

Inquiry and Higher-Order Evidence

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Abstract: What is the epistemic significance of higher-order evidence? Recently, philosophers have defended *zetetic* approaches to higher-order evidence, which appeal to factors related to inquiry. According to such views, in response to higher order evidence, one should open inquiry and deliberate on the question further. While it can often be productive to inquire in response to higher-order evidence, whether one should inquire is settled on primarily practical—not purely epistemic—grounds. I defend various cases where one can rationally respond to higher-order evidence without engaging in zetetic activity of any kind. Zetetic responses to higher-order evidence are thus bound to be incomplete. Reflection on these cases suggests a deeper lesson: epistemic norms never require us to engage in inquiry or to perform any action whatsoever. Zetetic proposals give rise to an overly demanding and implausible picture of normative epistemology, according to which epistemic norms are in the business of helping us to settle the answers to our questions. However, epistemic norms do not—and importantly should not—be expected to fulfill this role.

1. Introduction

We're limited and fallible thinkers. It's unfortunate, though virtually inevitable, that we will sometimes make mistakes when evaluating our evidence. We may misjudge, overestimate, and underperform. Sometimes these mistakes remain beneath the surface; they go unnoticed and unaccounted for. But other times are different: we may encounter *higher-order* evidence, which speaks to the potential quality of our evidential assessments and rational faculties. To get a feel for this sort of evidence, let us consider some influential examples.

Detective Darcy is consumed by an investigation. After pouring countless hours into her inquiry, she comes to believe that Lucy is guilty. Darcy shares this revelation with her boss, who informs her that she's been awake for over 36 hours, and that in the past she has made critical errors while being sleep-deprived. Darcy takes this concern seriously; she lowers her confidence in Lucy's guilt and goes home to sleep on it.¹

Next, imagine Amelia, a pilot who is taking a trip in her small, unpressurized airplane. She wants to figure out whether she has enough fuel to make it to Hawaii, so she performs a series of

¹ This case is adapted from (Horowitz; 2013).

complex calculations. As a result, she comes to believe that she has enough fuel to make the trip. Filled with excitement, she begins to envision herself sipping Mai Tais on the beach, but then she gazes down at the altimeter and realizes that she is at a serious risk of hypoxia: a condition which impairs one's reasoning skills while leaving them feeling completely sure of their judgements. Amelia is no longer confident that she has enough fuel, so she plans to land at a closer airport.²

Next is Lorenzo: a participant in a logic puzzle experiment. After completing a series of logic puzzles, he is told by the experimenters that the coffee he was sipping just moments ago—freely and without hesitation—was laced with a fast-acting drug that significantly impairs logical reasoning skills for 80% of people who consume it, while leaving them feeling clear-headed and sure of their judgements. Initially, Lorenzo was confident that he had correctly solved the logic puzzles, but now he's having doubts. Feeling uneasy (and creeped out), he suspends judgment and no longer believes that he has successfully solved the puzzles.³

Last, and perhaps most plausibly—if you're not an overworked detective, an adventurous pilot, or someone who has a penchant for partaking in ethically questionable logic experiments—you may encounter the *disagreement* of an epistemic peer. An epistemic peer is, roughly, someone who shares all the same first-order evidence as you and who is just as good as you when it comes to evaluating this evidence. A significant portion of the literature on higher-order evidence has centered upon the epistemology of peer disagreement. Consider the following influential case from Christensen (2007). This case will be our focus in what follows.

Restaurant: When you go to dinner with your friend Frankie you always agree to split the bill, including a 20% tip. When the bill arrives you do a mental-math calculation to figure out what you each owe. Based on your calculations, you come to believe that you each owe \$32. But according to Frankie's calculation you each owe \$37. You have no reason to distrust Frankie's judgement, and you know that her mental-math skills are no better or worse than your own. You also share the same first-order evidence: the bill is sitting right there on the table. So, you don't have an edge over Frankie, evidence-wise.

Let us assume that you are the one who got the math right. So, Frankie's disagreement is *misleading* higher-order evidence: the amount owed really is \$32 and your calculation was perfect. How, if at all,

² This example is adapted from (Elga; 2007).

³ This case is adapted from Christensen (2010).

should you revise your belief when you learn that Frankie disagrees with you? As you might suspect, philosophers are divided on how to answer this question. Here is a sketch of just two possible responses.

Become less confident. (a.k.a. Conciliate)⁴

Higher-order evidence from peer disagreement functions as a *defeater*. When you learn that Frankie disagrees with you, this defeats your justification for believing that you each owe \$32. You should instead suspend judgement or lower confidence in your view. This is the rational response to higher-order evidence from disagreement, even if your assessment of the first-order evidence was correct.

Stick to your guns. (a.k.a. Be Steadfast)⁵

Higher-order evidence from peer disagreement is *not* a defeater. When you learn that Frankie disagrees with you, it is rationally permissible for you to stick to your guns, and to maintain your belief that you each owe \$32. After all, this belief is supported—indeed, *entailed*—by your first-order evidence.

Conciliatory and Steadfast positions have been widely discussed in the literature, but they by no means exhaust all the possible positions one might adopt in this debate. The literature on the epistemology of disagreement is vast, and there are further accounts which do not fall neatly into either of these camps.⁶

However, our main goal is not to defend a particular view of higher-order evidence, but to evaluate the prospects of a new style of view which has been gaining traction across recent literature, namely: *zetetic* responses to higher-order evidence.⁷ Zetetic responses to higher-order evidence appeal to factors related to inquiry to explain the rational significance of higher-order evidence. Zetetic views

⁴ Conciliatory positions have been defended by, for example: Christensen (2007, 2009, 2014); Feldman (2006); Feldman and Warfield (2010); Matheson (2015); Fleisher (2021); González de Prado (2020).

⁵ For defenses of steadfast positions see, for example, van Inwagen (1996); Kelly (2005); Weintraub (2013); Titelbaum (2015).

⁶ See, for example: Lasonen-Aarnio (2014); Worsnip (2014); Buchak (2021); Jackson (2020).

