion, namely Q. In view of the foregoing, if members of an epistemic community end up with reliable epistemic standards, they are more likely to reach conclusions that others can trust, which serves the group's practical aim of getting significant truths.

We can now disambiguate the initial datum, which stated that "our social practice of epistemically evaluating one another's beliefs has value" (ibid., 131). With a clearer picture of the notions of social practices, evaluations and value, we can now reformulate the datum in the following way:

**Datum.** In an epistemic community, promoting and criticizing each other's attitudes with respect to their epistemic rationality makes it more likely that agents collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions others can trust.

<sup>4</sup> Dogramaci and Horowitz argue that, while there is a strong connection between rational epistemic standards and reliable processes, reliability is not a sufficient condition for epistemic rationality (Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016, 135). In such a context, we are left with two explanations of the connection between the two. Either reliability is a *necessary* condition for rationality or there is a *correlation* between reliability and rationality.

<sup>5</sup> See Goldman (1986) on reliabilism.

<sup>6</sup> While Dogramaci and Horowitz do not give a clear definition of significant truths, it seems that they are referring to the distinction between pointless truths and useful truths in epistemology. A significant truth could simply be a useful truth. For example, knowing if smoking increases the risk of heart disease can be useful from a practical point of view, while knowing the number of blades of grass in Central Park appears to have no practical purpose. See Grimm (2009) and Côté-Bouchard (2015, 2016) on this distinction.

The question is now whether uniqueness best explains such a datum. If members of epistemic communities reason from a *unique* set of rational epistemic standards, they can treat each other as epistemic surrogates, namely as agents with sufficiently similar modes of reasoning. In view of the goal of getting significant truths, having epistemic surrogates is valuable, since it allows agents to efficiently “divide the labor of *collecting evidence* and the labor of *reasoning*.” (ibid., 138). In other words, since epistemic surrogates have sufficiently similar reliable modes of reasoning, they can provide reliable information to each other through testimony.

However, Dogramaci and Horowitz argue that this is not the case with permissive epistemic standards. If agents reason from a *permissive set* of epistemic standards, they will not be able to treat each other as epistemic surrogates. Indeed, in such a case, rational agents could have distinct incompatible epistemic standards, and they would constantly be required to review each other’s standards to reach a conclusion. Consequently, Dogramaci and Horowitz conclude that uniqueness best explains their datum:

So our explanation works, given uniqueness. And in fact, it *requires* uniqueness. If permissivism is true, then rational reasoners need not conform. That is, there are cases where rational reasoners use alternative belief-forming rules, rules that yield distinct views given the same evidence. In this case, the enforcement of rational rules of reasoning does not make it safe to trust the testimony of rational reasoners, since there is now a risk that a rational reasoner will not be reliable. (ibid., 139)

Greco and Hedden (2016, sec. 1) also argue that the epistemic practices of treating each other as epistemic surrogates and dividing the epistemic labour among ourselves are best explained by uniqueness. According to them, one reason why epistemic evaluations are useful to a community is that identifying rational informants helps its members to reach new rational conclusions. Specifically, identifying rational informants helps us identify to whom we should *defer*. So in claiming that “Mary’s conclusion is rational”, we indicate to members of our epistemic community that we should accept her conclusion. Greco and Hedden then argue that permissivists cannot fully explain such an epistemic practice. Indeed, suppose (i) that it is rational for Mary to conclude P and that it is rational for John to conclude  $\sim$ P and (ii) that John and Mary are epistemic peers. Now, imagine that, except for John’s and Mary’s testimonies, you have no information on whether P. Since Mary and John are rational, you should defer to both of them. But since they reached inconsistent conclusions, deferring to both of them would lead you to an inconsistent combination of attitudes, which is irrational. So, presumably, it is required to defer to *one of them*. However, this means that it is impossible to treat John and Mary as epistemic surrogates. In other words, if permissiveness is true, you must treat one of them as an unreliable informant. Greco and Hedden then conclude that uniqueness best explains epistemic practices such as deference to epistemic surrogates.

