

# The limits of pluralism

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Scientific pluralists hold that there exist several possible acceptable ways of practicing economics (Davis 2014; Dow 1997, 2001, 2002; Longino 2002). Theoretical and methodological pluralisms aim at justifying the co-existence of a plurality of acceptable theories (i.e. set of core assumptions and explanations) and of acceptable methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, etc) by appealing to reasons. This article focuses on pluralism in economics, but I have no doubt its arguments could apply to other social sciences.

Why should we hold pluralist views in economics? And what limits should we give to pluralism? In this paper, I put forward two arguments. The first is a defence of pluralism, which has its source in Mill's defence of freedom of expression. On the one hand, if we have no assurance that a particular scientific practice is the "good" one, it is better to allow for a variety of such practices, so as to maximise the chance of finding the good one and minimize the risk of choosing a single bad theory. On the other hand, if we happen to know which practice is the good one, there is nevertheless no reason to ban concurrent practices, for the latter may help us refine the established scientific practice. This is especially true in economics, for what counts as "good economics" has not yet been settled. However, one could wonder what the limits of such pluralism are. Should everything count as science?

The second claim that I shall defend is that there are limits to pluralism in economics. The first "negative" limit excludes dogmatism. It says that a scientific practice cannot count as scientific in virtue of the fact that it happens to be the dominant practice, i.e. that it is the most widespread within universities and research centres. The second "positive" limit excludes relativism: a scientific practice can be included within the pluralist scientific realm if there exists a community of practitioners that share this practice and if this community is able to provide a justification for its practice that is acceptable to other communities. Adequate justifications are of a specific kind: they must appeal to reasons that scientists of a particular community have for choosing to practice science in a certain way. These reasons must be acceptable, at least in principle, by other communities.

These arguments rely on the assumptions that, first, scientists are reasonable, i.e. they are ready to listen to others' reasons for doing science and possibly to accept them if this is justified. Second,

scientists should have a minimal shared understanding of science, that is, some common values (epistemic values), such as rigour, consistency, commitment to truth, etc. Appeal to such values, which are largely accepted, is what makes a practice potentially justifiable to other scientific communities.

They also have several corollaries. First, this is an invitation to dialogue. Each community must justify its practice to others while trying to understand and evaluate others' reasons. Second, defending pluralism does not mean that everyone should be a pluralist. Individual scientists can remain attached to a specific community, while accepting that other ways of doing science are also acceptable (De Langhe 2010). Third, there is still a large space for disagreement. Scientists just need to agree and be able to communicate on the core reasons that drive scientific inquiry, i.e. that motivate the choice of a peculiar practice, not on the particular content or methods of each others' scientific inquiry.

## 2 WHY PLURALISM?

According to Mäki (1997, 38-39), pluralism (in economics) is the normative view that a plurality of theories or methods or something else is justified. It is opposed to dogmatism, which holds that a single theory or method is justified. Mäki (1997, 38) lists several possible pluralities that one may cherish: plurality of worlds, of truths, of theories, of methods, of meaning, of questions, of values, of ideologies, etc. This article restricts itself to theoretical and methodological pluralisms, that is, to arguments that aim to justify the co-existence of a plurality of core assumptions and of acceptable methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, etc) by appealing to reasons. Why such restrictions? First, because my arguments are meant to apply mainly (or only) to a defence of a plurality of theories and methods in economics. I suspect other arguments may be required to defend pluralism in other respects. Second, theoretical and methodological pluralisms are the most debated versions of pluralism in economics, which justifies that one focuses on them first.

On one view, the defence of pluralism is merely a strategic move from heterodox economists.: pluralism could weaken the mainstream orthodoxy and eventually bring about a new heterodox era (Sent 2003; Van Bouwel 2004). At the opposite of this view, Colander has claimed that pluralism is not the right strategy for heterodox to gain a greater and more legitimate place in the academic world, nor a successful means towards imposing their own ideas (Colander 2010, 2014). Colander might be correct. However, this paper is not about strategy. Its aim is rather to explore the conceptual meaning of pluralism, several arguments in its favour, and the limits we might put to it.

