

Cognitive pluralism

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Descriptive cognitive pluralism claims that different people, or people in different cultures, go about the business of reasoning (that is, forming and revising beliefs) in significantly different ways. If descriptive cognitive pluralism is true, it lends considerable urgency to the venerable philosophical problem of deciding which strategies of belief formation and revision we ourselves should use. Normative cognitive pluralism claims that various quite different systems of reasoning may all be equally good. Epistemic relativism, which claims that different strategies of reasoning are best for different people, is a species of normative cognitive pluralism. Evaluative-concept pluralism claims that different people in different cultures use very different concepts of cognitive evaluation. Their notions of rationality and justification (or the closest equivalents in their culture) are quite different from ours. If this is right, it poses a *prima facie* challenge to a central strategy in analytic epistemology which tries to arbitrate between different systems of reasoning by determining which system best comports with our own concepts of epistemic evaluation.

1. Descriptive pluralism

‘Cognitive pluralism’ might be used to label at least three distinct though related claims. One of these, which I call ‘descriptive cognitive pluralism’, has been much debated in anthropology, comparative psychology and the history of science. Descriptive pluralism maintains that different people go about the business of cognition – the forming and revising of beliefs and other cognitive states – in significantly different ways. For example, it has been urged that people in certain pre-literate societies think or reason very differently from the way modern, Western, scientifically educated people do. Closer to home, it has been suggested that different individuals or groups in our own society (men versus women, artists versus scientists, well-educated versus poorly educated) form beliefs and solve cognitive problems in markedly different ways – ways that indicate differences in underlying cognitive processes (see [Feminist epistemology §4](#)).

The denial of descriptive cognitive pluralism is descriptive monism, the thesis that all people exploit more or less the same cognitive processes. The distinction between descriptive monism and descriptive pluralism is best viewed not as a hard and fast one, but as a matter of degree. No one would deny that people differ from one another to some extent in the speed and cleverness of their inferences; nor would it be denied that in attempting to solve cognitive problems, different people try different strategies first. But if these are the only sorts of cognitive differences to be found among people, descriptive monism will be vindicated. If, on the other hand, it should turn out that different people, different groups or different cultures use radically different ‘psycho-logics’ – that the revising and updating of their cognitive states is governed by substantially different principles – pluralism will have a

firm foot in the door. The more radical the differences, the further we will be towards the pluralistic end of the spectrum.

If descriptive cognitive pluralism turns out to be true, it is possible that some of the diversity in reasoning strategies may be due to genetic differences among individuals or groups. But it might also be the case that some of the diversity, or all of it, is attributable to environmental variables that differ in important ways from one culture to another. Some of the rules of reasoning that people internalize and use, or all of them, may be analogous to the grammatical rules that subserve the production and comprehension of sentences in natural languages. The possibility that there is a fair amount of acquired diversity in human cognitive processes, and that patterns of reasoning or cognitive processing are to a substantial degree moulded by cultural influences, adds a certain urgency to one of the more venerable problems of epistemology. For if there are lots of different ways in which the human mind/brain can go about ordering and re-ordering its beliefs and other cognitive states, if different cultures could or do go about the business of reasoning in very different ways, it becomes quite pressing to ask which of these ways should we use and which cognitive processes are the good ones? Here the analogy with grammatical rules breaks down in an illuminating way. Most of us are inclined to think that one language is as good as another. The one you should use is the one spoken and understood by the people around you. By contrast, most of us are not inclined to accept this sort of thorough-going relativism about cognitive processes. If pre-literate tribes or pre-modern scientists or members of a contemporary sub-culture or our own distant descendants think in ways that are quite different from the ways we think, few of us would be inclined to suggest that all of these ways are equally good. Some ways of going about the business of belief revision are better than others. But just what is it that makes one system of cognitive processes better than another, and how are we to tell which system of reasoning is best? These are among the most basic and the most disquieting questions that epistemology tries to answer.

