

INQUIRY FOR THE MISTAKEN AND CONFUSED

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Abstract: Various philosophers have recently defended norms of inquiry which forbid inquiry into questions which lack true answers. I argue that these norms are overly restrictive, and that they fail to capture an important relationship between inquiry and our position as non-ideal epistemic agents. I defend a more flexible and forgiving norm: Epistemic Improvement. According to this norm, inquiry into a question is permissible only if it's not rational for one to be sure that by inquiring one won't *improve epistemically* upon the question. This norm illuminates the significant role that inquiry plays in our lives, given our epistemic nonideality, and it also motivates a robust understanding of the value of inquiry, as encompassing epistemic improvements which go beyond figuring out the answers to questions.

“Take chances, make mistakes, and get messy!”

- Ms. Frizzle, *The Magic School Bus*

1. Introduction

Meet Gertrude. Gertrude is currently in a state of deep wonder. She's wondering why Bertrand Russell quit smoking. She considers some possible answers: perhaps he quit for health-related reasons, or because his wife couldn't stand the stench, or maybe smoking was interfering with his ability to do philosophy. As you might suspect, there's something off-kilter about Gertrude's inquiry—Russell never gave up the pipe!¹

We've all been there. Even at our most vigilant moments, we may be led astray, venturing down a misguided path. Gertrude will never settle her inquiry by coming to believe a true answer to her question. There is no reason why Russell quit smoking because he never did. What should we make of this? Does this mean that Gertrude's inquiry is somehow improper? Does her inquiry violate any zetetic² norms? More generally, is the permissibility of inquiry determined, at least in part, by an inquirer's prior epistemic standing on a question? And, if so, what does that epistemic standing need to be like?

¹ In fact, in an interview with the BBC (which aired on Mar 4, 1959), Russell claims to have only refrained from smoking while eating and sleeping, and he even credits smoking for having once *saved* his life. URL: https://youtu.be/8ooLTiVW_lc.

² “Zetetic” meaning roughly, proceeding by inquiry. For the purposes of this paper, “zetetic norm” will just mean “norm of inquiry.” Here I'm follow terminology in Friedman (2020). Also see uses of “zetetic” in Axel and Olsen (2009) and Axel (2011). For an overview see Falbo (Forthcoming).

The goal of this paper is to make progress on these questions through investigating the norms of inquiry.³ In so doing, I propose the following zetetic norm:

Epistemic Improvement: Inquiry into Q is permissible at t only if it's not rational to be sure at t that by inquiring one won't improve epistemically upon Q .⁴

Epistemic Improvement is a modest norm. It states a necessary condition on the permissibility of inquiry. The core idea is this: if it is rational for an inquirer to be sure that their inquiry will not be a way to improve epistemically upon Q , then they should not inquire into Q . At minimum, for an inquiry into Q to be permissible, it must not be rational for the inquirer to be sure that by inquiring they won't improve epistemically upon Q .⁵

Epistemic improvement upon a question is to be understood very broadly—it's not just about coming to know the answer to a question. Beyond this, inquirers can improve epistemically in all kinds of ways: one can gain a deeper understanding, certainty, or a higher degree of confidence in their answer to a question. Additionally, an inquirer might improve epistemically by identifying mistakes in their reasoning, resolving a confusion, or revising a false belief related to the subject matter of the question.⁶

Epistemic Improvement doesn't require inquirers to be consciously thinking of themselves as trying to improve epistemically. Of course, one can permissibly inquire into a question without even knowing what the word "epistemic" means. The point is that we, as epistemologists, can describe inquirers as aiming to improve epistemically—whereas inquirers might informally describe themselves as trying to learn more, figure something out, better understand some topic, gain knowledge, or become more confident in the answer to a question, and so on.⁷

What does Epistemic Improvement say about Gertrude's inquiry? Well, it depends. Is it rational for her to be sure that by inquiring into Q she won't improve epistemically upon Q ? Perhaps it is. If Gertrude has overwhelming and strong evidence that Bertrand Russell didn't quit smoking, then it's plausibly rational for her to be sure that by inquiring into Q she won't improve epistemically upon Q . In this case, Epistemic Improvement gives the verdict that her inquiry is impermissible. But, on the other hand, if it is not rational for Gertrude to be sure—for instance, if it's rational for her to believe that Bertrand Russell quit smoking because she has strong but misleading evidence that he did—then her inquiry will conform to Epistemic Improvement.

³ What kind of rationality is at issue in this debate? Are norms of inquiry epistemic or practical (or both)? These are important questions but taking them up would take the paper too far afield, and the arguments that follow don't hinge upon whether the norms of inquiry are epistemic or practical. There is much debate on this question. For some discussion see, for example, Friedman (2020, Forthcoming), Kelp (2021), Steglich-Petersen (2021), Falbo (2023b), Haziza (2023b), Thorstad (2024), and Fleisher (Forthcoming).

⁴ This norm builds upon recent arguments for the view that the aim of inquiry is epistemic improvement. For defenses of this view see, for example, Archer (2021) and Falbo (2021, 2023a).

⁵ Epistemic Improvement is also a fairly weak norm. One might worry that it's too weak. I address this concern in §5.

⁶ I don't intend for this list of epistemic improvements to be exhaustive. The paper doesn't give a full account of all forms of epistemic improvements that may result from inquiry; I suspect that there are many.

⁷ For a related discussion see Whitcomb's (2010, pp. 666-669) discussion of what he calls the "conceptual deficiency argument", as well as the related discussion in Carruthers (2018).

Notably, the epistemic improvement that may result from the inquiry might not be the same as the epistemic improvement that the inquirer wants or expects to result from inquiry. For instance, Gertrude plausibly expects that she will learn why Bertrand Russell quit smoking, but by inquiring she may learn that he never did. She improves epistemically, not by coming to know the answer to her question, but by revising a false belief that she didn't realize she had. So, in inquiry, as in life, our expectations and reality may diverge.

