

# Inquiry and Confirmation

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## Abstract

A puzzle arises when combining two individually plausible, yet jointly incompatible, norms of inquiry. On the one hand, it seems that one shouldn't inquire into a question while believing an answer to that question. But, on the other hand, it seems rational to inquire into a question while believing its answer, if one is seeking *confirmation*. Millson (2021), who has recently identified this puzzle, suggests a possible solution, though he notes that it comes with significant costs. I offer an alternative solution, which doesn't involve these costs. The best way to resolve the puzzle is to reject the prohibition on inquiring into a question while believing an answer to it. Resolving the puzzle in this way makes salient two fruitful areas in the epistemology of inquiry which merit further investigation. The first concerns the nature of the inquiring attitudes and the second concerns the aim(s) of inquiry.

## 1 Introduction

Carmen is curious about whether she has enough eggs to make a frittata. She remembers seeing eggs in the fridge, and believes that they're still there, but decides to check again to make sure. Kai is splitting a dinner bill with a friend. She calculates her share plus the tip and before ponying up the cash, she re-checks her math. Wyatt is wondering whether he can substitute coconut oil for butter in a cake recipe. A post on his favourite vegan blog says that he can. The blog has a pretty good track record, but he calls up his brother, a pastry chef, to confirm. Carmen, Kai, and Wyatt are all inquirers. They each have some question that they're investigating, and they're not passively waiting around for evidence to come their way, but are actively taking matters into their own hands. Here's another thing that they have in common: each is seeking to *confirm* an answer to a question. Carmen is double-checking, Kai is re-calculating, and Wyatt is getting a second opinion. Moreover, this appears to be on the whole a good thing; responsible epistemic agents often seek out additional confirming

evidence, and in some cases it may even be dogmatic or narrow-minded to do otherwise.<sup>1</sup>

Millson (2020) has identified a puzzle that arises when considering two individually plausible, yet jointly incompatible norms of inquiry. On the one hand, it seems permissible to engage in inquiry to confirm one's answer to the question of *whether p*, while believing that *p*. However, some, including Friedman (2019a,b) and Kelp (2020, 2021), have argued that one should not inquire into a question while also believing an answer to the question. Following Friedman (2020), let's call norms of inquiry 'zetetic' norms.<sup>2</sup> These two zetetic norms can be formulated more precisely as follows:

DON'T BELIEVE AND INQUIRE (DBI): One ought not believe a complete answer to a question, Q, at *t* and inquire into Q at *t*.<sup>3</sup>

INQUIRE TO CONFIRM BELIEF (ICB): One may seek to confirm that *p* at *t* and believe that *p* at *t* (Millson (2020): 687).

DBI and ICB are wide-scope synchronic norms that concern the normative relationship between inquiry and belief, and which assume the possibility of inquiring while believing.

DBI prohibits what ICB permits, so something's got to give. But, what? In what follows, I argue that we should give up on DBI, but along the way I also argue that the tension between DBI and cases of rationally inquiring into a question while believing an answer to the question runs much deeper than is suggested by Millson's puzzle. This is because one can rationally inquire into the question of *whether p* while not just believing that *p*, but also knowing that *p*. The best way out of the puzzle is to reject DBI. Resolving the puzzle in this way makes salient at least two fruitful areas in the epistemology of inquiry which merit further investigation. The first concerns the nature of the inquiring attitudes, and the second concerns the aim(s) of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup>See Friedman (2019a) for a detailed discussion of re-checking forms of inquiry.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Friedman (2020): fn. 1. The Greek term 'zetetic' (*zētētikos*) meaning roughly 'to proceed by inquiry or investigation'. Are zetetic norms epistemic norms? And what kind of rationality is at issue in this debate? I only wish to claim that the relevant sense of rationality is *zetetic* rationality. And I don't take a stand on whether zetetic norms are epistemic norms or practical norms. While this is an important topic worthy of further attention, it is beyond the scope of the paper. For further discussion see, for example, Friedman (2020, Forth), Thorstad (2021), and Steglich-Petersen (Forth).