In summary, the Epistemic Practices Argument seems to support uniqueness, in the following way:

- (1) In an epistemic community, promoting and criticizing each other’s attitudes with respect to their epistemic rationality makes it more likely that agents collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions others can trust;

- (2) The most efficient way to collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions is for agents to treat each other as epistemic surrogates and to divide the epistemic labour among themselves;
- (3) Agents' treatment of each other as epistemic surrogates and the division of the epistemic labour among themselves is best explained by uniqueness;
- (C) By the principle of inference to the best explanation, it follows that uniqueness is true.

In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that such an argument is implausible. Specifically, such an argument seems to apply only to a limited set of situations and epistemic practices. I will offer two reasons for the claim that the practical relevance of promoting epistemic rationality does not seem to support interpersonal uniqueness *in general*. First, such an argument leaves open the possibility that distinct closed societies come to incompatible epistemic standards. But this is incompatible with uniqueness. Second, a different datum – the promotion of heterogeneity and diversity in epistemic communities – could be best explained by epistemic permissiveness.

## 2 Interpersonal Epistemic Permissiveness and Closed Societies

My first objection is that the Epistemic Practices Argument leaves open the possibility that distinct epistemic communities come to incompatible epistemic standards. First, it should be noted that the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices focuses on members of the same epistemic community, as we can see with the first premise of the argument:

- (1) *In an epistemic community*, promoting and criticizing each other's attitudes with respect to their epistemic rationality makes it more likely that agents collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions others can trust.

However, the Epistemic Practices Argument is supposed to support uniqueness *in general*, not just within an epistemic community. Thus if uniqueness is true, epistemically rational members of different epistemic communities should come to accept the same epistemic standards. But it is hard to see why, for example, epistemically rational communities which do not interact should end up with the same epistemic standards. Specifically, if some communities never interact with ours, what is the practical advantage of having the same epistemic standards as them? Here is an analogy with what I have in mind. Consider road regulations at the beginning of the twentieth century, before mass tourism or travelling. Road regulations have been uniquely determined in each country, and the most plausible explanation of such a fact is that there is value in coordinating with each other. To put it differently, each country saw fit to establish road regulations because there is value in coordinating with others. Nevertheless, distinct incompatible ways to drive have been adopted across countries (for example, in some countries one ought to drive on the left, while in other countries one ought to drive on the right). Plausibly, one reason why countries did not end up adopting universal road regulations is that there wasn't an overall gain in doing so. If

the above reasoning is justified in the practical realm, why should the conclusion be different when it comes to epistemic norms?

In the remainder of this section, I will mostly focus on closed societies, since they are an idealization of what I have in mind.<sup>7</sup> By closed societies, I mean societies that have no interaction whatsoever with outsiders. Such a lack of interaction can be causal or historical. To make my point clearer, let's take a look at the following case:

**Closed Societies.** We are in a parallel universe, in 1960. As in our universe, there are two great political communities: call them East\* and West\*. The only possible point of contact there ever was between East\* and West\* was Austria\*. However, Austria\* was recently destroyed by an atomic bomb, and so there is no forum allowing interaction between these communities. Neither East\* nor West\* is interested in having a new zone of interaction. Therefore, East\* and West\* will not take advantage of “inter-society” epistemic labour division.

The main feature of Closed Societies is simple: East\* and West\* have no interaction. If they were in contact, it seems clear that East\* and West\* could end up having the same epistemic standards, since members of these societies would have a common interest in epistemic labour division. However, in Closed Societies, this condition is not satisfied. Surely, there could be a unique set of rational epistemic standards in East\*, as well as a unique set of rational epistemic standards in West\*. But the Epistemic Practices Argument does not tell us whether these standards will necessarily be identical.<sup>8</sup> Since the argument is restricted to cases where epistemic practices matter to members of a group, it does not apply to cases where epistemic practices do not matter from one group to another. There is no *practical* reason why both societies should conform to the same practices, since these societies do not interact and therefore cannot divide epistemic labour.