In what follows, I argue that Epistemic Improvement can help to explain the permissibility of inquiry across a range of important cases, from mundane everyday kinds of inquiries, to more specialized inquiries conducted by experts on cutting-edge topics in fields like science and philosophy, as well as inquiries carried out by young children and beginners who are learning about a topic for the first time, and who are investigating questions from a position of radical ignorance.

Along the way, I also consider and resist competing zetetic norms on which permissible inquiry into Q requires that one either *know* that Q has a true answer (Willard-Kyle, 2023a, 2024) or that one's background knowledge *entails* that Q has a true answer (Whitcomb & Millson, 2023, Willard-Kyle, Millson, & Whitcomb, Forthcoming).⁸ Accordingly, these norms evaluate Gertrude's inquiry as impermissible—she should not have inquired into Q because Q lacks a true answer. I argue that these norms are overly restrictive and that they fail to capture an important value that inquiry has in helping us to overcome our condition as limited and fallible epistemic agents.

Here's the plan. In §2, I consider inquiries into certain kinds of so-called "bad" questions, namely, questions with false presuppositions. In so doing, I explain how these inquiries have been used to motivate norms of inquiry which say that one should only inquire into Q if Q has a true answer. In §3, I develop a series of cases that cast doubt upon these norms, and which draw attention to an important relationship between inquiry and non-ideal aspects of epistemic agents. In §4, I consider a strategy for how a defender of these norms might respond to these cases and argue that it is unsuccessful. In §5 I propose Epistemic Improvement, a more forgiving and flexible zetetic norm which can better explain the permissibility of inquiry across a wide range of cases.

The main upshot is this: sometimes, and arguably often, we can inquire into questions from confused and mistaken starting points. This is true in the case of Gertrude's inquiry. However, the falsity of Gertrude's belief doesn't necessarily transfer to, or somehow "infect", the permissibility of her inquiry. Indeed, inquiry is often the best and most effective means by which mistaken believers can epistemically improve and overcome their mistakes. However, recognizing this important function of inquiry requires us to clearly distinguish the norms of inquiry and the norms of belief. And it also requires us to conceive of the value of inquiry as encompassing epistemic improvements which go well beyond figuring out the answers to questions.

⁸ Also see related norms defended by, for example, Rosa (Forthcoming) who defends a *No False Presupposition Norm*: you shouldn't inquire into Q if Q has a false presupposition, as well as an *Anti-Impossibility Norm*: you shouldn't inquire into Q if it's impossible for you to know the answer to Q, as well as Haziza (2023a) who defends the *Addressee-Knowledge Norm* which says that an inquirer should only ask an addressee, A, a question, Q, if A knows the answer to Q. All these norms require an inquirer to only ask or inquire into Q if Q has a true answer. The arguments that follow also cast doubt upon these norms, and any zetetic norm which says that permissible inquiry into Q requires Q to have a true answer.

2. Bad Questions?

Consider the following questions.

- (1) Is Toronto in Italy, or in France?
- (2) Why does $2+2=7$?
- (3) When did Colonel Sanders become a vegan?

There is a sense in which all of these are “bad” questions. Each has a false presupposition: Toronto isn’t in either Italy or France, the sum of 2 and 2 isn’t 7, and Colonel Sanders (the founder of the fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken) never for a moment considered becoming a vegan.

Interrogative presuppositions are often characterized as having the following key features. First, the truth of the presupposition is typically required for the speech act to be performed successfully or properly. For example, if I ask you: “How’s your sister doing?” this speech act is successfully performed only on the condition that you have a sister. Success in this context can be understood as a condition on usability. For a speaker to properly use an interrogative, its presuppositions must be true (Katz, 1972, Comorovski, 1996). Second, the presupposition of a question is entailed by every possible answer to that question (Keenan and Hull, 1973). For example, every possible answer to (3)—e.g., that he went vegan at the age of 21 or 22 or 23 or 24, and so on— entails that Colonel Sanders at some point adopted a vegan diet. Third, and relatedly, a question only has a true answer if its presuppositions are true (Belnap, 1996, p. 610). So, if a question lacks a true answer, then it follows that the question has a false presupposition. Given that (1)-(3) have false presuppositions, these questions all lack true answers.⁹

A few qualifications are in order. (1)-(3) lack true *direct* answers. After asking (1) your interlocutor might respond with an *indirect* and *corrective* answer to the question: “what are you talking about? Toronto is in Canada!” or “I think you might be confused; Toronto isn’t in either Italy or France—it’s in Canada.” But, strictly speaking, these responses fall short of directly answering the question.¹⁰ Direct answers address the specific question that is being asked and they rule out possible answers to it. *Complete* direct answers rule out all but one possible answer. For example, the possible answers to (1) are: *Toronto is in Italy* and *Toronto is in France*. After being asked (1), one’s interlocutor might respond with: “Neither! Toronto is in Canada.” While this is a response to the question, it doesn’t provide a true or complete answer to it. (Though it does offer a true and complete answer to a closely related question, namely: “Where is Toronto?”)¹¹ Questions with false presuppositions can’t truthfully be answered directly because they lack true answers.

With this in mind, (1)-(3) appear to be defective or “bad” questions. Something seems off about inquirers who investigate questions with false presuppositions, but what exactly is the problem? Perhaps these inquirers fail to have the right sort of doxastic relationship to the questions that

⁹ Belnap (1996, p. 611) went as far as proposing: “that we all start calling a question “true” just when some direct answer thereto is true.”

¹⁰ For further discussion see Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984, pp. 31-32).

¹¹ For related discussion see Stivers and Hayashi (2010) on transformative answers.

they're investigating. They fail to believe or to know that their question has a false presupposition, and hence, that their question doesn't have a true answer.

