Epistemic Tolerance

DOMINIK BALG
Department of Philosophy, University of Cologne, Germany
dominik.balg@posteo.de

When it comes to political, religious or ethical issues, many people consider a tolerant "live and let live"-attitude to be the best reaction to disagreement. However, the current debate about the epistemic significance of disagreement within social epistemology gave rise to certain worries about the epistemic rationality of tolerance. Setting aside those already extensively discussed worries, I would like to focus on the instrumental rationality of a tolerant attitude with respect to our epistemic goals.

KEYWORDS: disagreement, fallibility, humility, open-mindedness, permissivism, rationality, relativism, tolerance, toleration

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will discuss a certain 'live and let live'-attitude towards recognized disagreement that might be called *epistemic tolerance*. What does it mean to react to a disagreement in an epistemically tolerant way? Tolerant people *agree to disagree* and respect each other's opinion as equally reasonable. They stick to their guns, but they don't impose their opinions on others. To put it a little more formally, a person who displays a tolerant attitude towards a recognized disagreement (i) evaluates the other person's belief as false, (ii) evaluates both her own and the other person's belief as equally reasonable, (iii) retains her own belief, and (iv) refrains from any attempt to modify the other person's belief.

Especially when it comes to political, religious, moral or scientific disputes, many people consider an epistemically tolerant attitude the best way to go. Take for example the following passage from Richard Feldman, where he recalls a situation in one of his classes:

> A few years ago I co-taught a course on 'Rationality, Relativism, and Religion' [...]. Many of the students [...] displayed a pleasantly tolerant attitude. Although [...] [they]

> disagreed with one another about many religious issues, almost all the students had a great deal of respect for the views of the others. They 'agreed to disagree' and concluded that 'reasonable people can disagree' about the issues under discussion. (Feldman 2007, p. 194)

Later on, Feldman describes his student's attitude in a little more detail:

> Thinking someone else has a false belief is consistent with having any of a number of other favorable attitudes toward that person and that belief. You can think that the person is reasonable, even if mistaken. And this seems to be what my students thought: while they had their own beliefs, the others had reasonable beliefs as well. I think that the attitude that my students displayed is widespread. It is not unusual for a public discussion of a controversial issue to end with the parties to the dispute agreeing that this is a topic about which reasonable people can disagree. (Feldman 2007, p. 200)

The attitude that Feldman ascribes to his students seems to be exactly the attitude that is picked out by my initial characterization of epistemic tolerance. Furthermore, I agree with Feldman that this attitude is widespread. One reason for the prima facie attractiveness of epistemic tolerance is that it seems to avoid both skepticism and dogmatism. It allows us to stick to our guns, while also leaving room for respecting conflicting opinions as equally valuable. Given its remarkable popularity, a critical assessment of a tolerant reaction to recognized disagreement is directly relevant to our epistemic practice.

In what follows, I will argue that tolerance cannot be an epistemically adequate reaction towards a recognized disagreement. In section 2, I will argue that although there are some legitimate worries about the epistemic rationality of a tolerant attitude, there will be many situations where reacting tolerantly towards a recognized disagreement is epistemically rational. In section 3, I will argue that there is nevertheless a fundamental argument to be made against a tolerant attitude. More specifically, I will argue that in order to come to a complete epistemic assessment of a tolerant reaction towards disagreement, considerations concerning its instrumental rationality with respect to our epistemic goals need to be taken into account. Once the dimension of instrumental rationality enters the picture, it becomes clear why epistemic tolerance cannot be an epistemically adequate reaction towards disagreement.

2. THE EPISTEMIC RATIONALITY OF TOLERANCE

In this section, I will argue that at least from the perspective of epistemic rationality, a tolerant reaction towards disagreement is not necessarily problematic. This claim has bite, for although many people find an epistemically tolerant attitude initially attractive, the recent debate within social epistemology about the rational reaction to recognized disagreement has raised some fundamental worries about the epistemic rationality of a tolerant stance. For example, one worry is that evaluating one's own belief and another person's conflicting belief as equally reasonable is only rational against the background of relativistic theories of epistemic justification or permissivistic accounts of evidential support relations (Feldman 2007). Another worry is that retaining one's own belief in the face of disagreement is epistemically irrational. On the one hand, many authors have argued that sticking to one's guns is epistemically irrational in disagreement situations where one respects the other person as one's epistemic peer (see Christensen 2009 for an overview) or as an epistemic authority (Constantin and Grundmann 2018; Zagzebski 2012), but also in situations where one is unsure about the other person's epistemic status (Hallsson and Kappel 2018; King 2012; McGrath 2009) and even in some situations where one considers oneself as epistemically superior (Priest 2016). On the other hand, an epistemically tolerant attitude might be irrational because of an *intrinsic rational tension between its components*. More specifically, the worry is that it is epistemically irrational to retain one's own belief while at the same time evaluating another person's conflicting belief as equally reasonable (Feldman 2007).