Also, cases like Closed Societies could support *unacknowledged* permissive situations, (Kopeck and Titelbaum 2016, 191–92). Acknowledged permissive cases are situations where epistemic peers are aware that they have reached incompatible conclusions towards P. By way of contrast, unacknowledged permissive cases are situations where epistemic peers are unaware of such a fact. Cohen (2013), for instance, has suggested that epistemically permissive situations are possible as long as epistemic peers are *unaware* that they have reached incompatible attitudes towards P. Cases like Closed Societies are interesting because epistemic peers from different communities

<sup>7</sup> A word on methodology. Dogramaci and Horowitz stress that they are interested in our actual epistemic practices (Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016, 132). So in elaborating an argument based on a counterfactual world, I might not connect with their paper, since they do not claim that their argument works in every possible world. However, I am very confident that numerous actual communities are a close approximation to what I have in mind with Closed Societies. At least historically, it is perfectly possible that some communities did not interact with each other.

<sup>8</sup> Dogramaci and Horowitz addressed similar cases, where “a community of like-minded friends” (Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016, 140) shares some epistemic rules, while judging that other agents outside the group are equally rational. So while members of that community adhere to a specific set of norms, they recognize that alternative norms are equally rational. But a case like Closed Societies appears to be different. In the situation described by Dogramaci and Horowitz, agents explicitly recognize distinct sets of norms as equally rational. What I have in mind are cases where two closed societies come to hold incompatible standards, and there is no need for a citizen of East\* to know what's going on in West\*.

could reach distinct incompatible conclusions without being aware of such a fact. Since acknowledged permissive cases present more difficulties for defenders of permissiveness, addressing cases like Closed Societies puts my argument on a surer footing.

To get a better grasp of the argument, let's take the specific case of epistemic standards. Several authors recently suggested that epistemic standards are permissive (Meacham 2014; Schoenfield 2014). If such a type of permissiveness obtains, then numerous incompatible standards for evaluating one's evidence (such as prior credence functions, updating rules, standards of inference, sufficiency thresholds, etc.) are rationally permitted. Yet if the Epistemic Practices Argument is conclusive, it should rule out permissiveness for epistemic standards.<sup>9</sup> However, as we will now see, the Epistemic Practices Argument does not rule out permissiveness for epistemic standards in cases of distinct epistemic communities. For the sake of simplicity, let's focus on the following epistemic standards:

**Sufficient Threshold.** If an agent is rational in having a sufficiently high (even if imperfect) degree of confidence  $X$  in  $P$ , he or she should believe  $P$ .

**Possibility of Error.** If an agent has salient evidence that  $P$  could be false, he or she should not believe  $P$ .

Sufficient Threshold and Possibility of Error do not always recommend the same attitudes. For example, if one knows that the probability that one's lottery ticket is a loser is *greater than  $X$* , but also has *salient* evidence that the ticket *could win*, then Sufficient Threshold recommends believing that the ticket is a loser and Possibility of Error recommends not believing that the ticket is a loser.

Imagine that people from West\* accept Sufficient Threshold and believe that a 0.95 rational degree of confidence in  $P$  is sufficient for rationally concluding that  $P$ . Naturally, such an epistemic standard affects which assertions are promoted and criticized in West\*. For example, when people from West\* buy tickets from the Pick-6 lottery, they are not criticized when they claim that their tickets are losers, since the probability that a ticket from Pick-6 is a loser is greater than 0.95. Now, suppose that people from East\* accept Possibility of Error. They believe that, especially in lottery cases where an agent has salient evidence that each ticket can be a winner, it is not rational to believe that your ticket is a loser, since there is always a chance that your belief might be false. So when people from East\* buy tickets from the Gosлото 6/45 lottery, know their odds of winning, and believe their tickets to be losers, they are subject to criticism for having an irrational attitude.

Now, let's assume that, when it comes to claiming that one's ticket is a loser, agents from East\* and West\* can be epistemic peers (in our context, the fact that their tickets come from different lotteries is an irrelevant piece of information).<sup>10</sup> If interpersonal uniqueness is true, then at least one of these communities promotes an irrational epistemic standard. But the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic

<sup>9</sup> In fact, Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016, 131) indicate that one of their aims is to answer these objections. Also, defenders of the Epistemic Practices Argument cannot assume, prior to their argument, that there is a uniquely rational set of epistemic standards. Making such an assumption is just to assume the truth of uniqueness.