<sup>3</sup>This norm is defended by Friedman (2019a,b) and Kelp (2020, 2021). Friedman (2017): 311 also defends an Ignorance Norm: "Necessarily, if one knows the answer to a question, Q, at *t*, then one ought not have an IA [i.e. an interrogative or inquiring attitude] towards Q at *t*." Also, see Whitcomb (2017) who defends the view that an Ignorance Norm constitutively governs the speech act of asking a question, as well as Sapir and van Elswyk (Forth) who use data from hedging in inquiry, to defend an Ignorance Norm. The arguments against DBI that follow will also cast doubt upon these Ignorance Norms.

## 2 The Puzzle

A detective in a play, who merely pretends to be curious about who the murderer is, is not engaged in genuine inquiry. Why not? What's the difference between a detective who is genuinely inquiring and a mere actor whose behaviour is seemingly identical? A difference one might cite is in their respective states of mind. The inquiring detective is really *curious* or is *wondering* about who the murderer is—the actor isn't. Friedman (2019a,b) argues that in order inquire into some question one must have an inquiring state of mind directed towards the question.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, inquiring attitudes are *interrogative* states of mind that have questions as their contents. They are attitudes like wonder and curiosity, and they are directed towards questions that one wants to figure out the answers to. Following this line of thought, let's assume then, for the time being, that interrogative attitudes are a necessary component of genuine inquiry. (I will call this assumption into question in Section 5.)

How do interrogative attitudes cohere with other doxastic attitudes such as belief? One way of developing an answer to this question draws upon data from conversation and considers the felicity conditions of utterances that are used during the course of inquiry. Consider the following:

- (1) # I believe Frida is a painter, but I wonder whether Frida paints.
- (2) # I know Frida paints, but I'm curious: is Frida a painter?

Why are (1) and (2) infelicitous? These utterances represent the speaker as having an inquiring attitude (i.e., wonder, curiosity) towards some question while also believing an answer to that question. This, however, is precisely the mix of doxastic attitudes that DBI prohibits. DBI can thus explain why utterances like (1) and (2) are infelicitous because they represent speakers as having a rationally incoherent state of mind; as settled and unsettled upon the answer to a question.

In tension with DBI, Millson offers evidence in support of ICB. He draws upon a range of linguistic data, especially the felicity conditions of biased interrogatives as they are used in confirmation requests. Consider the following.<sup>5</sup>

- (3) Gold is an element, isn't it? [tag-interrogative]
- (4) Isn't gold an element? [negative polar interrogative]

(3) and (4) represent the speaker as having some affirmative non-neutral attitude towards the truth of a possible answer.

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<sup>4</sup>Also see Friedman (Forth, 2020, 2017, 2013a,b), as well as Whitcomb (2010) and Carruthers (2018).

<sup>5</sup>Millson (2020): 687-690. See also: AnderBois (2019); Farkas and Roelofsen (2017); Gunlogson (2001, 2008); Malamud and Stephenson (2015); Asher and Reese (2005) and van Rooij and Šafářová (2003) for further discussions of the pragmatics and semantics of biased questions.

How do biased questions support a zetetic norm like ICB? Millson considers the possibility that biased questions, and hence, the inquiries which underlie them, are consistent with categorical belief in the question's answer. If this is right, then, contra DBI, it can be rationally permissible to both inquire into a question while believing an answer to that question.

Thus, a puzzle for the zetetic norms arises from the incompatibility of DBI's *prohibition* on believing that  $p$  while inquiring into the question of *whether*  $p$ , and ICB's *permission* to believe that  $p$  while inquiring into *whether*  $p$ .