Putting these pieces together, we might attempt to capture what's epistemically defective in these cases as follows:

- (i) When one inquires into a question, Q, one has the goal of coming to know (or figure out) the answer to Q.
- (ii) It's impossible to know (or figure out) the answer to Q, if Q has a false presupposition.
- (iii) So, one shouldn't inquire into Q, if Q has a false presupposition.

Inquiring into questions like (1)-(3) appears to be at odds with the view that knowledge is the aim of inquiry, or more generally, that inquiry aims at figuring out the answer to a question. So, perhaps we ought not open inquiry into a question if it's not possible to achieve the aim or goal of inquiry.¹²

This line of reasoning sits naturally with Knowledge Norm, which has recently been defended by Willard-Kyle (2023a).

Knowledge Norm: Only inquire into (an unconditional) Q at *t*, if one knows at *t* that Q has a true (complete and direct) answer.¹³

Inquiries into (1)-(3) violate Knowledge Norm. Such violations, the thought goes, can account for what seems epistemically defective about these inquiries. To get a feel for why one might defend Knowledge Norm consider the following conversational exchange.

Leslie: (*In a very accusatory tone.*) Why are you brewing kombucha in your room?

Victoria: What? I'm not! Why are you asking me that?

Leslie: # I don't know that you're brewing kombucha in your room. Still, I'm curious, why are you?

¹² For defenses of knowledge as the aim of inquiry see, for example, Sartwell (1992), Whitcomb (2010), Rysiew (2012), Kelp (2014, 2020, 2021), Sapir and van Elswyk (2021), Carter and Hawthorne (2024), and Haziza (Forthcoming). For some critical discussion of this view see Archer (2021), Falbo (2021, 2023a), Woodard (2022), Beddor (2023), and Willard-Kyle (2023b). For arguments which cast doubt upon whether inquiry has a constitutive aim see Friedman (2024).

¹³ Notice that Knowledge Norm, as Willard-Kyle (2023a) has formulated it, only applies to *unconditional* questions. Accordingly, inquiries into *conditional* questions, which have interrogative consequents (e.g., *if Russell quit smoking, then why did he quit?*), fall outside of the scope of this norm. The semantics of conditional questions (like the semantics of conditionals more generally) has been notoriously hard to pin down. For some discussion see, for example, Hulstijn (1997), Groenendijk (1999), Velissaratou (2000), Issacs and Rawlins (2008), and Ciardelli et al. (2019, Ch. 7). Willard-Kyle (2023a, 620, fn. 23) suggests that conditional questions may function as hedges which remove the default presumption that the speaker know that their question has a true answer. One might worry that this qualification of the norm makes it awkwardly parochial: if knowledge norm is a genuine zetetic norm, then why does it only apply to a select range of inquiries? Moreover, inquiries into conditional questions aren't fringe or exceptional—they are paradigmatic. A more attractive norm, I think, would be one which applied universally: to inquiries into all kinds of questions, regardless of their syntax. Taking up this topic in more detail would take the paper too far afield. Epistemic Improvement (which is defended in §5) applies to inquiries into all question types.

Leslie doesn't seem to be thriving epistemically. One way we might explain this is in terms of a violation of the Knowledge Norm. She doesn't know that her question has a true answer, so she ought not to have inquired into this question. Victoria isn't brewing kombucha in her room, so if Leslie is aiming to know or figure out the answer to this question, this task is impossible.

More broadly, Knowledge Norm appears to explain why utterances of the form *I don't know that p, but Q?* are infelicitous, where *p* is a proposition, and *Q* presupposes *p*. For example:

- (4) # I don't know that Russell quit smoking, but why did he quit?
- (5) # I don't know that the King of France exists, but how is he doing?

It's infelicitous to assert that one doesn't know that *p* while asking a question that presupposes *p*. The Knowledge Norm seems to account for this infelicity because it says that you shouldn't inquire into a question, if you fail to know that the question has a true answer. And if the question has a false presupposition, one could never know that it has a true answer: because it doesn't. Moreover, if inquiry aims at knowledge, or at least at figuring out the answer to a question, then this too will be impossible given that the question lacks a true answer.

This data is similar to conversational data that is often drawn upon to motivate a related Ignorance Norm for inquiry, which prohibits inquiring into *Q* while knowing *Q*'s answer.¹⁴ Compare:

- (6) # I know Mario collects coins, but does Mario collect coins?
- (7) # Eminem is a famous rapper, but I'm wondering: is Eminem a rapper?

So, the thought goes, just as the Ignorance Norm can explain why utterances like (6) and (7) sound terrible—given that such speakers are represented as knowing the answer to a question while inquiring into that very question—so too does Knowledge Norm explain why utterances like (4) and (5) are infelicitous. This is because these utterances represent a speaker as inquiring into some question while failing to know that the question has a true answer.

Just as the Ignorance Norm requires *ignorance* on the part of the inquirer—it is only permissible to inquire into *Q* if one *lacks* knowledge of *Q*'s answer—on the other side of the coin, according to Knowledge Norm, inquiry requires *knowledge*: one must *know* that *Q* has a true answer in order to permissibly inquire into *Q*. Accordingly, proper inquiry demands that inquirers strike a balance between ignorance and knowledge. Willard-Kyle (2023a) says:

¹⁴ For defenses of the Ignorance Norm see, for example: Friedman (2017), Whitcomb (2017), and Sapir and van Elswyk (2021). Also see, Fitzpatrick (2005, 143), who argues for a related pragmatic principle on the speech act of question asking: "A speaker can only ask an information-seeking question if he or she does not know the answer(s)." For critiques of the Ignorance Norm see, for example: Archer (2018), Millson (2021), Falbo (2021, 2023a), Woodard (2022), and Beddor (2023). For further discussion on the relationship between the Ignorance Norm and the Knowledge Norm see Willard-Kyle (2024).