<sup>10</sup> We can assume that some tickets from the Pick-6 and the Gosлото 6/45 lotteries have the same probability of winning. It should also be noted that two agents can be epistemic peers without knowing that they are epistemic peers. So agents from East\* and West\* can be epistemic peers without knowing it.



practices cannot explain such a fact. In each community, the promotion of particular epistemic standards allows agents to treat each other as epistemic surrogates. This means that the division of epistemic labour is very efficient in each community, since agents share common epistemic standards. Presumably, each community can end up getting significant truths. Yet, all of this is compatible with the fact that these communities hold incompatible epistemic standards. Since these communities do not interact, they cannot benefit from “inter-community” labour division and have no advantage in having the exact same epistemic standards. This means that the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices fails to establish a specific type of uniqueness.

Now, recall that, according to Dogramaci and Horowitz, “if [interpersonal] permissivism is true, then rational reasoners need not conform [to a unique set of epistemic standards]” (Dogramaci and Horowitz 2016, 139). This statement needs to be refined. Indeed, there are at least two ways to interpret it, as in the following:

- (i) **Unique Community.** If epistemic standards *X* within an epistemic community are permissive, then rational reasoners who are part of that community need not conform to epistemic standards *X*.
- (ii) **Distinct Communities.** If (1) there is a unique set of rational epistemic standards *X* in community *A*, (2) a unique set of rational epistemic standards *Y* in community *B*, and (3) standards *X* are incompatible with standards *Y*, then rational members of community *A* could either conform to standards *X* or to standards *Y*.

While the Epistemic Practices Argument may be conclusive in cases like (i), it is not conclusive in cases like (ii). Indeed, if (1) there is a unique set of rational epistemic standards *X* in community *A*, (2) a unique set of rational epistemic standards *Y* in community *B*, and (3) standards *X* are incompatible with standards *Y* (in the sense that, relative to the same body of evidence, they do not always recommend the same attitudes), then a specific type of interpersonal epistemic permissiveness holds. In other words, two incompatible sets of standards could be equally rational across epistemic communities, while rational reasoners ought to conform to their community’s standards. Thus, the Epistemic Practices Argument is compatible with a specific type of permissiveness.

In summary, the Epistemic Practices Argument cannot apply to agents who cannot benefit from the division of epistemic labour. Furthermore, we cannot assume that there is a unique epistemic community, where agents’ evaluations of each other’s attitudes matter. A closed society could very well hold distinct epistemic standards and not care about outsiders’ epistemic standards. In such a context, the argument merely supports the following line of reasoning:

- (1) In an epistemic community, promoting and criticizing each other’s attitudes with respect to their epistemic rationality makes it more likely that agents collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions others can trust;
- (2) The most efficient way to collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions is for agents to treat each other as epistemic surrogates and to divide the epistemic labour among themselves;
- (3\*) Agents’ treatment of each other as epistemic surrogates and the division of the epistemic labour among themselves is best explained by uniqueness *within an epistemic community*;



(C\*) By the principle of inference to the best explanation, uniqueness is true *within an epistemic community*.

So while the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices might be conclusive against a specific type of interpersonal permissiveness, it is limited to members of the same epistemic community.

### 3 Different Datum, Different Conclusion

In this section, I identify a dilemma for defenders of the Epistemic Practices Argument. Recall that premise (2) of the Epistemic Practices Argument states that the most efficient way to collect evidence, reason, or draw conclusions is for agents to treat each other as epistemic surrogates and to divide the epistemic labour among themselves. Since the fact that we treat each other as epistemic surrogates is best explained by uniqueness, we can infer uniqueness on the basis of such an epistemic practice. But what if a distinct epistemic practice does not require that we treat each other as epistemic surrogates and is best explained by permissiveness? The core of the dilemma is this: either our epistemic practices do not correctly reflect the requirements of epistemic rationality, or they do. Taking the first horn of the dilemma means that there is an explanatory gap in the Epistemic Practices Argument. Taking the second horn of the dilemma means that some types of epistemic labour are best explained by permissiveness, and so once again the Epistemic Practices Argument is compromised.