⁷ “Zetetic” means, roughly: “proceeding by inquiry.” I adopt this terminology from Friedman (2020), though it can be traced back to at least the ancient skeptics. For an overview of zetetic approaches in epistemology see Falbo (Forthcoming).

of higher-order evidence are reflective of a broader trend in epistemology toward a “zetetic turn”, namely, an approach on which epistemic norms are centered upon, or at minimum apply to, inquiry.⁸

Here’s the plan. In §2, I outline motivations for zetetic accounts of higher-order evidence, with a focus on recent views defended by Palmira (2023, Forthcoming) and Staffel (2021, 2023, Forthcoming). In §3, I defend a series of cases that cast doubt on zetetic responses to higher-order evidence. In §4, I consider a possible way that a defender of a zetetic approach may respond to these cases, and I argue that it is unsuccessful. In §5, I defend some tentative lessons concerning the relationship between inquiry and epistemology. The main upshot is this: epistemic norms never require us to engage in inquiry or to perform any action whatsoever. Obligations to inquire fall squarely into the domain of the *practical* (or the moral), not the epistemic. As a result, zetetic proposals give rise to an overly demanding and implausible picture of normative epistemology on which epistemic norms are in the business of helping us to settle the answers to our questions. However, epistemic norms do not—and importantly should not—be expected to fulfill this role.

2. Zetetic Responses to Higher-Order Evidence

Before turning to zetetic accounts, it will be helpful to have a view of inquiry on the table. It is widely accepted that inquiry is an intentional and goal-directed activity, with an epistemic aim. However, there is an ongoing debate concerning what the aim of inquiry is. For our purposes we can remain neutral on this front.⁹ All that’s important to highlight is that unlike belief or credence—which are doxastic *states*—inquiry is an intentional *action*. It’s an activity that we engage in, typically when we are trying to figure out the answer to a question. This, I take it, is uncontroversial among philosophers who otherwise have differing views on the norms of inquiry.¹⁰

Inquiry is also a temporally extended activity: it involves a range of different stages which unfold over some interval of time. If you want to figure out whether garlic is toxic to dogs, you can

⁸ For some discussion see, for example, Friedman (2020); Thorstad (2022); Haziza (2023); Domínguez (2023); Falbo (2023b), Fleisher (2024).

⁹ For some defenses of the view that inquiry aims at knowledge see: Whitcomb (2010); Kelp (2011, 2021); Sapir and van Elswyk (2021); Carter and Hawthorne (forthcoming); Haziza (forthcoming), and for a more pluralistic account of the aims of inquiry see Archer (2021); Falbo (2023a), who argue that inquiry aims at epistemic improvement, broadly construed.

¹⁰ One notable exception is Siegel (Forthcoming). Siegel focuses on cases of what she calls “low inquiry”, and specifically, how inquiry can progress during episodes of mind wandering. The relationship between inquiry and mind-wandering (and more spontaneous aspects of inquiry) is fascinating, however for simplicity, and following much of the literature on inquiry, the arguments that follow will focus exclusively on cases of deliberate and intentional inquiry.

pursue this question in several different ways. You might: Google it, ask a trusted friend, consult an expert veterinarian, read a book, perform a risky taste test with Rover, and so on. Some of these pursuits are obviously better than others. We can classify these activities as belonging to what we might call the *evidence gathering* phase of inquiry. They are activities that an inquirer performs to acquire evidence which is needed to answer their question.

There is also what we might call the *deliberation* phase of inquiry. This is the part of inquiry where we actively evaluate our evidence and attempt to figure out its significance. Imagine Detective Darcy, diligently mulling over the crime scene, trying to fit the pieces together so she can determine who committed the crime. She isn't gathering evidence, but instead processing it. Of course, in real-life our inquiries are messy, and they don't always follow a linear path from evidence collection to deliberation. For example, during a complex episode of deliberation, you may discover, stumble upon, or be motivated to seek out new evidence. There is also much more involved in the activity of inquiry beyond gathering evidence and deliberating on it. But for our purposes it will be sufficient to focus on only these phases of inquiry, as they are most relevant to the question of how we ought to rationally respond to higher-order evidence.¹¹

Back to higher-order evidence. You are sitting at the dinner table, stuffed, having just finished a satisfying meal. You reach for your wallet, ready to pay the bill, but then Frankie disagrees with you. Oh no! Now what? Zetetic approaches to higher-order evidence consider the dynamics of inquiry when explaining how we should respond to higher-order evidence. They can be characterized broadly as follows.

Inquire.

The proper response to higher-order evidence is *zetetic*. When you find out that Frankie disagrees with you, you should re-open the question and investigate the matter further. For example, you should re-deliberate or double-check your math to make sure that you didn't make a mistake.¹²

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the different stages of inquiry see Friedman (Forthcoming).

¹² For recent defenses of zetetic accounts see Palmira (2019, 2023); Staffel (2023); Anaya (2021); Yarandi (2023). For a defense of views which bring zetetic norms into the fold of normative epistemology see, for example: Friedman (2020, Forthcoming); Kelp (2021); Flores and Woodard (2023); Fleisher (Forthcoming). For some resistance, see, for example: Thorstad (2022), Falbo (2023b), Arpaly (2023), and Domínguez (2023).

This response has intuitive appeal. When you learn that Frankie disagrees with you, the most natural next step is to double-check your math and deliberate upon the question further. More generally, the thought goes, when we encounter higher-order evidence we ought to open the question and investigate the matter further. What should you do with your belief in the meantime, while you're inquiring? We will explore this question further in the following sections.

2.1 The Duty to Double-Check

Palmira (2023, Forthcoming) argues that higher-order evidence generates a *zetetic* obligation to inquire.¹³ More precisely, he defends the following norm:

Duty to Double-Check: Whenever one has evidence E that bears on p and then receives sufficiently strong higher-order evidence about E , one ought to double-check whether p .