Asking a question requires just the right amount of knowledge. One must know that there is an answer but one must not know what the answer is. Proper inquiry is properly poised between ignorance and knowledge (Willard-Kyle 2023a, p. 639).¹⁵

A related but distinct norm has recently been defended by Whitcomb and Millson (2023):

Evoked Question Norm: It is irrational to wonder Q when your knowledge doesn't evoke Q (Whitcomb and Millson; 2023, p. 5).¹⁶

What does it mean for one's knowledge to *evoke* Q? The concept of evocation comes from the literature on Inferential Erotetic Logic.¹⁷ A question is *evoked* by one's knowledge, only if one's knowledge entails that the question has a true answer, and one's knowledge doesn't already entail any direct answer to Q. For example, if you know that someone spilled the juice, but you don't know who it was, then your background knowledge evokes the question: *who spilled the juice?*¹⁸

Additionally, Whitcomb and Millson (2023) formulate Evoked Question Norm as a norm governing inquiring attitudes, like wonder and curiosity, which have questions as their objects (opposed to propositions), and which are taken to be central to our inquiring practices.¹⁹

Evoked Question Norm restricts the range of questions that one is permitted to inquire into. It says that one should only inquire into Q if one's knowledge *evokes* Q. This is the relevant epistemic standing that is required for proper inquiry. Furthermore, one's knowledge doesn't evoke Q unless Q has a true answer, so it follows that one should only inquire into Q if Q has a true answer.

Knowledge Norm has a similar result, but via a different route. This norm takes things a step further: it says that one should only inquire into Q when one *knows* that Q has a true answer. This norm requires a stronger epistemic standing than the Evoked Question Norm, which only requires that an inquirer's background knowledge entail that Q has a true answer.

Both norms are wide-scope norms which say that it's impermissible for an inquirer to lack a particular epistemic state while inquiring into Q. These norms are also motivated by their presumed ability to explain what goes awry with inquirers who investigate questions with false presuppositions. Such inquirers lack the epistemic standing that's required for proper inquiry into Q. Both norms agree that one shouldn't inquire into Q unless Q has a true answer—to do otherwise would be to engage in impermissible inquiry.

¹⁵ This balancing act between ignorance and knowledge can be traced back to Plato's *Meno*. For further discussion see Fine (2014).

¹⁶ Also see Willard-Kyle, Millson, and Whitcomb (Forthcoming) for a further defense of this norm.

¹⁷ For some discussion see, for example, Wiśniewski (1996, 2016, 2021), Belnap (1996), Bromberger (1971), and Millson (2020).

¹⁸ Whitcomb and Millson (2023) formulate evocation in terms of whether one's *knowledge* evokes Q. An alternative approach would be to conceive of evocation as a relation between the propositions one (at least) hypothetically accepts as true (but doesn't necessarily know) and questions. For example, a definition along these lines is proposed by Wiśniewski; (2016, p. 1): "a set of declarative sentences X evokes a question Q if, and only if the hypothetical truth of all the sentences in X warrants that at least one principal possible answer (PPA) to Q is true but does not warrant the truth of any particular PPA to Q."

¹⁹ For further discussion of inquiring attitudes see, for example: Friedman (2013), Palmira (2020), and Archer (2022).

3. Mistakes Were Made

In this section, I argue that across a range of important and paradigmatic cases of inquiry, violations of Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm are not only permissible but *required* to cultivate genuine learning. Such norms are unable to account for cases where an inquirer starts off with a false belief which underlies their question, but by inquiring, they can revise their belief and improve epistemically as a result.

Considering these cases helps to put into focus an important relationship between our rational imperfections, on the one hand, and the pursuit of inquiry, on the other. Inquiry is often a crucial resource for limited and fallible beings like us: it is an important activity that we can engage in to compensate for our cognitive limits. Adopting a more forgiving and flexible norm like Epistemic Improvement can help us better account for the significant role that inquiry plays in our lives, given our epistemic nonideality.

3.1 Excuses, Excuses.

Let's consider another way that the conversation between Victoria and Leslie from above might have unfolded.

Leslie: (*In a very accusatory tone.*) Why are you brewing kombucha in your room?

Victoria: What? I'm not! Why are you asking me that?

Leslie: Charlotte just told me that you were and there's a funky vinegar smell emanating from your room—just like last time! Plus, I'm allergic to kombucha. Don't you remember how I broke out into a rash last time you had it in the house?

Victoria: I know you have allergies! Relax—I'm not brewing kombucha! For your information: my room smells like vinegar because I spilled red wine, and I was trying to get the stain out.

Leslie: Oh! Well, that explains it. Sorry about that.

Leslie doesn't know that Victoria is brewing kombucha in her room (because she isn't), despite having fairly strong evidence which suggests that she is. Victoria, let's assume, has brewed kombucha in her room in the past, so this isn't out of character with her typical hippie-style do-it-yourself shenanigans. And let's stipulate that Charlotte is a highly reliable testimonial source—she has a very strong track record when it comes to sharing testimony, especially upon matters related to Victoria (her best friend), despite being mistaken in this one instance. Moreover, given her serious allergies, it's important for Leslie to investigate this matter.