### 3 A Solution?

Millson considers, though does not explicitly endorse, the following solution to this puzzle. He suggests that the data from biased interrogatives might not express the speaker's belief, but rather their *credence*. Specifically, if we assume a view according to which one can have a maximally high credence in  $p$ , yet fail to believe that  $p$ , then we can perhaps explain the data from biased interrogatives without having to abandon DBI.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, the linguistic data from biased questions doesn't support the rational compatibility of inquiry and belief. Instead, it supports the rational compatibility of inquiring into a question while having a high degree of confidence or credence in the answer. But, and this is the crucial part, this is consistent with failing to believe that  $p$ , and so is also consistent with a norm like DBI.

It's noteworthy that this way of resolving the puzzle comes at a cost: it requires that one reject a Lockean view of belief on which to believe that  $p$  is to have a credence above a certain threshold in  $p$ .<sup>7</sup> Millson notes that this is a serious dialectical burden and he is skeptical that this solution to the puzzle is worth the cost (Millson; 2020, 691).

However, there is an alternative solution which can remain neutral on the relationship between credence and belief. This solution rejects DBI on the grounds that one can inquire into a question while not only having a significantly high credence in  $p$ , but also while knowing, and hence, outright believing that  $p$ . Thus, regardless of whether or not one is an anti-Lockean about belief, there is yet a further, even stronger, reason to reject DBI in favor of ICB.

### 4 Knowing While Inquiring

Consider the following case adapted from Brown (2008).

- (8) *Fatima, an expert surgeon, is scheduled to preform an operation this afternoon. She has spent the morning carefully studying the patient's file, and knows that*

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<sup>6</sup>For a defence of such views, see for example, Buchak (2014); Friedman (2013b); Staffel (2016) and Jackson (2019).

<sup>7</sup>Lockean views of belief are defended by, for example, Goldman (1979); Foley (1992); Swinburne (2001); Sturgeon (2008) and Marvin (2019). For an overview of this debate see Jackson (2020).

*it's the left kidney which needs to be removed. A few hours later, before the surgery, she thinks to herself:*

*"Okay, now I know it's the left kidney, but I'm going to double-check the patient's file one last time—just to be sure. After all, imagine how horrible it would be if I removed the wrong kidney."*

(8) is a perfectly coherent, natural, and even praiseworthy thought. However, notice that Fatima already knows that it's the left kidney, yet she decides to inquire further into this matter. To strengthen this point, we can imagine the following series of events unfolding.

(9) *Fatima walks into an nearby office where her resident is studying the patient's file. He's a reliable informant and she trusts his judgment. She asks him the following.*

(b) Can you please confirm: is it the left kidney or is it the right kidney?<sup>8</sup>

*The resident responds.*

(c) It's the left kidney.

*Another resident overhears this interaction and asks a nearby nurse the following question.*

(d) Why did Fatima just ask her resident about which kidney it is? Didn't she already know which kidney it was?

*The nurse responds.*

(e) Of course she knew! She's only investigating further to be absolutely certain. Wouldn't you want your doctor to double-check which kidney it was before they operated on you?

This case casts doubt upon DBI given that Fatima is inquiring into a question while not just believing, but also knowing an answer to it.

One might object and claim that Fatima no longer believes or no longer knows that it's the left kidney when she opens her inquiry. For example, [Friedman \(2019a\)](#) defends the view that an inquirer no longer retains their knowledge or belief that *p* when they re-check the answer to *whether p*. She describes double-checkers like Fatima as shifting from a state of belief to a state of suspended judgment on the question ([Friedman; 2019a](#), 88-89).