Duty to Double-Check concerns higher-order evidence which conflicts with, or calls into doubt, one's assessment of the first-order evidence. It's possible that one might receive *confirming* higher-order evidence. For example, you might discover the *agreement* of an epistemic peer or superior. This is not the kind of higher-order evidence that concerns us here. Accordingly, whenever we encounter sufficiently strong higher-order evidence we should engage in an inquiry and double-check our answer to the question.¹⁴ Applied to your dinner with Frankie, Duty to Double-Check says that you should re-open inquiry and double-check your answer to the question.

In response to higher-order evidence from disagreement, this norm says that you should no longer remain confident in, or retain your belief, in the disputed proposition. The reason for this, Palmira (2023) argues, has to do with the relationship between rational inquiry and rational belief retention. If one is permitted to believe that p , then one is also permitted to take the question of *whether* p to be settled. But, and here's the rub, if one ought to double-check *whether* p , then one ought not take the question of *whether* p to be settled. To inquire into the question of *whether* p while believing

¹³ Also see Palmira (2019) for earlier related arguments.

¹⁴ In what follows I will assume, following Palmira (2023), that in cases like Restaurant the higher-order evidence from disagreement counts as being *sufficiently strong* such that Duty to Double-Check applies. However, see (Palmira; Forthcoming, 15) for discussion of cases where higher-order evidence is weaker, and where it wouldn't trigger an obligation to double-check on his view. I put these cases aside in what follows.

that p would be tantamount to being settled and unsettled upon the answer to the question. But this is an incoherent mix of doxastic commitments.

Palmira (2023, 16) defends two related principles, which, when taken together, give rise to a conflict between a zetetic obligation to inquire into a question, Q , and the permission to retain one's belief that p , where p is a possible answer to Q .

Double-Checking and Not-Settling: If one ought to double-check whether p , then one ought not to take the question whether p to be settled.

Retaining and Settling: If S is permitted to retain their belief that p , then S is permitted to take the question whether p to be settled.

These principles connect norms of inquiry to norms governing belief retention. What's involved in taking a question to be settled? Palmira (2023) argues that this involves *passive zetetic behavior*. If one takes Q to be settled, then one doesn't inquire into Q , wonder about the answer to Q , gather evidence about Q , allocate attention or cognitive resources to figuring out the answer to Q , and so on (Palmira; 2023, 17). In short, if you're settled upon Q , then you're permitted to not inquire into Q .

Retaining and Settling is motivated by the idea that if you're permitted to believe that p , then you are also permitted to be zetetically passive about the question of whether p . For example, if you have sufficient evidence which justifies you in believing that garlic is toxic to dogs, then you're permitted to take this question to be settled. You're not under any zetetic obligation to investigate this matter.

When combined with Duty to Double-Check these norms generate a tension between retaining one's belief that p and double-checking whether p . We can formulate this line of reasoning as follows:¹⁵

¹⁵ A related idea is found in Friedman (2019b), who argues for a zetetic norm called Don't Believe and Inquire (DBI). According to this norm, one ought not inquire into Q while believing an answer to Q . When discussing cases where an agent is plausibly under an obligation to inquire, she says:

...if one ought not both inquire into Q at t and believe p^Q at t (this is just DBI) and one ought to inquire into Q at t , then one ought not believe p^Q at t . Let's call this principle OIA. I'm assuming OIA here without argument, but I hope it has some intuitive plausibility. Roughly: if subjects ought not both believe and inquire at some time, but they ought to inquire at that time, then we can say outright that they ought not believe at that time. (Friedman; 2019b, 305)

Also see the related discussion in Friedman (2019a) and Friedman (Forthcoming).

1. If S receives sufficiently strong higher-order evidence, then S ought to double-check whether p. (Duty to Double-Check)
2. If S ought to double-check whether p, then S ought *not* take the question of whether p to be settled. (Double-Checking and Not-Settling)
3. So, if one receives sufficiently strong higher-order evidence, then one *ought not* take the question of whether p to be settled. (From 1 and 2)
4. If S is permitted to retain their belief that *p*, then S is permitted to take the question whether *p* to be settled. (Retaining and Settling)
5. If one receives sufficiently strong higher-order evidence, then one is *not* permitted to retain their belief that *p*. (From 3 and 4)

On this view, it would be irrational to maintain your belief (or to be settled upon the view) that the amount owed is \$32 once you discover that Frankie disagrees with you. This is because learning about this higher-order evidence generates a *zetetic* obligation to double-check whether the amount owed is \$32, and this zetetic duty is in tension with continuing to believe that the amount owed is \$32.

It is important to note that this approach generates a result that's identical to a Conciliatory view: both views maintain that the subject is no longer justified in believing that the answer is \$32. However, it gets to this result via a very different route, namely: a zetetic obligation to inquire. According to a Conciliatory approach, after discovering that Frankie disagrees with you, you ought to become less confident or suspend judgment upon whether *p*—not because you are under an obligation to inquire, but because higher-order evidence itself functions as a *defeater*: it defeats your justification for believing that the answer is \$32.

Now let's turn to a related but distinct zetetic approach: the *Unmooring View* of higher-order evidence, defended by Staffel (2023, Forthcoming).

2.2 The Unmooring View of Higher-Order Evidence

Staffel (2023) argues that the rational response to higher-order evidence from disagreement is to no longer hold a *terminal* attitude towards the proposition that you each owe \$32, and instead to adopt a *transitional* attitude. The distinction between these two attitudes is at the core of the Unmooring View.

Terminal attitudes are the attitudes we adopt when we conclude our deliberation and take ourselves to be finished evaluating our evidence. *Transitional* attitudes are more provisional, and we

adopt them as a way of keeping track of our evaluation of our evidence while deliberation is still ongoing. Transitional attitudes reflect: “an agent’s confidence in different possible answers to a question while they are in the midst of an extended deliberation” (Staffel; 2023, 245).¹⁶

The difference between these attitudes is most salient when we consider an inquirer who is evaluating a complex and fixed body of evidence. Consider the following example from Staffel.