Leslie's inquiry violates Knowledge Norm: she didn't know that her question had a true answer. It also violates Evoked Question Norm: her background knowledge doesn't entail that her question has a true answer. But was Leslie's inquiry impermissible? I don't think so. Given her strong (yet misleading) evidence, it was highly reasonable for her to assume that Victoria was brewing kombucha in her room. And, considering this, it's also highly reasonable for her to ask Victoria why

she was doing this. These sorts of inquiries are commonplace. It seems overly demanding to require Leslie to know, or to have knowledge which entails, that Victoria is brewing kombucha before she can permissibly ask a question which presupposes this.²⁰

We often inquire into questions when we have good reason to think that the question's presuppositions hold, even when we fall short of knowing that they do. This doesn't necessarily mean that we're being careless or jumping to conclusions. In some cases, the presupposition of the question may be largely or even entirely irrelevant to the individual's reasons for inquiring. For example:

Dog Park: Randy, a stranger, approaches Thomas at the dog park. He starts to pet the dog that Thomas walked into the park with. Randy asks: "what's your dog's name?" Thomas answers: "Porco." Unbeknownst to Randy, the dog isn't Thomas's—he's dog sitting Porco for his roommate—but Thomas doesn't mention this because it would be pedantic and irrelevant to Randy's reasons for inquiring. Randy just wants to know the dog's name so he can use it while playing with the dog for a couple of minutes at the park.

We avail ourselves of these sorts of shortcuts in inquiry all the time: we inquire into questions which presuppose what is reasonable to assume. This seems perfectly permissible, especially when the truth of the presupposition is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant to our reasons for inquiring. These shortcuts help to make inquiry more efficient and streamlined. For inquiries which involve some significant degree of time pressure, these shortcuts are often necessary and incredibly helpful.

Proponents of the Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm might respond to such cases as follows. They might argue that all such inquiries are norm-violating, and thus that they involve genuine zetetic mistakes, but this doesn't mean that we should *blame* inquirers like Leslie or Randy. Why not? Because they *reasonably thought that they knew* that their question had a true answer (or that their background knowledge entailed that it did). They ought not to have inquired, but they are *excused* for having done so. So, the thought goes, Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm are compatible with, and indeed can help explain why, inquiries like these appear to be permissible, even though they strictly speaking are not.²¹

²⁰ Also see Dretske (1970), who argues that it is possible to know a proposition without thereby knowing its presuppositions. Dretske argues that epistemic operators such as "know that" fail the following closure principle: *If S knows that p, and p entails q, then S knows that q*. In other words, one may know that *p*, yet fail to know a presupposition of *p*. For example, one may know that they see a zebra at the zoo yet fail to know that what they see is not a cleverly painted mule (Dretske 1970, pp. 1015-1016). Dretske is primarily concerned with responding to skeptical arguments which rely upon this closure principle; however, his arguments are relevant for our purposes to the extent that they allow for some distance between knowing a proposition and knowing its presuppositions. Similarly, in the case of interrogative presuppositions, this lends some support to the idea that one may properly inquire into a question, without thereby knowing all the questions presuppositions. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to these connections to Dretske's work.

²¹ A reply along these lines is given in (Whitcomb; 2010, p. 680-683). For related discussion also see Sapir and van Elswyk (2021) and Haziza (2023a) on primary and secondary propriety, building upon arguments from Williamson (2000) and DeRose (1992, 2002).

This response is insufficient for at least two reasons. First, it's not always the case that such inquirers are merely blameless or excused for having inquired into Q. Instead, they positively *ought* to have inquired into Q. Reconsider Leslie. Inquirers like Leslie are inquiring in a way that makes complete sense given their current circumstances. Getting lured in by misleading evidence is unfortunate and, in some cases, may reflect an epistemic mistake. Leslie got things wrong: she has a false *belief*. Fair enough. But this doesn't imply that her subsequent *inquiry* into Q, which presupposes this belief, is also mistaken. If anything, by engaging in inquiry Leslie is in a better position to dislodge and revise her mistaken belief—she can improve her epistemic position by inquiring.²²

Consider the following analogy, adapted from Archer (2018).²³ Suppose that Lucas has promised Filip that he would pick him up at the airport. But being careless and consumed by video games, Lucas forgets, thereby breaking his promise. Breaking the promise constitutes a moral failing on the part of Lucas. But, *given that he has broken the promise*, the best thing for him to do is to try to make amends: to apologize to Filip. Of course, in an ideal world, Lucas would not have broken the promise, and he wouldn't need to apologize. The need for Lucas to apologize means that he has made a moral mistake. But, having made this mistake, apologizing is exactly what Lucas should be doing.

Similarly, in an ideal world Leslie would not have formed a false belief based on misleading evidence. It would have been better for her to not have encountered misleading evidence and to have only formed true beliefs. But unfortunately, epistemic agents don't always inhabit pristine epistemic environments, free of misleading evidence. So, given that Leslie has strong, yet misleading, evidence that Victoria is brewing kombucha in her room, and given that she is severely allergic to kombucha, inquiry into Q is perfectly permissible. Even though she will not figure out the answer to her question (which is what she is hoping for), by engaging in inquiry, she will improve epistemically; she will learn more about what is going on in Victoria's room and revise her mistaken belief accordingly.

We often stand to improve epistemically by inquiring, even when we inquire into questions with false presuppositions. Inquiry can be a very useful activity to engage in to help overcome our epistemic limits and to revise our mistaken beliefs. Just because one engages in inquiry from an initially mistaken or sub-optimal epistemic state—they have a false belief which underlies their question—this doesn't imply that one's inquiry is mistaken as well. The normative status of belief

²² There is a parallel debate in the literature on the norms of assertion, specifically, among those who defend a knowledge norm on assertion: the view that one should only assert that *p* if one knows that *p*. This view is defended, for example, by Williamson (2000) and Hawthorne (2004). A putative counterexample to the knowledge norm of assertion is that it is perfectly appropriate for subjects in Gettier cases to assert that *p* even though they lack knowledge that *p*. This objection is given in Hill and Schechter (2007) and Brown (2008). In response, defenders of the knowledge norm of assertion have claimed that such assertions are impermissible, yet *excusable*, or that they exhibit a kind of "secondary proprietary" (DeRose, 2002), because the speaker reasonably thought that they knew. For similar reasons to those outlined in this section, I think this response is inadequate. The speaker in such cases is not blameless or excusable for having asserted what they don't know, but rather there is a strong sense in which they positively *ought* to have asserted that *p*. See, for example, Schechter (2017) and Greco (2019) for defenses of this point.