Does Fatima no longer know that it's the left kidney when she double-checks the patient's file? This seems highly unlikely, given that she's an expert

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<sup>8</sup>Notice that this is an *alternative* question not a biased question. In this case the speaker offers her interlocutor a pointed choice between two closed options (the left or the right kidney). In asking the question in this way the speaker does not indicate her own stance on the matter (unlike the case of biased interrogatives), for in some cases this may influence the respondent's answer, potentially weakening their ability to confirm the answer. For an analysis of alternative questions see, for example, [AnderBois \(2011, 2019\)](#) and [Biezma and Rawlins \(2015\)](#).

surgeon and that she had carefully studied the patient’s file just a few hours earlier. We can assume that her memory on this issue is fairly fresh, and that in the meantime she has not encountered any defeating evidence or reason to think otherwise. So, she is plausibly interpreted as maintaining her knowledge when she seeks confirmation before the surgery.<sup>9</sup>

How does this case connect to Millson’s puzzle? If it is rationally permissible to inquire into a question while knowing the answer to the question, then, *a fortiori*, a zetetic norm like ICB is also plausible. This is based upon the assumption that if you can engage in inquiry while knowing the answer, then you can surely engage in inquiry while having a weaker epistemic state, such as belief or credence.

The solution that Millson considers as possibly reconciling DBI and ICB does not account for inquiries like Fatima’s; that is, it does not explain how it can sometimes be rational to inquire into a question while having knowledge of its answer. Views about the nature of belief and credence are largely orthogonal to resolving this deeper tension between DBI and cases of rationally inquiring while knowing.

## 5 Future Implications

The rationality of inquiring into a question while knowing its answer suggests a number of fruitful areas for future investigation into the epistemology of inquiry. Here I outline two such areas.

### 5.1 The Inquiring Attitudes

If it can be rationally permissible, in at least some cases, to inquire while knowing, then what might this imply for the relationship between inquiry and interrogative attitudes? Earlier (in Section 2) I granted the assumption that interrogative attitudes, such as curiosity and wonder, were a necessary component of inquiry. From there, we had motivated DBI by considering which doxastic states were rationally compatible with interrogative attitudes, and hence, with inquiry. However, cases of rationally inquiring while knowing call this assumption into question.

Certainly, in many cases it is correct to describe inquirers as curious or as wondering about the answer to some question. As Millson (2020) has pointed out, this is also true in cases of inquiries which involve biased questions. He

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<sup>9</sup>For further defence of this point see the arguments given in Brown (2008): 176-177. One might argue that, due to the high stakes involved in this case, Fatima fails to maintain her knowledge while inquiring. More generally, one might defend the view that if the stakes are high enough to motivate the need for further inquiry, then they also undermine one’s knowledge. A principle like this is needed to rule out cases of rationally inquiring while knowing. However, it’s unclear why we should accept such a strong principle. This principle can’t be assumed, and it requires motivation and further argument, especially given how natural it is to describe Fatima as knowing in this case. For further support for the view that agents in cases like Fatima’s retain their knowledge see, for example, Reed (2010); Gerken (2011, 2017); Locke (2014, 2015) and Jackson (2019).

offers compelling evidence which suggests that in uttering a biased interrogative, and hence in seeking confirmation, speakers typically express interrogative attitudes. This helps to explain why it's often infelicitous to combine biased interrogatives with an overt denial of an interrogative attitude.

- (10) #I'm not wondering whether gold is an element, but (gold is an element,) isn't it? (Millson; 2020, 688)

However, it is unclear that this will hold universally across all cases of inquiry. Specifically, in some cases of inquiring while knowing, it appears that interrogative attitudes may not have any necessary role. If one already knows that  $p$ , it seems rationally permissible, in at least some cases, for one to lack an attitude of curiosity or wonder concerning the answer to the question.

Consider again Fatima, the expert surgeon. She need not be wondering or curious about whether it's the left kidney. In fact, it's rather straining to interpret her as having one of these interrogative attitudes, given that she's a medical expert and that she already knows that it's the left kidney. Nonetheless, her lacking this attitude is perfectly consistent with her having a desire *to confirm that it's the left kidney* or a desire *to be sure that or to be certain that it is*. More generally, the desire to be certain or sure that  $p$  need not entail that one has an interrogative attitude directed towards the question of whether  $p$ . If this is right, then it suggests the possibility of rational inquiry without interrogative inquiring attitudes.