First, consider the first horn of the dilemma. If our epistemic practices do not reflect the requirements of epistemic rationality, we cannot determine the standards of epistemic rationality by observing our epistemic practice. This means that there is an explanatory gap in the Epistemic Practices Argument. Recall that, according to defenders of the Epistemic Practices Argument, the *fact* that we treat each other as epistemic surrogates is best explained by uniqueness. However, uniqueness is a *normative* thesis stating that epistemic peers concerning P are *rationally required* to come to the same conclusions on whether P. Deriving a normative conclusion from mere factual considerations is problematic, since we cannot assume that what *is* the case is *valuable, required, or permitted*. To put it differently, we should not assume that, in observing our epistemic practices, we necessarily learn something about normative requirements.

Here is another way to put it. Defenders of permissiveness might accept that treating each other as epistemic surrogates is best explained by the belief in uniqueness. For instance, there could be general acceptance of uniqueness among the population, and this could explain why, as a matter of fact, we treat each other as epistemic surrogates. However, since defenders of permissiveness think that uniqueness is false, they will simply conclude that such an epistemic practice is irrational, mistaken or that it goes beyond what is rationally required of agents. Specifically, the Epistemic Practices Argument implicitly presupposes that communities are composed of epistemically rational reasoners and that interactions within communities *correctly reflect* rationality requirements. Without such a presupposition, inferring uniqueness from our epistemic practices is unjustified.

Let's now pass to the second horn of the dilemma by assuming that, in observing our epistemic practices, we can determine what is rationally required of agents. Now, the

problem is that if we make such an assumption, we can find epistemic practices supporting permissiveness. Many epistemic communities encourage (or at least maintain) methodological diversity and heterogeneity. In philosophy of science, for example, there is a divide concerning the norms of universalism and pluralism, as Helen Longino explains in the following:

Researchers committed to a monist or unified science will see plurality as a problem to be overcome, while researchers already committed to a deeply social view of science will see plurality as a resource of communities rather than a problem ... Universalism and unification require the elimination of epistemologically relevant diversity, while a pluralist stance promotes it and the deeply social conception of knowledge that follows. (Longino 2016, sec. 4)

Not only in science do we encourage diversity and heterogeneity. All things being equal, we invite people holding different standards to a public debate, we praise dissenting philosophers for diversifying the perspectives on a given question, we leave scientists free to use distinct methods leading them to incompatible conclusions, we ask lawyers to hold distinct standards regarding a litigation (a lawyer should always take his or her client's side and argue accordingly), and so forth. As epistemic communities, we sometimes promote incompatible epistemic standards. While we think that there is value in confronting them, such a confrontation doesn't always aim at reconciling everyone's standards. Confrontation may have a different goal, like making it salient that some standards of reasoning are incompatible. In such specific contexts, our epistemic practices suggest that epistemic heterogeneity bears value.

I want to draw two conclusions here. First, in cases where we promote methodological heterogeneity, the division of some epistemic labour could make sense *without* uniqueness. For example, epistemic communities value critical thinking, and it is possible that a necessary mean of developing critical thinking is to confront incompatible epistemic standards with one another in the public sphere. Consider the case of public debates. In confronting different perspectives with each other, a public can realize that there are numerous distinct ways to reason on a given issue. So in holding different epistemic standards and confronting them, debaters are *useful* to epistemic communities, since they help reinforce the public's critical skills. Furthermore, debating is a type of epistemic labour. For that reason, eliminating epistemic diversity within an epistemic community can result in blocking a fruitful type of epistemic labour. Thus, there is a sense in which the division of epistemic labour is entirely compatible with the fact that agents are not epistemic surrogates. In cases like debating, holding distinct epistemic standards (and so, not treating each other as epistemic surrogates) is not an obstacle to accomplishing collective epistemic labour. In fact, a necessary condition for fruitful debates is that debaters do not defend exactly the same arguments or use the same methods.