While surely important and interesting, I don't think that these worries suffice to establish a fundamental argument against the epistemic adequacy of a tolerant attitude. In fact, it is pretty easy to come up with cases where evaluating both one's own belief and another person's conflicting belief as equally reasonable while retaining one's own belief is perfectly rational. Consider for example the following case: Lea and Nick are two detectives investigating a murder. They have been working together for many years and respect each other as reliable and competent colleagues. After carefully evaluating the evidence, they both suspend judgement on who the killer is. Then they receive a phone call from the victim's butler, who claims that the gardener did it. Having no special reason to distrust the butler, Lea forms the belief that the gardener did it. Nick, however, knows that the butler is a notorious liar and remains agnostic. At the same time, he knows that Lea isn't aware of the butler's tendency to lie and thus considers her belief as reasonable. Because he respects Lea's belief as reasonable, he refrains from modifying it and decides not to tell her about the butler's unreliability.

In this case, it should be clear that Nick is perfectly rational in retaining his own belief in face of the disagreement with Lea. Nevertheless, it also seems perfectly rational for Nick to evaluate Lea's belief as reasonable. Moreover, there is some substantial sense in which Nick's and Lea's beliefs are epistemically on a par: For example, they are both formed on the basis of a thorough and careful evaluation of the available evidence, and both are caused by reliable belief-forming processes. Given that, it even seems to be rational for Nick to evaluate Lea's and his own belief in some substantive respects as *equally* reasonable. If this is correct, then at least from the perspective of epistemic rationality, there will be no fundamental argument to be made against a tolerant attitude towards disagreement. Retaining one's own belief while respecting another person's conflicting belief as equally reasonable is not necessarily irrational.

However, this line of thought might lead to the following worry: Even if we accept that Nick's reaction is epistemically rational, his positive epistemic evaluation of Lea's belief seems to be too weak to plausibly constitute the proper basis for a genuinely tolerant attitude. Although the idea that a tolerant attitude is essentially based upon an ambivalent normative evaluation is widely accepted, it should also be clear that not *every* ambivalent normative evaluation rationalizes a tolerant attitude (Forst 2013, 2017; King 1998). And while Nick's reaction is based on *some* ambivalent epistemic evaluation, he is obviously only rational in retaining his original belief due to a *significant evidential asymmetry* between him and Lea. So the worry is that as long as my conception of epistemic tolerance allows for cases in which the positive epistemic evaluation of a conflicting belief is harmless enough to not render retaining one's own belief epistemically irrational, it will be too weak to only capture cases where it is natural to speak of tolerance, and the cases that philosophers are primarily interested in when they talk about tolerance as a specific intellectual attitude towards persistent disagreements over moral, political or religious questions.

While it is true that my conception allows for cases with some epistemic asymmetries, I don't see why this should be a problematic feature. In fact, it seems independently plausible that a tolerant attitude is compatible with significant asymmetries - several authors within practical philosophy have explicitly argued that at least for some instances of tolerance, such an asymmetry is even constitutive.[1] And the

[1] For example, in his essay *Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, Immanuel Kant already called tolerance a "presumptuous title" (Kant 1991, p. 58). Taking up Kant's criticism, Rainer Forst has developed a much discussed "permission conception" of tolerance, according to which toleration consists in a unilateral relation between an authority and an inferior party (Forst 2013, 2017). Forst is convinced that the permission conception of toleration is not

same seems to be true for the theoretical domain. Consider for example demands for tolerance with respect to scientific communities. Many philosophers of science believe that scientific communities would benefit from a tolerant behavior of their individual members. However, the idea is not that scientists should be tolerant towards conflicting theories that are equally well supported by the available evidence. The idea is rather that scientists should be tolerant towards theories that are *only weakly supported* by the available evidence – because they could easily turn out to be better than expected (Chang 2012, Šešelja et al. 2015).