Detective Fletcher: Manny has committed a murder and tries to frame Fred for it. Detective Fletcher, upon initially inspecting the evidence, responds as Manny has planned, and becomes 90% confident that Fred committed the murder. However, as she evaluates the evidence more carefully, she discovers incongruencies that ultimately lead her to conclude that Fred was framed, so she reduces her confidence that Fred is the murderer to 2%. She also comes to believe that Fred didn’t do it. (Staffel; 2023, 243)

Detective Fletcher is in the middle of an ongoing deliberation: she is trying to figure out who the murderer is by carefully evaluating her evidence. Due to Manny’s very expert framing attempt, Fletcher initially becomes 90% confident that Fred is the murderer. But this is just a preliminary assessment of the evidence, and she knows that her deliberation is still in its early stages. At this point, Fletcher’s attitude is merely *transitional*: while it encodes Fletcher’s current take on the evidence, it doesn’t reflect her settled or final judgement. Instead, it functions to help Fletcher keep track of her evidence as her deliberation unfolds. As she continues her deliberation, she gains a more informed understanding of her evidence and realizes that Fred was framed. She finishes her deliberation and adopts a *terminal* attitude, namely: she believes that Fred is innocent.

Staffel outlines three main differences between paradigmatic instances of terminal and transitional attitudes (Staffel; 2023, 244-245). The first difference concerns *stability*: terminal attitudes typically remain stable unless we encounter new evidence or discover an error in our reasoning, while transitional attitudes may fluctuate significantly while deliberating on a fixed body of evidence.

The second difference concerns *action*. Terminal attitudes typically function as bases for action, whereas transitional attitudes do not. In some cases, with a gun to your head or under significant time pressure, one might be forced to act based on a merely transitional attitude. If there is only a minute left to complete the exam, and you haven’t finished your reasoning through a

¹⁶ Staffel has defended the distinction between transitional and terminal attitudes in detail across a series of recent papers: (Staffel; 2019, 2021a, b).

question, you might quickly jot down your best guess. So, in some cases one may act based on only a transitional attitude, however, given their preliminary status, Staffel argues that these attitudes typically don't function as bases for action.

The last difference involves *updating*. Typically, we update other relevant attitudes that are logically or probabilistically related to our terminal attitudes, at least in so far as we're being coherent, but we don't do the same for merely transitional attitudes. Staffel argues that transitional attitudes are *insulated* from other reasoning contexts that aren't directly relevant to the issue that's under deliberation. It makes sense for Detective Fletcher to not update her other attitudes in light of her merely transitional credence that Fred is the murderer. This may be a potential waste of time and energy, given that her attitude may change as her deliberation continues to unfold.

Notably, given their different normative profiles, transitional and terminal attitudes have different standards of evaluation. What justifies terminal attitudes? Here's Staffel (2023):

...for an agent to have a doxastically justified terminal attitude, it must be properly based on this *first-order* evidence (or be reached via a suitable process of reasoning). ...If the agent receives credible higher-order evidence that calls the quality of their reasoning into question, they *can't have a justified terminal attitude* until the relevant parts of their reasoning have been checked or replaced. (Staffel; 2023, 251, italics added)

So, one can only have a justified *terminal* attitude if it's supported by one's first-order evidence. Similar to a Conciliatory approach, this view accepts that higher-order evidence is a defeater: one can't have a justified *terminal* attitude if they have higher-order evidence which calls into question the quality of their reasoning. The Unmooring View parts ways with the Conciliationist (and moves closer towards a Steadfast position) insofar as it accepts that it can't be rational to have a terminal attitude that is not supported by one's first-order evidence.

The rational status of transitional attitudes is different; their justification isn't tightly linked to what the first-order evidence supports. Detective Fletcher's transitional attitudes at the start of her investigation—her initial 90% confidence that Fred is the murderer—is justified even though it isn't ultimately supported by her first-order evidence. This is because (let's assume) Detective Fletcher's attitude is properly sensitive to the evidence she has evaluated up until that point, she is using a permissible cognitive process, and her reasoning is properly based upon the evidence she has considered thus far in her investigation (Staffel; 2023, 247).

So, terminal attitudes are only justified to the extent that they fit with, and are based upon, the agent's first-order evidence. Transitional attitudes are different: they can be justified even when they are not supported by the agent's first-order evidence.¹⁷

How does this relate to higher-order evidence? According to the Unmooring View, in cases like Restaurant, when you receive misleading higher-order evidence from Frankie's disagreement, you are no longer justified in holding a *terminal* attitude, and instead should adopt a *transitional* attitude towards your view. Here's why. Higher-order evidence functions as a defeater: it *unmoors* or unsettles your previously justified *terminal* attitude (Staffel; 2023, 249) and reverts (or demotes) it back to being justified only as a *transitional* attitude.

On this view higher-order evidence defeats one's justification for holding a terminal belief in the answer to Q. However, this approach acknowledges an attitude that would be rational for the agent to adopt, namely: a *transitional* attitude, where this attitude is defined in terms of its role in ongoing deliberation—it is the kind of attitude one has towards possible answers to a question, when they have not yet finished evaluating their evidence.

3. Some Resistance to Zetetic Approaches

Is one ever under an *epistemic* obligation to inquire or to deliberate in response to higher-order evidence? I don't think so. In this section I raise some difficulties for zetetic accounts of higher-order evidence. The main concern is this: zetetic accounts are unable to explain the rational significance of higher-order evidence because epistemic norms never require that we engage in inquiry or deliberation, or that we perform any specific action whatsoever, or so I will argue.

3.1 Order of Explanation

Given Duty to Double-Check, when you learn about Frankie's disagreement you are zetetically obligated to double check the answer to the question, Q. And because inquiry into Q is rationally incompatible with believing an answer to Q, you should no longer retain your belief that you each owe \$32. But this explanation gets the order of explanation backwards. Why should you inquire when Frankie disagrees with you? You are motivated to inquire *because* you are no longer justified in

¹⁷ For further discussion see Staffel (2021) for a defense of *pro tem rationality*.

maintaining your belief, not the other way around. It is not that you should no longer believe your view *because* you should inquire.