Rather than asking “how can my scientific practice become (or remain) dominant?”, this paper wonders “how can my scientific practice be justified?”.

This section first reviews critically the most common arguments in favour of pluralism. It then proposes a new argument, which is more likely to justify a plurality of theories and methods. Van Bouwel (2005) lists four possible arguments in favour of pluralism in economics.

First, some argue that the world is so complex that a plurality of theories might better explain it than a unique one (Caldwell 1982; King 2008; Gräbner 2017). Let us call it the Ontological argument. However, one could argue that the complex nature of the world rather requires scientists to invest all their scientific energy in one theory (or method), instead of wasting it in several competing approaches, so as to maximize the chance to improve the understanding of reality (Davidson 2004). The fact that reality is complex is not a sufficient reason for supporting pluralism. Why would a plurality of theories tackle complexity better than a single one? On the contrary, proponents of the unification of science would claim that a unified theory is better able to explain a large amount of facts (Kitcher 1981; Mäki 1997).

A second argument insists that the scientist’s mind is cognitively limited. The mind of isolated economists cannot master all of economic reality, nor summarize all information, nor see all relevant facts (Dow 2004). Therefore, a plurality of views is required. Against that argument, one could argue that unified theories generally provide a unified framework that “cognitively-limited” scientists can then use without having to bother with complicated methodological decisions. Unification reduces the cognitive effort of scientists by providing ready-made answers to important methodological questions (Kuhn [1962] 1970). On the contrary, pluralism might increase the individual effort of each scientist to understand and justify its own practice.

The third argument starts from the premise that we develop our theories based on particular (historically, geographically and/or socially relative) and potentially changing situations or positions (King 2008). Pluralism must therefore be the rule, for no single theory can account for these multiple context-dependent positions. This argument relies on a strong epistemological position. Do humans differ in time or in space in a way that makes their scientific research incomparable? One can agree that the social world constantly changes. However, that does not entail that the methods or core hypotheses of social sciences should adapt. Why can’t we study different worlds with the same lenses? The mere fact that the world is changing or that different scientists have different lenses does not justify pluralism.

Finally, the fourth argument stresses that we may choose our scientific method depending on the question we are inquiring (Van Bouwel 2004). The problem with that pragmatic argument is that the question that is asked often depends on the method that is used. Kuhn has argued that choosing a method entails that we limit the questions that we can answer (Kuhn [1962] 1970). Different theories define different questions to answer and different methods for answering them. Some theorists might judge that certain questions are impossible to answer, or illegitimate, or even conclude that there is no point in asking them. Others might, on the contrary, judge that these particular questions are central and that failing to answer them is a sign of scientific failure. In sum, the existence of multiple questions depends on the existence (ex ante) of a multiplicity of theories that allow for answering them. That argument, therefore, presupposes the existence of pluralism, but does not imply it.

These arguments are, therefore, unsatisfactory. This does not mean that defending pluralism is impossible. I would like to propose a new argument in favour of pluralism. This argument is heavily influenced by Mill's defence of freedom of expression (Mill [1859] 1974; See also Marqués et Weisman 2010, 78-80), but it also builds on previous research in philosophy of science. Mill (Mill [1859] 1974, 76) argues that "the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation – those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error." I think this argument extends to a defence of pluralism.

The argument takes the following shape. On the one hand, if we do not know whether a particular scientific practice is the "good" one, it is better to allow for a variety of such practices, so as to maximise the chance of finding the good one, while minimizing the probability to choose a single bad theory or method. For now, I remain vague on what a "good" or "bad" theory would look like. Note that I do not claim that a plurality of theories will, as a whole, provide a better explanation of reality. I rather claim that having a plurality of competing theories increases the likelihood that one of them is the right one. I expect the first part of the argument to convince those who, like Mäki (1997, 42), think that economics is presently in a state of "radical epistemic uncertainty" and that it "falls short of the demands that economists are expected to fulfil" (Mäki 1997, 43). In the absence of a good theory, it is better to allow for a variety of competing ones.