Given that, the sole fact that there is a significant epistemic asymmetry in cases like the one of Nick and Lea doesn't necessarily speak against them being genuine instances of a tolerant attitude. Nevertheless, it is right that those are not the cases that philosophers are primarily interested in when they think of tolerance as an intellectual attitude towards conflicting opinions. I think that at this point, it will be helpful to distinguish between *appropriate* and *inappropriate* instances of tolerance. While Nick's attitude towards Lea's belief arguably is a genuine instance of tolerance, it is clearly inadequate. At the same time, it is also clear that Nick's attitude is not epistemically irrational. So why is it so problematic? How can we distinguish appropriate from inappropriate instances of epistemic tolerance? And are there even any appropriate instances of epistemic tolerance? To answer these questions, a critical discussion of epistemic tolerance has to go beyond the assessment of its epistemic rationality.

3. THE INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY OF TOLERANCE

Given the initial characterization of epistemic tolerance, it shouldn't come as a surprise that evaluating the epistemic rationality of a tolerant attitude won't suffice to come to a complete assessment of its adequacy. Reacting tolerantly towards a recognized disagreement doesn't just mean to stick to one's guns – it also means to refrain from any attempt to modify the other person's belief on the basis of a specific epistemic evaluation of that belief. A tolerant reaction doesn't just consist in a specific doxastic response to recognized disagreement, but also in a certain *behavior towards conflicting beliefs of others*. Given that, a critical discussion of an epistemically tolerant attitude needs to take into

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just based on a rich philosophical tradition, but still informs our understanding of the term to a considerable extent. I think that this diagnosis is correct. For example, only against the background of a conception of toleration that allows for significant asymmetries, it gets clear why many sexual, religious or political minorities take offense at being tolerated.

account considerations concerning its instrumental rationality with respect to epistemic goals.[2]

The idea behind demands for epistemic tolerance seems to be that from an epistemic point of view there are circumstances under which it is advisable to refrain from modifying other people's beliefs, although we consider them to be false. More specifically, the idea is that we shouldn't try to modify conflicting beliefs of others if those beliefs are reasonable. This suggests that in cases where the conflicting beliefs of others are unreasonable, we should try to modify them. Tolerating a conflicting belief doesn't just mean to refrain from modifying that belief *and* to evaluate it as reasonable – it means to refrain from modifying that belief *because* it is reasonable. This specific relation between tolerating something and interfering with it is no peculiarity of an epistemically tolerant attitude, but a structural feature of toleration in general. To see this, it is helpful to consider a case of practical tolerance. Suppose Sam is a sexist journalist who deeply hates all women. Determined to convince as many people as possible of the legitimacy of male supremacy, he frequently publishes articles in which he argues for his androcentric world view. However, none of his readers find his arguments convincing. Quite the contrary, his offensive articles lead many people to reflect on their sexist prejudices and to actively engage in feminist advocacy.

In this situation, it might be plausible to argue that tolerating Sam's behavior could be morally adequate.[3] However, it should be clear that tolerating Sam's behavior would only be a morally adequate reaction, if in general it was adequate to interfere with sexist behavior. Tolerating Sam's behavior doesn't just mean to refrain from interfering with it and to appreciate its desirable consequences – it means to refrain from interfering with it because it has desirable consequences. So one core idea behind a tolerant attitude is that there are specific positive evaluations of other persons' objectionable beliefs or actions that make it rational to refrain from interfering with them (Forst 2013,

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[2] The idea that considerations concerning instrumental rationality with respect to epistemic goals need to be taken into account in order to come to a complete assessment of our intellectual conduct is not a new one. For example, Thomas Kelly has argued that theoretical rationality is a 'hybrid' virtue that involves sensitivity to both epistemic and instrumental reasons (Kelly 2003). To use Kelly's terminology, we can say that a tolerant attitude towards disagreement will only be theoretically rational if it is both epistemically rational and instrumentally rational with respect to our epistemic goals.