What should you do in Restaurant when you learn about Frankie's disagreement? Here is how the series of events should unfold according to Palmira's Duty to Double-Check:

1. **Initial Inquiry:** The bill arrives, and you do some quick mental math to determine how much you each owe.
2. **Belief:** Based on your calculation, you come to justifiably believe that you each owe \$32.
3. **Higher-order Evidence:** You learn that Frankie disagrees with you. This disagreement is misleading higher-order evidence.
4. **Zetetic Obligation:** Upon learning about Frankie's disagreement, you are now under a zetetic duty to double-check whether you each owe \$32.
5. **No longer believe:** Given that you ought to double-check whether you each owe \$32, you are no longer justified in believing that you each owe \$32. Believing an answer to Q while inquiring into Q is *incoherent*. (Palmira; 2023, 16)¹⁸

To see why this approach gets the order of explanation backwards consider a spin on the Restaurant case. Just as you learn about Frankie's disagreement, a massive fire erupts in the restaurant (the chef let his flambéing technique get away from him). The fire alarm is blaring, and you and Frankie rush to the nearest exit. Thankfully, nobody is harmed, but everything in the restaurant is incinerated, including your dinner bill. One tiny benefit of this otherwise devastating event is that you and Frankie are no longer on the hook to pay for your dinner. In this case, you are under no obligation to inquire or to double-check your answer to Q. This is simply because figuring out the answer to this question no longer matters. However, even if there is no zetetic need to inquire, we can still ask whether you are justified in believe that you each owed \$32. Intuitively, this belief is not justified. Why not?

Zetetic obligations do not explain why you are no longer justified in retaining your belief in Restaurant. Instead, what explains why one ought to inquire is some practical goal of the agent,

¹⁸ Also see related arguments in Friedman (2019b).

coupled with the fact that they are no longer justified in believing an answer to the question. Consider how Henderson (2022) describes the relationship between higher-order evidence and inquiry.

If we are not confident about our beliefs, this should provoke hesitation to act. It should also provide the stimulus for active attempts to improve one's epistemic situation, either by removing impediments to one's own rational processing powers, or, particularly in the case of disagreement, by stimulating further inquiry, deliberation and consultation. (Henderson; 2022, 522)

This series of events is commonplace. When we encounter higher-order evidence, it casts doubt upon the reliability of our belief forming methods (perhaps we miscalculated). In response, we are often motivated to inquire to restore our confidence and to regain a justified and informed stance on the matter. If that's right, then we often inquire in response to higher-order evidence *because* we are no longer justified in maintaining our belief. Our lacking a justified belief is what prompts us to inquire in the first place. It's not that our belief is rendered unjustified *because* we are under an obligation to inquire. If this is right, then it can't be features of inquiry—i.e. it can't be a tension between inquiring and believing—which explains why the agent is no longer justified in retaining their belief. The rational requirement to suspend judgment or to lower confidence in response to higher-order evidence isn't parasitic on the obligation to inquire.

Let's compare this result to the Unmooring View of higher-order evidence. This approach doesn't face a similar objection because it accepts that higher-order evidence can function as a defeater. According to the Unmooring View, in response to higher-order evidence the agent's belief is no longer justified as a *terminal* attitude and instead gets demoted to the status of a *transitional* attitude, where transitional attitudes are defined in terms of their function in ongoing deliberation. Staffel (2023) says:

Receiving credible higher-order evidence that indicates that one's reasoning is likely flawed unmoors the previously settled conclusion of one's reasoning and throws the agent back into a transitional stage of their deliberation. (Staffel; 2023, 256-255)

However, why should the agent necessarily be *thrown* back into a transitional stage of deliberation? Perhaps they may not need to deliberate upon the question at all? One should only deliberate further upon Q if they care or need to figure out the answer to the question, given their aims and interests.

For instance, in Restaurant it seems plausible that what explains why you should deliberate further on the matter is the fact that you need to pay the dinner bill (assuming a fire doesn't break out). The sheer fact that one has received higher-order evidence doesn't, in and of itself, seem to require that one deliberate on the matter further. There is always another option on the table, namely: a settled form of suspending judgment.¹⁹

So, while higher-order evidence directly defeats the justification for your belief, it doesn't seem to require you to deliberate. Instead, the reason why you should inquire in the Restaurant case is because it matters to you that you pay the bill. When your belief is defeated by Frankie's disagreement, you inquire because want or need to figure out the answer to the question. But this is a *practical* and not an epistemic reason to inquire. Further deliberation is not necessary and so the adoption of a transitional attitude seems to be only at most an *optional* response to higher-order evidence.

Across both accounts there is thus a worry that the zetetic features of cases which motivate these view (in, for example, case like Restaurant) are merely *contingent*—they stand or fall with the practical aims of the agent—and thus they can't ground an explanation of the epistemic impact of higher-order evidence. I will further explore and develop this objection in §3.2 and §3.3.

3.2 Epistemic Criticism

I have suggested that the reasons to double-check or to deliberate in response to higher-order evidence are primarily *practical*, not purely epistemic. They concern the zetetic ambitions and pursuits of inquirers: whether they care or need to settle the answer to a question. If this is right, then higher-order evidence doesn't generate an epistemic obligation to double-check, nor does it require one to deliberate upon the question. Instead, the obligation to inquire flows from the agent's contingent zetetic goals.

Palmira (2023) anticipates this objection, and he offers a response to it. He argues that Duty to Double-Check is a genuinely epistemic norm because it is appropriate to *epistemically criticize* agents who violate it. Imagine that you're sitting down at the restaurant and then Frankie disagrees with you. Oh no! Being the intellectually humble person you are, you begin to re-check your math, but then

¹⁹ Perhaps this suspended judgement is a *transitional* attitude and is thus captured by the Unmooring View. I discuss this possibility, and resist it, in §4.

you look up and notice that Frankie is just sitting there, not doing anything. The conversation with Frankie unfolds as follows:

You: “Why are you just sitting there? Shouldn’t you double-check your math?”