²³ Archer (2018, p. 302) uses this analogy to argue against the Ignorance Norm on inquiry.

is one thing, and the normative status of inquiry is another. And, if that is right, then there is no zetetic mistake that is in need of excusing in these cases.

There is a second reason why an appeal to blameless or excusable inquiry is insufficient. In the above cases, it is plausible to assume that Leslie and Randy *thought that they knew* that their question had a true answer. This ignorance makes attributions of blamelessness and excusability seem fitting. But there are other cases of permissible inquiry which lack this feature. Consider a much more serious case of interpersonal inquiry.

Best Friends: Lucinda and Tyra have been best friends for decades; they are as close as can be. Tyra isn't a big fan of Lucinda's on-again-off-again boyfriend, Clay. Clay likes to drink—a lot. Over the past few months Clay's drunken blackouts have become more frequent, and more aggressive. Tyra has started to worry about Lucinda's safety. During a visit, Tyra notices that Lucinda isn't her usual happy-go-lucky self. She seems tired and deflated. Tyra also notices several small finger-sized bruises scattered across Lucinda's arms. Lucinda and Tyra make eye contact, and in that moment, Lucinda realizes that Tyra has seen her bruises. Lucinda quickly crosses her arms, covers up the bruises, and nervously looks away. Assuming the worst, and feeling deeply concerned for her friend's safety, Tyra asks: "How long has he been doing this to you?"

Tyra is aware that she doesn't yet know whether Clay has been physically abusive towards Lucinda, but she strongly suspects that he has. So, she goes out on a limb and asks Lucinda a question which presupposes this. Her inquiry is risky, but even still, it seems permissible for the following reasons. We can assume that a part of Tyra's justification for inquiring in this way is based upon her firsthand knowledge of what Lucinda is like as a person. Tyra realizes that if she were to ask directly and bluntly: *is Clay abusing you*—a question which corresponds to Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm—then this would come across as confrontational. Lucinda would turn cold, and she wouldn't want to confide in Tyra. So, by assuming the heavy truth, rather than directly asking about it, Tyra attempts to lessen the burden on Lucinda, making it easier for her to open up and share.

Of course, Tyra could be wrong about Clay—but she has good reason to suspect that he is being abusive, and sometimes taking these risks can be well worth the epistemic (and moral) rewards that result. In Best Friends, by implementing this zetetic strategy, Tyra is better positioned to gather more candid information about the safety and wellbeing of her best friend.

Importantly, Tyra realizes that she doesn't yet know whether Clay has been abusive. It's not that she *thought that she knew* that her question had a true answer—she didn't. Of course, she has good reason to suspect that her question does have a true answer, and this seems sufficient for her to permissibly inquire into this question in this context.

An objection to this case might be raised as follows. There is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, asking a question because it's conversationally appropriate or effective as a means to

some pragmatic or psychological end, and, on the other hand, asking a question because it is a proper object of one's inquiry.²⁴

For example, during dinner the person beside you might say: "could you please pass the salt?" In asking this question, your fellow diner is not trying to figure out whether you have salt-passing skills. This utterance is most plausibly interpreted as a polite request for you to pass the salt. The speaker's reasons for uttering Q are gustatory or related to etiquette, they're not zetetic. Or consider how when we greet complete strangers with "how are you?" we typically aren't trying to learn more about how they are. We're just making conversation or trying to be nice (Watson; 2021, p. 279-280). When Joey Tribbiani from the sitcom *Friends* says his iconic line—"how you doin'?"—he isn't engaged in a zetetic pursuit. He's flirting.²⁵ Compare this with a therapist who asks their patient the same question. The therapist is inquiring. They are curious and want to learn more about how their patient is doing. So, just because someone is asking a question, this does not mean that they are inquiring into that question.

Now let's compare Best Friends. By asking Q ("how long has he been doing this to you?"), opposed to the more direct and confrontational question ("are you being physically abused?"), Tyra is perhaps aiming to minimize the amount of potential shame or embarrassment that Lucinda may feel. In this sense, we might interpret Tyra's question as what Brown and Levinson (1987) call a *face-saving act*: it is an attempt to reduce the stigma or negative impact that this conversation may have on Lucinda's reputation or self-image. So, the objection goes, Tyra isn't really *inquiring* into Q, instead her reasons for asking Q are psychological or "face saving"—she's trying to be a respectful and supportive friend.

It's plausible that at least some of Tyra's motivations for asking Q are psychological and that they flow from her desire to be a caring and considerate friend. But this is compatible with—and arguably helps to explain why—Tyra is also genuinely inquiring into Q. Tyra has evidence that strongly suggests that Lucinda is in a physically abusive relationship, so, given that she deeply cares about her friend's safety and well-being, she wants more information. She asks Q because she is curious and wants to learn more about how long this has been going on. So, while Tyra may ask Q to achieve some psychological or pragmatic end, this is consistent with her having Q as a genuine object of her inquiry.

If this is right, then the defenders of Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm can't explain why such inquiries seem permissible by describing these inquirers as engaged in norm-violating, yet blameless or excusable inquiry.

3.2 Novice Inquiry

Consider another case.

²⁴ Thank you to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider this objection.

²⁵ This is perhaps a bit too quick: Joey might be engaged in some *other* zetetic pursuit—e.g., he might be trying to figure out whether the person he is flirting with is interested in him. The key point is that he isn't inquiring into the specific question that he is asking. Instead, he asks this question for some non-zetetic purpose: it's a way to initiate conversation or to get attention or to flirt.