2. Normative pluralism

Normative cognitive pluralism is not a claim about the cognitive processes people do use; rather it is a claim about good cognitive processes – those that people ought to use. It asserts that there is no unique system of cognitive processes that people should use, because various systems that are very different from each other may all be equally good. The distinction between normative pluralism and normative monism, like the parallel distinction between descriptive notions, is best viewed as a matter of degree, with the monist end of the spectrum urging that all normatively sanctioned systems of cognitive processing are minor variations of one another. The more substantial the differences among normatively sanctioned systems, the further we move in the direction of pluralism. Epistemic relativism is a species of normative cognitive pluralism. An account of what makes a system of reasoning a good one is relativistic if it entails that different systems are good for different people or different groups of people (see [Epistemic relativism](#)). Not all pluralistic accounts of good reasoning are relativistic, since some accounts entail that different systems of reasoning are equally good for everyone.

Historically, it is probably true that much of the support for normative pluralism among social scientists derived from the discovery (or putative discovery) of descriptive pluralism, along with a certain

ideologically inspired reluctance to pass negative judgments on the traditions or practices of other cultures. But normative pluralism was certainly not the only response to descriptive pluralism among social scientists. Many reacted to the alleged discovery of odd reasoning patterns among pre-modern peoples by insisting on monism at the normative level, and concluding that the reasoning of pre-modern folk was 'primitive,' 'pre-logical' or otherwise normatively substandard. Among philosophers, both historical and contemporary, normative cognitive pluralism is a minority view. The dominant philosophical view is that there is only one good way to go about the business of reasoning, or at most a small cluster of similar ways.

3. Evaluative-concept pluralism

Evaluative-concept pluralism is a descriptive thesis, not a normative one. It maintains that people's intuitive concepts of cognitive evaluation, concepts like those that we express with terms like 'justified' or 'rational', vary significantly from culture to culture. If evaluative-concept pluralism is correct, the terms of cognitive evaluation exploited in other cultures or intellectual traditions may differ in both meaning and extension from the terms of cognitive evaluation that are embedded in our own everyday thought and language.

Though the issue is controversial, some philosophers think that evaluative-concept pluralism poses a serious challenge to the tradition of analytic epistemology. That tradition tries to resolve normative questions in epistemology by analysing or explicating our ordinary concepts of epistemic evaluation. If we want to know whether our own system of cognitive processes is better or worse than some alternative system, the analytic epistemologist proposes that we settle the question by determining which system does a better job of producing beliefs that comport with our concept of justification (or rationality) (see [Normative epistemology §1](#)). But the analytic epistemologist typically offers us no reason to think that the notions of evaluation prevailing in our own language and culture are any better than the alternative evaluative notions that might or do prevail in other cultures. In the absence of any reason to think that the locally prevailing notions of epistemic evaluation are superior to the alternatives, it is hard to see why we should care whether the cognitive processes we use are sanctioned by those local evaluative concepts.

Imagine that we have located some exotic culture that does in fact exploit cognitive processes very different from our own, and that the notions of epistemic evaluation embedded in their language also differ from ours. Suppose further that the cognitive processes prevailing in that culture accord quite well with their evaluative notions, while the cognitive processes prevailing in our own culture accord quite well with ours. Would any of this be of any help in deciding which cognitive processes we should use? Without some reason to think that one set of evaluative notions was preferable to the other, it seems clear that for most of us it would be of no help at all.

See also:

[Feminist epistemology](#)

[Gender and science](#)

[Postcolonial philosophy of science](#)

[Rational beliefs](#)

References and further reading

Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (1982) *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(A collection of essays by philosophers, anthropologists and historians of science debating the evidence for descriptive pluralism and the merits of relativism.)

Hutchins, E. (1980) *Culture and Inference: A Trobriand Case Study*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

(A sophisticated study in cognitive anthropology that supports descriptive cognitive monism.)

Levy-Bruhl, L. (1966) *Primitive Mentality*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

(Classical anthropological defence of descriptive pluralism and normative monism.)

Quine, W.V. (1960) *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Chapters 1 and 2 offer an important argument against the possibility of descriptive pluralism.)

Stich, S. (1990) *The Fragmentation of Reason*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

(Chapters 1, 4 and 6 are especially relevant and expand on the material in this entry.)

Wilson, B. (1979) *Rationality*, Oxford; Blackwell.

(Collection of essays by philosophers, anthropologists and others exploring various aspects of cognitive pluralism.)