One way to approach this observation is to contend that the inquiring attitudes exhibit more diversity than, to my knowledge, has previously been recognized. In addition to *interrogative* inquiring attitudes (e.g., wonder or curiosity concerning *whether p*), there may also be *propositional* inquiring attitudes (e.g., the desire to confirm *that p* or to be sure *that p*) which may guide one's inquiry. These two species of inquiring attitudes may not be mutually exclusive—perhaps one may have an attitude of curiosity directed towards the question of *whether p*, while also desiring to confirm that  $p$ . However, in other cases, one might just have the desire to confirm *that p* or, just have an attitude of curiosity directed towards the question of *whether p*. These issues are complex and require further reflection and argument. I solely hope to sketch the outline of an alternative way forward in understanding the inquiring attitudes.

## 5.2 The Aim(s) of Inquiry

The plausibility of rationally inquiring while knowing also sheds new light on debates surrounding the aim(s) of inquiry. A popular view is that the aim of inquiry is knowledge.<sup>10</sup> However, cases like Fatima's suggest that the aim of inquiry is not (or not only) knowledge. If one has already achieved the aim

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<sup>10</sup>For defence of this view see, for example, Hannon (2019); Kappel (2010); Kelp (2011, 2014, 2020, 2021); Kvanvig (2009); Millar (2011); Rysiew (2012); Whitcomb (2010, 2017) and Sapir and van Elswyk (Forth). This view is also strongly suggested across the work of Friedman, see especially Friedman (2017): 309-311 and fn. 14, Friedman (2013a): 145, and Friedman (2019b): 299. See Archer (2018) for criticisms of this view.

of inquiry—if one already knows that  $p$ —then why inquire any further? If knowledge is the goal of inquiry, then inquiring after one knows (especially if one is aware of their knowledge) seems superfluous or potentially even irrational. But, Fatima’s inquiry doesn’t appear to be superfluous, nor does it seem irrational.

Cases of rationally inquiring while knowing thus help to uncover the value of inquiry in attaining epistemic states other than knowledge or justified belief. Fatima doesn’t aim to gain knowledge from her inquiry, she’s already got that. What she’s striving towards is something more—she wants to be sure or certain that  $p$ .

Such cases thus draw our attention to forms of epistemic improvement, other than coming to know the answer to a question, that inquirers might have the goal of attaining. This may include epistemic states such as certainty or being free from doubt concerning the answer to a question. However, to be clear, this is not to say that all inquiries are aimed at certainty. Rather, the suggestion is that inquiry may not be confined to just one single aim or unified goal (e.g., knowing the answer to a question), but may involve a diverse range of epistemic aims, all of which take the form of a general kind of epistemic improvement. These may include, but are not limited to: gaining a justified belief, a more accurate credence, knowledge, certainty, or an epistemic state where one’s knowledge is over-determined by the evidence such that if one were to lose some of their evidence, one could still maintain their knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Millson identifies a puzzle arising from the incompatibility of two plausible zetetic norms: *Don’t Believe and Inquire* (DBI) and *Inquire to Confirm Belief* (ICB). I’ve argued that this tension runs much deeper than Millson has suggested. Inquiry into a question is compatible not only with belief in the question’s answer, but also knowledge of it. In light of this, the best way to resolve the puzzle is to reject DBI. It can be rationally permissible to inquire into a question while outright believing, or even knowing, its answer. Reflecting upon such cases, makes salient at least two fruitful areas which merit further attention in the epistemology of inquiry. The first concerns the nature of the inquiring attitudes, which might be more diverse than one might have initially thought. And the second concerns the aim(s) of inquiry, which may involve more than just coming to know the answer to a question.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>I develop and defend the view that inquiry aims at epistemic improvement, and that the inquiring attitudes come in both propositional and interrogative forms, in Falbo (ms.).

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