Let suppose, though, that we do have the good theory that fulfils plainly all scientific requirements. I argue that this is nevertheless not a sufficient reason to ban concurrent practices,

for the latter may help us refine the established scientific practice, to bring closer to the truth, and to avoid dogma. Suppose methodological individualism is the right method and that rational choice theory the good theory. Competing theories, even if false or less rigorous or less fruitful, may nevertheless play the role of provocative agents. They may force the righteous theorist to justify her practice, thereby avoiding dogma and keeping its “vital effect” (Mill [1859] 1974, 116). They may force established practitioners to solve new problems which alternative theorists pretend mainstream theorists fail to explain. They can also help her to put her theories and discoveries to test against those of others. As Mill ([1859] 1974, 80) puts it, “the steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it.”

Later in this paper, I will discuss limits to this argument. I will, in particular, discuss which theories and methods are acceptable within the pluralist realm, and which are not. My argument will be complete only when these limits are settled. For now, note that this argument has several advantages, compared to previous ones, and avoids the hurdles of Van Bouwel’s lists of arguments.

First, this argument avoids making a strong epistemological statement about truth. Believers in the existence of a unique set of universal truths about the world as well as those who deny the existence, or unicity, or universality of truth, should be content with it. Whether truth exists, is unique and universal, does not matter. Pluralism is compatible both with the claim that science seeks to provide a list of all truths, and with the claim that truth is unattainable. However, it relies on the premise (to be refined later) that a set of shared “values” defines what counts as “good” science (Kuhn 1977; Longino 2004; Claveau et Voisard 2018). We might not be sure that current scientific practice is the good one. However, every scientist is supposed to strive towards perfecting the scientific method.

Second, it does not assume that the world is hard to understand, or that scientists have cognitive limitations. Neither do I assume that scientists have super-powers. I do not make any methodological assumptions regarding the complexity of reality or the limits to human cognitive capacities.

Third, my argument is humble. It remains agnostic on whether the current practice is the right one. Several authors have insisted on the importance of humility in science. Popper insisted that, since all scientific statements are fallible, we can never be sure about their truth. Therefore, we better be humble (Popper 1959). It is also tolerant and is a priori open to a very large number of competing theories (Garnett Jr 2006; Lee 2011), provided that these theories can improve our understanding or can nurture the current existing scientific practice.

Fourth, the argument may appeal both to those who despise current scientific practice and to those who revere it. In short, to the former, it says: “pluralism will lead us closer to correct practice”. To the latter, it says: “pluralism will lead us away from error”. In other words, it may content those who agree that pluralism of methods and assumptions increases the possibilities of making discoveries (Feyerabend 1975). On the other hand, it may content the monists that believes the contrary by pointing at the fact that concurrent practices (some of which inadequate) pushes us to refining our own.

Finally, this argument is in line with Elster’s claim in favour of freedom of research (Elster 2011, 2016). Everyone should be free to pursue his or her own scientific agenda, conditional on the fact that everyone research can be set against a background of peer criticisms. There is a prima facie case for freedom in science. However, are there limits to that freedom? I have already noted that some particular values play a crucial role here, as well as the presence of peers that can provide constructive criticisms to each other’s.

### 3 WHICH PLURALISM?

Pluralism faces two potential dangers (De Langhe 2010). The first is a fall back into dogmatism. Pluralism should not be used as a strategy towards a new hegemony (Van Bouwel 2004). The second danger is the temptation of relativism.

Therefore, one should put limits to pluralism. There are obvious “negative” limits, which define the reasons that cannot count as sufficient to reject a theory from the set of acceptable theories. There are also “positive” limits, which define reasons that one may use to include a theory within the set of acceptable theories.

#### 3.1 Negative and Positive limits

A first “negative” limit is the following: a scientific practice cannot count as scientific in virtue of the fact that it happens to be the dominant practice, i.e. that it is the most widespread within universities and research centres (Caldwell 1982, 286 et sv.). As Hodgson et al (1992) puts it: “Economists today enforce a monopoly of method or core assumptions, often defended on no better ground than it constitutes the “mainstream.” Economists will advocate free competition, but will not practice it in the marketplace of ideas.” Such a position is unacceptable.