Culture Shock: Jade is a tourist, who is visiting a new and unknown city. She has some sense of her surroundings, but she's anticipating some degree of culture shock. It's been a long trip and she's feeling exhausted. Jade is wondering where the local coffee shop is, so she asks a stranger: "Excuse me: where's the local coffee shop?" The stranger gives her a sideways look: "Coffee? There are no coffee shops here. They banned coffee years ago." Bad news for Jade.

Jade's inquiry violates Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm: she doesn't know, nor does her knowledge entail, that her question has a true answer. These norms say that Jade's inquiry is impermissible—she ought not to have inquired. But this verdict seems overly harsh.

Jade doesn't know that there is a coffee shop in town (and perhaps she wouldn't have travelled to this town if she knew that there would be no coffee). But, even still, it was highly reasonable for her to assume that there was a coffee shop in town. Acting upon this assumption, by inquiring into a question that presupposes it, was also incredibly useful. By inquiring, Jade came to learn something new about her environment, even though she failed to learn the answer to her question. She was able to figure out that she had a false belief, and she revised it accordingly. Moreover, with this revised belief in tow, Jade is now able to reconfigure her zetetic pursuits so that they better align with her environment. Hence, inquiry can be a productive activity to engage in to refine and shape one's zetetic goals so that they better match the world.

One might argue that Jade isn't really inquiring into Q but is only asking Q because this is an effective way to achieve some practical goal of hers. Perhaps all she really cares about is figuring out how to get some form of caffeine into her system—she isn't picky: it could be coffee, tea, an energy drink, or a supplement (though she does draw the line at illicit drugs). So, while she utters the question: "where is the local coffee shop?" she doesn't ultimately care whether the caffeine comes from a local coffee shop, or a vending machine, or a gas station, or somewhere else. She asks Q because she thinks that this is an effective way to pursue her practical goal of trying to get caffeinated. So, the thought goes, Q isn't strictly speaking a proper object of Jade's inquiry, and so, Culture Shock isn't an objection to Knowledge Norm or Evoked Question Norm.

As we saw in §3.1, the asking of a question, Q, can come apart from inquiring into Q. So, it is possible that Jade isn't inquiring into Q when she asks Q. But we need not interpret Culture Shock in this way. We can plausibly interpret Jade as being curious about where the local coffee shop is because she craves coffee and she reasonably, though wrongly, assumes that she can get it at a local coffee shop. When she asks the stranger where the local coffee shop is she is aiming to improve epistemically upon this question. She wants to learn where the local coffee shop is so she can get what she wants. Unfortunately, what she ends up learning is that she can't get what she wants, but at least now she is better informed, and she can taper her expectations accordingly.

Sometimes we may find ourselves navigating radically new and unfamiliar territory. When this happens, the most effective approach may be to investigate questions that are based upon our best guesses or assumptions. Such inquiries function as critical starting points for learning—they help

an inquirer to gain traction on a new subject and they help inquiry to get off the ground in the first place.

Jade had a false belief. This is a non-ideal and unfortunate epistemic state to be in. In this sense, it's fair to say that she has erred epistemically. But, as we saw before, we shouldn't assume that this false belief somehow "infects" or implies that her inquiry is also improper. It's her *belief* that is mistaken, not her inquiry. As a result of inquiring, Jade improves epistemically: she revises a false belief, and comes to gain a more informed perspective on her environment.

We can compare Culture Shock to the situation that young children often find themselves in as they are first learning and discovering new things about the world. Inquiry during this phase of life is usually messy and full of mistakes and confusions. Children will often ask questions which have false presuppositions, constantly running afoul of Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm. But why think that this is necessarily a bad thing? What else should we expect children to do and how else will they ever learn and come to have a more accurate picture of the world?

Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm seem unable to capture the value of inquiry as it's carried out by young children and beginners, who are approaching inquiry with very little background knowledge on the relevant topic. But this is precisely *why* one may be motivated to inquire in the first place. A significant amount of productive learning happens prior to having the knowledge that these norms require.

One response is to argue that inquirers can come to have the knowledge that these norms require for proper inquiry via sources *other* than inquiry. For example, one might gain this knowledge through perception or through the testimony of others who are better informed on the topic. Or, alternatively, one might argue that young children and novice inquirers who are investigating unknown and unfamiliar topics *are* bound to (or at least are much more likely to) violate zetetic norms, given the likelihood that these inquirers will ask questions which lack true answers.

None of these options are plausible. They require inquirers to either get the knowledge required for permissible inquiry through a source other than inquiry, or to refrain from inquiring on the topic. But, in some cases, especially when the inquiry is temporally urgent or of great practical importance, one simply won't have the luxury of putting off their inquiry until they (fortuitously) come to know that their question has a true answer or until they come to (somehow) know that their question has a false presupposition. This result belies the important role that the activity of inquiry has in helping inquirers to figure these things out on their own.

Engaging in inquiry is frequently appropriate, not only to figure out the answers to our questions, but also as a method for clearing one's confusions, identifying false beliefs, and revising them accordingly. What's mistaken in these cases (if anything) is that the inquirer is opening an inquiry from a sub-optimal position of ignorance or confusion. This non-ideal starting point may then be reflected in the questions one asks—one might end up pursuing questions which lack true answers—but that is simply par for the course given one's position as a novice. This is exactly how inquiry should and sometimes must proceed under non-ideal epistemic conditions.

We should thus resist the idea that just because one starts their inquiry from a position of ignorance or with a false belief, that this means that their inquiry is doomed to be impermissible as a result. This would fail to appreciate the crucial function that inquiry has in helping to improve the epistemic position of beginners, and especially young children, who are learning about some part of the world for the first time. Novice inquirers should be encouraged to take a stab at asking questions, even if they are coming from a place of confusion or if they are misguided about the relevant subject. This is what the process of learning is all about.