Frankie: “What? No way! The answer is \$37 – I don’t need to check.”

You: “But how can you be so sure? You’re being irrational and, frankly, dogmatic. You should double-check your math to see if it was *you* who made the mistake.”

Frankie: “Chill! Don’t be so dramatic. I didn’t make a mistake. The answer is \$37 – trust me.”

You: “I don’t trust you!”

Intuitively, this criticism seems appropriate. It would be unwise to place your epistemic trust in Frankie on this matter. What is epistemic trust? According to Kauppinen (2018), one reduces epistemic trust in another by lowering the level of credibility that they assign to them as a testifier (at least as it concerns the topic under discussion), or by being less willing to collaborate with them in joint inquiry. The appropriateness of this epistemic criticism functions as a diagnostic tool: it is evidence, Palmira (2023) argues, that a distinctively epistemic norm has been violated.²⁰

For the sake of argument, let’s grant that a distinctive sort of epistemic criticism is appropriate in this case. Is this evidence that there is an *epistemic* obligation for agents to double-check in response to higher-order evidence? I don’t think so. Imagine a twist on the Restaurant case (this time with no fire):

High Roller: While you cherish your dinners with Frankie, those meals tend to be delicious yet humble. Dinners with Taylor, your billionaire friend, are extravagant and oozing with luxury. You can’t afford such fancy meals, but you always offer to pitch in (it wouldn’t feel right if you didn’t). The agreement is that you will cover the tip, which is always 20%. The bill arrives and as expected, it’s an exorbitant amount of money. You do some mental math and get the result that you owe \$87. Taylor—who is just as good at you when it comes to doing mental math—gets the result that you owe \$91.

You and Taylor disagree about how much you each owe. But then she says the following: “You know what, I’m not sure what we each owe, but honestly it doesn’t matter! Don’t worry about it—it’s my

²⁰ Also see Flores and Woodard (2023) for a related argument when defending epistemic norms on evidence gathering.

treat.” You agree to this (you don’t want to make a fuss and Taylor is a billionaire). You both suspend judgment on the question, Taylor hands her platinum deluxe credit card to the waiter and tell him to add \$400 tip, and neither of you investigate the matter further. In this scenario, it would be incredibly awkward and inappropriate (not to mention uncouth) to respond to Taylor with: “I don’t trust you, Taylor. You’re being irrational! Why aren’t you re-checking your math!”

It's not appropriate to epistemically criticize agents who suspend judgment in response to higher-order evidence. If that’s right, then epistemic criticism doesn’t provide evidence for there being a distinctly epistemic obligation to inquire in response to higher-order evidence. Instead, one can evade epistemic criticism by suspending judgment.

This is exactly the result we should expect if the zetetic obligation to inquire is practical, not epistemic. Once the practical aims of the agent change, or if they find some non-zetetic way to achieve their goal (e.g., by simply passing the credit card to the waiter without a care in the world), then the need to inquire also dissolves. Appreciating this point—specifically that reasons to engage in inquiry are primarily practical, not epistemic—raises further challenges for zetetic proposals.

3.3 Further Cases where Inquiry is Superfluous or Counterproductive

Zetetic accounts are unable to explain the rational response to higher-order evidence in cases where the agent’s practical aims don’t provide reasons to inquire. One notable feature of Restaurant, and many cases which are discussed in the literature on peer disagreement, is that they are most plausibly interpreted as cases where it matters to the individual that they figure out the answer to the question. Indeed, in these cases, the target individual is often construed as an inquirer with a specific zetetic agenda: Frankie needs to figure out how much is owed so he can pay the bill, Darcy the sleepy detective needs to figure out who the murderer is so she can crack the case and get justice for the victims, and so on. But other cases are different.

For example, consider Amelia, the potentially hypoxic pilot who is trying to figure out whether she has enough fuel to get to Hawaii (Elga; 2008). How should Amelia rationally respond to her higher-order evidence that she is at a serious risk of hypoxia? Intuitively, she ought to kiss her dreams of a Hawaiian vacation goodbye: she should become much less confident in the results of her calculations and should suspend judgment on the question of whether she has enough fuel to make the trip. Does it make sense to describe Amelia as being under a zetetic obligation to inquire? Should she adopt a transitional attitude and re-deliberate upon the question further? Given that she

might be hypoxic, further inquiry would be irrational: it wouldn't help to advance her zetetic aim of trying to figure out if she has enough fuel to get to Hawaii. But, while there is no obligation for her to inquire, there remains a rational requirement for her to suspend judgement.²¹

Additionally, as we saw in High Roller (§3.2), there are other cases where one can learn about the disagreement of an epistemic peer while not caring much, if at all, about answering the question. Despite this lack of zetetic interest, we can still ask how the individual ought to respond to their higher-order evidence. The question of how one should respond to higher-order evidence can be pulled apart from the question of how one should inquire. Consider another case.

Dog Park: Thomas is hanging out at the dog park with his friend Sam when suddenly, a dog runs past his visual field. Based on his immediate visual perception, he comes to believe that the dog is a Siberian Husky. However, later, while driving home, Sam casually remarks: “wasn't that Alaskan Malamute at the park cool!” Thomas responds: “I thought that was a Siberian Husky.” He shrugs his shoulders, suspends judgment, and doesn't dwell on the topic further.



Figure 1: Alaskan Malamute (right) and Siberian Husky (left).²²

In Dog Park, at no point does Thomas deliberate or inquire into the question of what breed the dog is. He doesn't acquire his initial belief that the dog is a Siberian Husky via inquiry, instead he comes to have this belief because of immediate perception, nor does he engage in inquiry upon learning that his friend Sam—who we can assume is an epistemic peer on this issue (he is just as good at identifying dog breeds)—believes differently. When Thomas learns about the higher-order evidence from disagreement, this calls his perceptual belief into doubt, and in response he suspends

²¹ Also see the arguments in González de Prado (Manuscript) who defends related cases of higher-order uncertainty at the end of inquiry: where further inquiry is unnecessary or unproductive.