Second, epistemic permissiveness could explain why, in some situations, agents are not required to hold identical epistemic standards. For example, when scientists disagree about which theory fits a body of evidence, we do not ask them to suspend judgment until they reach rational consensus on pain of being irrational. Nor do we expect debaters to reach consensus at the end of a debate, even if they have discussed their respective arguments at length under full disclosure. Since we are satisfied with

the fact that debaters or researchers maintain their respective positions, we are not committed to the conclusion that at least one of them is irrational. Following the inference to the best explanation from our epistemic practices (assuming that our epistemic practices correctly reflects requirements of epistemic rationality), this indicates that there are cases where, relative to a body of evidence, there are incompatible rational standards that agents can hold.

Here is an objection to this view. Perhaps practices like debating do not support permissiveness, since agents advocating P in a debate or a scientific paper might not *really* believe P. In a similar vein, agents endorsing some incompatible epistemic standards might not *really* endorse incompatible epistemic standards. Agents could simply be acting as the “devil’s advocate” for the sake of fruitful debate. Provided that this is correct, some social practices like debating or developing scientific theories would be independent of what agents really believe or endorse. Therefore, in some specific contexts, our epistemic standards can *appear* incompatible, but the epistemic standards we *really* endorse could be uniquely determined.

However, such a line of reasoning faces a serious difficulty. As I said at the beginning of this section, we have to assume that interactions within communities *correctly reflect* rationality requirements. Uniqueness is supposed to be best explained by our epistemic practices if we make such an assumption. However, if the standards agents internalize can be distinguished from the standards agents appear to endorse in their interactions, then some epistemic practices will fail to reflect the epistemic standards internalized by epistemically rational agents. Our interactions in debates, for example, would show that our epistemic practices sometimes fail to reflect rational epistemic standards. Therefore, it would be incorrect to assume that interactions within communities *correctly reflect* rationality requirements. But this contradicts an assumption we *have to* make! As I explained at the beginning of this section, if we do not assume that interactions within communities *correctly reflect* rationality requirements, then there is an explanatory gap in the Epistemic Practices Argument.

Defenders of the argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices then face a dilemma. Indeed, at least one of the following is true: either (i) we cannot determine the standards of epistemic rationality by observing our epistemic practices or (ii) we can (because our epistemic practices correctly reflect rationality requirements). Taking the first horn of the dilemma, one cannot draw normative conclusions concerning our epistemic practices from some facts concerning our epistemic practices. However, the argument’s third premise states that the *fact* that we treat each other as epistemic surrogates is best explained by a *normative* thesis like uniqueness. In view of the foregoing, the first horn of the dilemma leads to rejecting the third premise of the Epistemic Practices Argument. Taking the second horn of the dilemma, one can assume that we can draw normative conclusions from our actual epistemic practices. However, since some epistemic practices are better explained by permissiveness, this means that our epistemic practices do not support uniqueness (at least, since some epistemic practices are better explained by permissiveness, it should not be argued that our epistemic practices support uniqueness). Either way, the Epistemic Practices Argument is compromised.

## 4 Conclusion

The argument from the practical relevance of epistemic practices constitutes a novel and interesting perspective on permissiveness. However, in its current state, this argument leaves many essential questions unanswered. First, such an argument applies only to communities where our epistemic practices matter to each other. It is plausible that, *within* an epistemic community, we should care about each other's epistemic practices and promote epistemic rationality. Still, that doesn't imply that permissiveness should be rejected. For example, the question of whether separated epistemic communities could come to distinct rational epistemic standards remains open. Specifically, such an argument cannot address cases like closed societies, where epistemic practices outside a closed community cannot bear practical significance for that community. Second, some valuable epistemic practices like confronting incompatible epistemic standards in public debates would make more sense if permissiveness were true. For that reason, uniqueness doesn't seem to be supported by every epistemic practice we engage in. While such a practical perspective is relevant, the Epistemic Practices Argument doesn't seem to support interpersonal epistemic uniqueness in every situation.

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