[3] Whether tolerance really would be an appropriate reaction in this case is, of course, a difficult ethical question. All I am assuming here is that it is at least not absurd or obviously misguided to consider tolerating Sam's behavior as potentially appropriate.

ch. 1). And this idea seems to imply that in general we should try to interfere with other persons objectionable beliefs and actions.

Accordingly, to establish the instrumental rationality of epistemic tolerance, two claims need to be defended: The first claim is that in general, it is instrumentally rational with respect to our epistemic goals to modify conflicting beliefs of others. The second claim is that it is irrational with respect to our epistemic goals to modify conflicting beliefs of others that are reasonable.[4] In this section, I will argue that while the first claim is plausible to at least some degree, the second claim is clearly wrong.

Let's begin with the first claim. Why should it in general be instrumentally rational with respect to our epistemic goals to modify conflicting beliefs of others? At first glance, there seems to be a straightforward explanation. If minimizing falsehood in a large body of beliefs is a core feature of our epistemic goals, it will be instrumentally rational with respect to these goals to modify any belief we consider to be false – regardless of whether or not it is part of our own belief system or not.

However, this line of thought will be highly controversial and is likely to be rejected by most epistemologists. The way that it is usually interpreted, the goal of getting at the truth and avoiding falsehood is an individualistic goal - instead of interfering with other people's beliefs, we should try to maximize truth and minimize error within our own belief system. Maybe a proponent of epistemic tolerance could try to shift the burden of proof here and argue that although most epistemologists actually accept that there is an epistemically important difference between our own false beliefs and false beliefs of others, it is not clear at all why there should be such a difference. And as long as there are no convincing arguments for a fundamental distinction

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[4] At this point, a little more needs to be said about exactly what it means to modify 'conflicting beliefs of others'. One natural worry is that as long as trying to modify other people's beliefs only means to engage in argumentative exchange, it is hard to see how this can be a problematic activity at all. However, what I have in mind when I talk about the modification of other people's beliefs is rather an intentional attempt to get other people to believe certain things. Engaging in argumentative exchange and presenting reasons for one's own view is certainly one possible means to make other people believe something, but of course there will also be other ways of doing this. Furthermore, many people frequently engage in argumentative exchange without thereby intending to convince others of their own position – for example, to simply gather new evidence or to come to a better understanding of conflicting standpoints.
Given this, it is also clear that a tolerant attitude isn't necessarily incompatible with engaging in argumentative exchange – at least as long as one doesn't do so with the intention to modify the other person's belief.

between the epistemic significance of falsity within our own belief system and falsity in other people's belief systems, so the idea, a social interpretation is the most natural way to understand our epistemic goals. However, the plausibility of such a move is at least questionable. It seems that as long as a core part of the argument for the instrumental rationality of epistemic tolerance rests on such a controversial assumption as a social interpretation of epistemic goals, the prospects of success look pretty poor.

Luckily, there is an alternative route the proponent of a tolerant stance could choose. Even if our epistemic goals are purely egocentric, to the effect that every person should only aim at the truth and avoid falsehood with respect to her own belief system, there is still some room to argue that in general we have good reasons to modify conflicting beliefs of others. To see why, one just needs to consider the social aspects of our epistemic reality. In forming beliefs about the world, every person heavily relies on the beliefs of others. Given our fundamental epistemic dependency on other people, it is clear why we should care about our epistemic environment. By improving the quality of our epistemic environment, we can effectively increase the chance of forming more true than false beliefs in the future (Werning 2009). And modifying false beliefs of others, so the idea, is one obvious way to improve the epistemic quality of our environment - since the beliefs of other people are part of countless reasoning and communication processes that are impossible to track, even beliefs we know to be false can have epistemically infectious effects that can easily be harmful to our own belief system.

Of course, there are many situations in which I know that another person's false belief won't have any negative impact on my own belief system. But given the high degree of communicative interaction in our globalized world, one could argue, those will be cases where I have *positive reasons* to believe that the other person's belief is epistemically harmless. In the absence of such reasons, it seems that the prima facie rational thing to do is still to try to modify the other person's conflicting belief. A similar point can be made with respect to cases where we don't have the time or the cognitive resources to modify conflicting beliefs of others. Also in those cases, one could argue, the falsity of the other person's belief still constitutes a prima facie reason for modifying it that is only outweighed by specific pragmatic considerations. To defend the instrumental rationality of a tolerant attitude, one doesn't have to argue that we should try to modify *all* conflicting beliefs that are not reasonable – all that needs to be established is that we have prima facie reasons to modify conflicting beliefs of others. And as we have seen, even against the background of an individualistic interpretation of our epistemic goals there are still some interesting arguments for the

proponent of a tolerant attitude to support this claim. Although there is a lot more to say about those arguments, and although the above considerations do in no way suffice to establish this claim, I will accept it in the following for the sake of argument.