²² Image Credit: <https://www.petmojo.com/siberian-huskies-vs-alaskan-malamutes-difference/> Date Accessed: January 14, 2025.

judgement. From his perspective, further inquiry or deliberation is unnecessary, given that he is indifferent about having an opinion on this matter.

Why do these cases matter? Here's why. They put pressure on the explanatory depth of zetetic proposals. Across a range of paradigmatic cases of higher-order evidence it appears that the agent is under no distinctly epistemic obligation to inquire or to deliberate. And, if there is a zetetic obligation (or reason) to deliberate or double-check, this seems to flow from the agent's contingent practical goals. So, when these goals are absent, so too will the agent lack a reason to engage in inquiry or deliberation in response to higher-order evidence.

It is often incredibly natural to attribute zetetic concern to an agent that discovered higher-order evidence—to view them as bothered by such evidence, and as wanting to figure out the answer to the question. But we should resist the idea that we are *epistemically* required to be zetetically ambitious in these cases. Lazy or incurious individuals can still rationally respond to their higher-order evidence—not by inquiring—but by suspending judgment or becoming less confident. Not all questions that cross our mind need to be figured out and settled once and for all; sometimes we are perfectly content with not resolving the answer to a question, especially if not much hangs on it and it has little or no impact on our life. So, while higher-order evidence is often an important indication that we may have made an error when evaluating our first-order evidence, this doesn't entail that we're need to re-trace our steps and fix our potential epistemic mistakes. It's permissible for epistemic agents to leave things hanging: to suspend judgment, and to have questions remain unresolved and unanswered. Life's too short.

To summarize: whether we should inquire is settled by purely practical factors. If that's right, then we can't explain how we ought to rationally respond to higher-order evidence by appeal to zetetic considerations. In various cases we can learn about, and rationally respond to, higher-order evidence without engaging in zetetic activity of any sort.

4 Transitional Attitudes without Deliberation?

A defender of the Unmooring View might respond as follows. Strictly speaking, rationally responding to higher-order evidence *doesn't* require that the subject engage in deliberation on the question. But still, in response to higher-order evidence, one is no longer justified in having a terminal attitude and should instead adopt a *transitional* attitude.

Staffel (2023) suggests a response along these lines in a footnote.

It's an interesting question what agents should do when they receive (misleading) higher-order evidence that their reasoning was flawed, but they no longer care about the right answer ...In this case, it is a waste of time to re-deliberate. *One thing we could say is that the agents in these cases are rational to leave in place their transitional attitudes, since they don't need terminal attitudes for action or further reasoning.* For re-deliberation to be a rational response to receiving higher-order evidence that one's initial reasoning was flawed, it is not sufficient that the higher-order evidence is credible. The agent must also have a continued interest in answering the question at hand. If the question no longer matters to the agent, it is better to leave the matter unsettled and avoid wasting cognitive resources. ...there is no point in re-deliberating if the agent is not in a position to improve on their previous reasoning in some way (Staffel; 2023, fn. 16, italics added).

Let's return to Amelia, the possibly hypoxic pilot. She suspends judgment upon whether she has enough fuel to get to Hawaii. Intuitively, this is the rational response to her higher-order evidence. What explains this? A dilemma emerges. On the one hand, we might think of this suspension as a *terminal* attitude. But if it's a terminal attitude then, according to the Unmooring View, it would be unjustified, given that the attitude conflicts with Amelia's first-order evidence. Her calculations were impeccable, and she does in fact have enough fuel to get to Hawaii (let's assume). This is an unwelcome result.

On the other hand, we might classify Amelia's suspended judgment as a *transitional* attitude. This is the more promising way to go, given that transitional attitudes can be rationally held, even if they conflict with the agent's first-order evidence. But why think that this attitude is transitional? Note that Amelia's attitude of suspended judgement never plays any role her deliberation. Additionally, her suspension appears to fit at least two of the characteristic features of terminal attitudes: it is stably held and it's used as a basis for action, e.g., it informs Amelia's decision to forgo her trip to Hawaii and to land at a closer destination.²³ The Unmooring view is unable to explain how suspended judgment could be a rational attitude for Amelia to have as a response to her higher-order evidence. Classifying this attitude as transitional appears to be ad hoc.

²³ The third criterion that Staffel proposes that is that we typically *update* our other probabilistically relevant beliefs considering terminal attitudes, but not our merely transitional attitudes. Perhaps the agent does not update their other beliefs (i.e., beliefs which are not relevant to the context of deliberation) in light of this attitude, but this need not be because the attitude is transitional; instead, it may be a result of the attitude being overly narrow in its subject matter.

A defender of the Unmooring View may reply as follows. They may argue that it's *not* ad hoc to describe Amelia's attitude of suspended judgment as transitional. Here's why. Amelia is operating under exceptional circumstances where she is *forced* to use her attitude as a basis for action. Thus, her using the attitude as a basis for action shouldn't be taken as evidence that the attitude is terminal, opposed to transitional. (This is like how a student might act on a merely transitional attitude when completing an exam under time constraints.) Furthermore, events may have unfolded differently: imagine that Amelia suspends judgment on whether she has enough fuel to make it to Hawaii, but then she soon remembers that she has packed her handy portable oxygen device. She retrieves it and begins to administer supplemental oxygen. With the risk of hypoxia behind her, Amelia returns to her deliberation. She carefully reexamines her evidence, re-checks her calculations, and concludes that she has enough fuel to make it to Hawaii (her dreams of sipping Mai Tais on the beach reemerge). So, once Amelia can rationally deliberate upon the question, her attitude *would* factor into her deliberation, and thus, it is properly classified as transitional.²⁴

This is a plausible way for the defender of the Unmooring view to explain the hypoxia case. But how far does this response go? There are further cases where it doesn't seem to apply. For example, consider cases like High Roller (§3.2) or Dog Park (§3.3). These are cases where, even if the agent can rationally deliberate on the question, they choose not to. In response to higher-order evidence from disagreement, subjects in these cases suspend judgement. Why don't they deliberate? The reason is straightforward: they don't care or need to answer the question. This is unlike the situation of Amelia (the no-longer-at-risk-of-hypoxia pilot). She wants to figure out how much fuel she has left because she has her heart set on a trip to Hawaii.