A second “positive” limit is the following: a scientific practice can be included within the pluralist scientific realm if there exists a community of practitioners that share this practice and if

this community is able to provide a justification for its practice that is acceptable to other communities.

The existence of a community guarantees internal peer criticism, which is an important condition of scientific rigour and is a first check on pluralism (Caldwell 1988).

Adequate justifications are of a specific kind: they must appeal to reasons that scientists of a particular community have for choosing to practice science in a certain way. These reasons must be acceptable, at least in principle, by other communities. Acceptable reasons include the formal rigour of the approach, the scientific fertility of the approach, the ability to explain phenomena considered crucial to reality (Kuhn 1977; Haack 1999). These criteria give scientific character but no right to monopoly.

Different approaches may fare unequally well depending on the criteria chosen. But they must appeal at least to one of them. Qualitative methods and quantitative methods refer to different values (the former is closer to reality, the latter is more rigorous). Even if one may not like one of them, both are justified by the appeal to some core epistemic values.

### 3.2 Underlying assumptions

My arguments rely on two assumptions.

First, scientists must be reasonable, i.e. they must be ready to listen to others' reasons for doing science and possibly to accept them if this is justified (Scanlon 1982). Even if there are deep and fundamental disagreements, there is always the possibility to argue and to understand the reasons for these disagreements. Each is able to understand the reasons why the other chooses a different theory or method.

Second, scientists should have a minimal shared understanding of science, that is, some common values (epistemic values), such as rigour, consistency between theory and reality, commitment to truth, etc. Appeal to such values, which are largely accepted, is what makes a practice potentially justifiable to other scientific communities. There must always be a minimal understanding of the research goals and the reasons for choosing a particular postulate.

## 4 SOME COROLLARIES

These claims have several corollaries.

First, this is an invitation to dialogue. Each community must justify its practice to others while trying to understand and evaluate others' reasons.

Second, defending pluralism does not mean that everyone should be a pluralist. Individual scientists can remain attached to a specific community, while accepting that other ways of doing science are also acceptable (De Langhe 2010).

Third, there is still a large space for disagreement. Scientists just need to agree on the core reasons that drive scientific inquiry, i.e. that motivate the choice of a peculiar practice, not on the particular content or methods of each others' scientific inquiry.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In 1970, Feyerabend (1970, 210- 11) claimed that “science is advanced by a critical discussion of alternative views” (in that, he agreed with Popper (1970)). But he also praised “tenacity” or the need to “raise [one’s theories], with the help of criticism, to a higher level of articulation and *thereby to raise their defence to a higher level of consciousness*” (his emphasis). In this article, I praised both proliferation and tenacity.

This paper argued for a proliferation of theories and methods, but only in a conditional way. First, my arguments are conditional on the the present state of economics, which can be described as suffering from epistemic uncertainty. If that is the case, then pluralism is justified, as it can increase the chance to find the right theory or method. Second, my arguments depend on the extent to which a plurality of theories can help refine the existing state of the profession. Supposing we have found the “good” theory of method, competing theories still have a role to play, the role of provocative agents. That is where tenacity enters the stage. As I argued in the second part of the paper, we should only accept those theories and methods that can be justified by their communities with reasons that other communities can accept. Even if monists have got the good theory, alternative theories or methods can be justified if their practitioners are able to show that their contribution brings about something to the community of economists, either in the form of increased rigour, enhanced realism, or of another important epistemic value.

Perhaps these conditions do not hold. It might be excessively prudent to assume that economics suffers from epistemic uncertainty and excessively optimistic to expect that scientists will reasonably discuss the pros and cons of their competing theories or methods. Communication between them may fail, because of a lack of willingness to communicate or of a proper common

language. People may also fail to agree on common values or reasons, or to acknowledge the relevance of competing theories' contributions.

I do not underestimate these issues. However, I hope that this paper can be an invitation for economists to justify their own practice and to listen to the justification of others. At least, it may help them to discover on which ground they are rejecting certain theories and accepting others.

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