Suppose that it is in general instrumentally rational with respect to our epistemic goals to modify the conflicting beliefs of others - why should it be irrational in cases where the other person's belief is reasonable? The underlying idea behind this second claim seems to be that there is an intimate connection between tolerance and fallibility. This idea has some philosophical tradition. In 'On Liberty', John Stuart Mill already argued that one main reason for tolerating conflicting beliefs is that – given our fundamental fallibility - they could always turn out to be true (Mill 2001, p. 19).[5] So the thought behind demands for epistemic tolerance is that although it is generally rational to modify false beliefs of others, we should at least refrain from modifying those conflicting beliefs of others we consider to be reasonable - modifying reasonable beliefs of others just because they conflict with our own fallible opinion would be a form of intellectual hubris.

How convincing is this line of thought? On the one hand, it seems plausible that - given our fundamental fallibility - we should be very careful in our attempts to modify conflicting beliefs of others. Just because we believe that someone has a false belief, that doesn't mean we are in fact right. Especially under hostile epistemic conditions, intellectual virtues like humility and open-mindedness are indispensable for an epistemically responsible way of dealing with conflicting opinions of others. So instead of prematurely dismissing differing beliefs, we should try to take them seriously and make up our mind as impartially as possible.

On the other hand, this does in no way mean that we should react tolerantly towards disagreement. A tolerant person refrains from modifying those beliefs of others she considers to be reasonable. But as the considerations from section 2 suggest, a tolerant attitude is only epistemically rational in cases with significant evidential asymmetries.

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[5] It is important to note that Mill presupposes a slightly different conception of toleration when talking about tolerance towards other person's conflicting beliefs. More specifically, Mill doesn't think that we should only tolerate conflicting beliefs if they are reasonable. According to Mill, we should tolerate *all* conflicting beliefs, because all conflicting beliefs could easily turn out to be true. Furthermore, Mill thinks that we should even tolerate conflicting beliefs we know to be false, since sincerely engaging with conflicting opinions is necessary to fully understand and appreciate one's own insights. Nevertheless, the argument from fallibility plays an important role in Mill's theory of toleration and can directly be applied to the conception of epistemic tolerance that is relevant here.

And in those cases, it seems very unlikely that the tolerated beliefs could surprisingly turn out to be true, even if they are reasonable. Take the case of Nick and Lea: Given that Lea's belief is formed on the basis of unreliable testimony, the fact that it is reasonable doesn't make it any more likely to be true. This also explains why it wouldn't be appropriate for Nick to tolerate Lea's belief – given that it is most likely to be false, he should simply inform Lea of the butler's tendency to lie.

However, a proponent of epistemic tolerance could just agree and still argue that there are some specific circumstances under which distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable beliefs is epistemically significant. In fact, she could rightly point out that she never claimed that we should refrain from modifying *all* conflicting beliefs that are reasonable. It seems to be obvious that sometimes reasonable beliefs of others give us reasons to change our own beliefs, and that sometimes we should try to change the beliefs of others even if they are reasonable. Given that, plausible demands of epistemic tolerance are always restricted to specific circumstances or domains. The idea is not that we should always tolerate conflicting beliefs that are reasonable, but rather that there are specific circumstances under which we should tolerate conflicting beliefs that are reasonable. But what are those circumstances supposed to be?

One idea is that there may be circumstances under which it is appropriate to tolerate reasonable beliefs because, although there seems to be a significant evidential asymmetry in face of which the conflicting belief is sufficiently likely to be false, there is also a certain chance that this asymmetry turns out to be illusory. For example, consider the following case: Tim and Mary are two philosophers who respect each other as thoughtful and open-minded colleagues. While Tim believes that antinatalism is true, Mary believes that antinatalism is false. Having discussed the issue for a while, both have presented various arguments and considerations for their respective views. Mary, however, sticks to her guns. For her, antinatalism is just obviously false. At the same time, she is well aware that there is no way of sharing this sense of obviousness with Tim. Nevertheless, she decides to refrain from trying to modify Tim's belief, because she knows that he might have his own sense of obviousness.