In these further cases, it isn't appropriate to classify these agent's attitude of suspended judgement as transitional. In Dog Park the agent's initial belief is not acquired via deliberation, nor does the agent deliberate upon learning that his friend disagrees. Of course, there is a sense in which the agent is open to revising their attitude of suspended judgment in response to learning about further evidence—but this is of course true of *all* the agent's attitudes, and so this can't be what makes the attitude *transitional* opposed to terminal. If this is right, then the Unmooring View is incomplete: it is unable to explain why adopting a settled form of suspended judgment is a rational way of responding to higher-order evidence.

²⁴ Thank you to Julia Staffel for this example and response.

One possibility which (Staffel; 2023, 258, fn.16) considers, is that these are *anti-interrogative* attitudes: a species of suspended judgment, recently defended by Lord (2020). Anti-interrogative attitudes are adopted when one is disposed to *not* inquire into a question. For example, Lord considers the example of someone who adopts an anti-interrogative attitude towards the question of whether there was an even number of food particles in Marx’s beard when he died. When describing anti-interrogative attitudes Lord (2020) says:

Rather than merely dropping the issue, you can bury the issue, which is to say you can adopt an attitude towards whether p that disposes you to ignore the question...So while adopting an interrogative attitude keeps p in your outlook in a way that orients you towards settling the question, adopting an anti-interrogative attitude puts whether p in the outlook by, in effect, taking whether p to be a bad question. In some cases, this seems to be the right stance to take—e.g., when our epistemic situations look to be permanently impoverished when it comes to some question. (Lord; 2020, 129-130)²⁵

However, it’s not plausible to characterize the individuals in High Roller or Dog Park as having anti-interrogative attitudes. These agents aren’t burying their questions because they take them to be bad or unanswerable questions. Instead, they are more plausibly interpreted as simply dropping the question for a more straightforward reason: they just don’t care or need to answer the question.²⁶

If the previous arguments are on the right track, then they point to a deeper reason why we shouldn’t explain the epistemic impact of higher-order evidence by appealing to zetetic considerations. Across a range of cases, one can rationally respond to higher-order evidence by adopting an attitude of suspended judgement, and by not deliberating upon the question further. Requirements to engage in zetetic activity are primarily practical (or moral)—not purely epistemic. Accounts which center zetetic factors are thus bound to be incomplete.

²⁵ For related discussion, also see Archer (2019), who defends a species of agnosticism according to which an agent decides not to inquire into a question because they take the question to be unanswerable.

²⁶ See Friedman (Forthcoming) for a related but distinct view, on which *all* doxastic states are *zetetic*. On this view, suspended judgment is a zetetically-open attitude because when one suspends judgment about Q, they treat Q as: “zetetically open, unresolved, or unsettled” and belief is a zetetically-closed attitude because belief is the attitude we adopt when we close our inquiries and settled the answers to questions.

5. Concluding Remarks

I hope to have cast doubt on views which appeal to zetetic considerations to explain the epistemic significance of higher-order evidence. More broadly, I also hope to have drawn attention to a crucial independence between the rationality of inquiry and epistemic normativity. This independence is expressed by Feldman (2000), a prominent defender of evidentialism, who denies that epistemic norms are in the business of helping us to resolve the answers to our questions. He argues:

There are cases in which one can spend one's time gathering evidence about propositions concerning inconsequential and trivial propositions or about more weighty matters. Evidentialism provides no guidance about what to do. As I see it, this is not a weakness of evidentialism, since *such choices are not to be made on epistemic grounds*. What topics you ought to investigate depend upon what topics are of interest to you, what investigations can help you to make your own life or the lives of others better, and other such matters. Evidentialism is silent on those moral and prudential issues, and I don't see why it should address them (Feldman; 2000, 690) (*italics added*).²⁷

I agree with Feldman and others who have argued that norms of inquiry are practical (or moral) and not epistemic.²⁸ Zetetic accounts are unable to provide an adequate explanation of the rational response to higher-order evidence because there are no purely epistemic reasons to inquire. And there are no epistemic reasons to inquire, because inquiry is an intentional *action* which is governed by primarily *practical* considerations.

When considering the Duty to Double-Check defended by Palmira (2023, Forthcoming), I have argued that the rational requirement to suspend judgement in response to higher-order evidence isn't parasitic on the obligation to inquire. This approach gets the order of explanation backwards: one is motivated to inquire *because* they are no longer able to rationally maintain their belief, and because it matters to them—practically or morally—that they answer the question and arrive at a settled view.

²⁷ Also cf. (Feldman; 2000, 698-699, *italics added*):

You should gather more evidence concerning a proposition only when having a true belief about the subject matter of the proposition makes a moral or prudential difference and gathering more evidence is likely to improve your chances of getting it right. Of course, whether you ought to gather such evidence also depends upon what other things you could do with your time. *Epistemological considerations simply don't resolve such matters.*

²⁸ See defenses of this position in Thorstad (2021); Arpaly (2023); Domínguez (2023); Falbo (2023b).

When considering the Unmooring View defended by Staffel (2023, Forthcoming), I have suggested that in a range of cases it's possible to rationally respond to higher-order evidence by suspending judgment and not deliberating on the question. This gave rise to a dilemma: either this attitude of suspended judgment is a terminal attitude, in which case it's irrational (given that it isn't supported by the individual's first-order evidence) or it's a transitional attitude. But classifying these attitudes as transitional is ad hoc given that they never play any role in the agent's deliberation.

While it can often be productive to inquire in response to higher-order evidence, whether one should inquire is largely a contingent matter that is settled on practical—and not purely epistemic—grounds. There are no epistemic duties to act, even when performing specific actions is required to settle the answers to our questions.²⁹

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