This case, the idea goes, is a good example for an appropriate instance of epistemic tolerance. First of all, Mary seems to be justified in retaining her own belief because she has private evidence that clearly speaks for its truth. At the same time, there is also a sense in which Tim's belief is reasonable. He has carefully engaged with all the arguments Mary put forward to support her view, but after thorough investigation, he still didn't find them very convincing. Finally, Mary's decision to refrain from further attempts to modify Tim's belief also

seems to be justified. Given that Tim's belief could be partly based on private evidence as well, it might turn out to be better supported than expected.

If this line of thought was convincing, a tolerant reaction towards another person's conflicting belief would be epistemically adequate given that (i) there are good reasons to believe that there is a significant evidential asymmetry in face of which retaining one's own belief is epistemically rational (ii) there are also good reasons to believe that the alleged evidential asymmetry might break down. It is important to note that the possibility of such a constellation doesn't necessarily presuppose the existence of private evidence. Even if there isn't anything like private evidence, there will be cases that satisfy the two conditions specified above.[6] For example, we can imagine a situation that resembles the one of Nick and Lea. Suppose that Nick justifiedly believes that Lea's belief is based on misleading evidence, but that he is also aware that his belief that the butler is a liar could easily turn out to be false – maybe because it is only based on comparatively weak evidence. In this case, a tolerant attitude towards Lea's belief might also be appropriate. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the above conditions are still extremely specific. Even if it was epistemically adequate to display a tolerant attitude under those conditions, general demands for epistemic tolerance in entire domains like philosophy or politics would probably be inappropriate.

However, it seems that even under those very specific circumstances the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable beliefs that is characteristic of a tolerant attitude is still arbitrary. To see this, just consider the following sequel to Mary's case. Suppose that, after talking to Tim, Mary meets Gary. Being the member of a radical religious cult, Gary has been brainwashed into believing that antinatalism is true. In this case, it is not clear at all why Mary should try to modify Gary's belief, but not Tim's. From Mary's perspective, Gary's belief could just as easily turn out to be probably true as Tim's. But in contrast to Tim's belief, Gary's belief isn't reasonable at all. So, even if it is instrumentally rational to refrain from modifying Tim's belief because it could easily turn out to be probably true, this has nothing to do with the fact that it is reasonable. Given that, the initial worry remains. It seems that the cases where a tolerant attitude towards disagreement is not epistemically irrational are exactly those cases in which the reasonableness of the other person's conflicting belief is not a good

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[6] Nevertheless, it shouldn't come as a surprise that demands for epistemic tolerance seem to be especially common in exactly those domains in which philosophers have usually argued for the possibility of private evidence, like for example ethics or religion (see e.g. Feldman 2007, Rosen 2001, van Inwagen 1996).

basis for deciding whether to modify it or not. Or to put it differently: A tolerant reaction is only epistemically rational in cases where it is instrumentally irrational.

4. CONCLUSION

If my arguments are convincing, a tolerant attitude towards recognized disagreement is necessarily epistemically inadequate. Given the remarkable popularity of epistemic tolerance, this result is highly relevant to our intellectual practice. However, to fully understand the epistemic problem with a tolerant attitude, it is not enough to discuss its epistemic rationality - as I have argued in section 2, there are cases where reacting tolerantly towards recognized disagreement is epistemically rational. In section 3, I have suggested that to come to a complete epistemic evaluation of epistemic tolerance, considerations concerning instrumental rationality with respect to epistemic goals need to be taken into account. Once the dimension of instrumental rationality is included, it gets clear why a tolerant attitude is so problematic. The problem with a tolerant stance towards disagreement is not that it is epistemically irrational, but rather that in those situations where it is epistemically rational, it doesn't provide a good basis to decide which conflicting beliefs of others we should try to modify. So to establish a convincing argument for the epistemic inadequacy of a tolerant attitude, considerations concerning its instrumental rationality with respect to epistemic goals have to be taken into account.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I would like to thank Jan Constantin, Thomas Grundmann and Steffen Koch for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the participants of the ECA Groningen 2019 for a vivid and fruitful discussion.

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