3.3 Controversial and Cutting-Edge Inquiry

Learning about a topic can be difficult, not just for beginners, but also for experts. Some questions are riddled with controversy, and there is widespread and persistent disagreement concerning how best to answer them.²⁶ Such are the conditions under which one partakes in *philosophical inquiry*.²⁷ Consider the following case.

Philosopher: Piper is an academic philosopher. She has dedicated her career to studying the relationship between God’s benevolence and the existence of evil in the world, with a focus on the following question: *Why does God permit evil in the world?* Piper has puzzled over this question for decades: she’s carefully read the relevant literature and considered many objections. She’s debated with theists, atheists, and agnostics alike, often into the long hours of the night. She’s open-minded and charitable, and always willing to consider views on all sides of the issue.

Was it permissible for Piper to have inquired into this question? I sure hope so. If it wasn’t then that would be bad news for a lot of philosophers. But notice that according to Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm, Piper only should inquire into this question if God really exists. Piper’s question presupposes the existence of God. So, if it turns out that God doesn’t exist, then Piper ought not to have inquired—by inquiring she makes a zetetic mistake.²⁸

This is an unwelcome result. Regardless of whether God exists, Piper’s inquiry seems permissible. Indeed, many philosophical questions may, in the end, turn out to have false presuppositions. But this doesn’t mean that this research was impermissible or that philosophers ought not to have investigated these questions. This would place an overly strict boundary on the range of research

²⁶ The significance of this point has been borne out across the vast literature on the epistemology of disagreement. See Christensen (2009) for an overview of this debate.

²⁷ For some discussion see, for example: Goldberg (2013), Fleisher (2018), Barnett (2019), and Staffel (Forthcoming).

²⁸ Another interesting case is inquiry into metaphysical questions. For example, Thomasson (2009, p. 444) argues that: “many metaphysical debates turn out to be mere pseudo-disputes that arise from attempts to respond to defective, unanswerable questions.” Also compare, McSweeney (2023) who argues that metaphysics is essentially imaginative (and akin to art), and that the goal of metaphysical inquiry is to gain a better understanding of a way that the world could be. In the case of inquiry into metaphysical questions, then, it might turn out that many of these questions lack true answers (and thus that inquiry into them violates Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm). But one might plausibly argue that investigating these questions may still help inquirers to cultivate an understanding of the relevant theory, which will help them to comprehend a way the world could be, and this itself is a valuable form of epistemic improvement, regardless of whether the world really is that way or not.

questions that philosophers can pursue, making permissible philosophical inquiry potentially myopic or lacking in creativity. Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm seem to give the wrong verdicts when it comes to investigating controversial topics in philosophy.

Of course, if God doesn't exist, then Piper has a false belief. In this respect, we can describe her as having made an epistemic error. However, as before, just because her belief is false this doesn't necessarily mean that her inquiry is doomed to fail. Mistaken belief doesn't entail mistaken inquiry.

It's important to note that this point generalizes to other domains which are similarly difficult and controversial. Consider visionary and innovative inquirers who push the boundaries of their respective fields of study. Travel back to 1667, and consider Johan Joachim Becher, who first proposed phlogiston theory. Imagine him inquiring into the question: *why does phlogiston release during combustion?* Even though it turned out that this theory was false, would it follow that Becher shouldn't have inquired into this question? Of course not! We should resist this result. Researchers who investigate questions on cutting-edge topics help to make important progress, even if their theories turn out, in the end, to be false.²⁹

In specialized and difficult fields like science and philosophy (among many others), we don't just want to uncover the answers to our questions, we also want to clarify our misunderstandings, and figure out what the good questions are. Inquiry is a valuable activity, not only for discovering the truth, but also for uncovering error. If scientists or philosophers were always trying to respect Knowledge Norm or Evoked Question Norm, then this may stifle the creativity and innovation that helps to propel these fields forward.³⁰

4. Just Ask the Right Questions

I will now consider a strategy on behalf of the defender of the Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm for how to respond to the cases in §3.

One might argue that we can take some of the sting out of these cases by highlighting that it's nearly always possible to reformulate a question such that it has a true answer and thus conforms to these norms. Inquirers often hedge their questions to indicate that they might not know the question's presuppositions. For example, one might ask: "Assuming that there is one, where is the local coffee shop?"³¹ Or consider how questions of the form *is it the case that p or not p?* make conformity to Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm fairly easy. So long as the inquirer recognizes that all such questions are guaranteed to have a true answer given that every proposition is either true or false.³² Let's call these questions with *easy entailments*. So, the thought goes,

²⁹ Also see, Battaly (2017, p. 9) who considers the related case of Albert Michelson and Edward Morley, physicists who conducted many experiments trying to study the now debunked phenomena of ether drift. Additionally, for discussion on the relationship between evidence and the pursuit of theories in scientific inquiry see, for example, Šešelja and Straßer (2014) and Fleisher (2022).

³⁰ For further discussion on the important relationship between creativity and inquiry (especially within the arts and sciences) see, for example: Kieran (2019), Chung (2022), and Brainard (Forthcoming).

³¹ Thank you to an anonymous referee for raising this objection concerning hedging.

³² For the sake of argument, I'm assuming bivalence (that every answer to a question is either true or false), however nothing critical will turn on this assumption. Willard-Kyle (2023a, p. 625) also assumes bivalence.

inquirers can easily come to know that their question has a true answer. They aren't ever going to be stuck without a proper (i.e., without a non-norm-violating) question to ask when, for example, they're inquiring as a novice, or when they're conducting research into a cutting-edge or controversial subject as an expert—there are just way too many questions with easy entailments for that to ever happen.³³

Carefully considering this response helps to uncover further challenges for these norms. First, at least some of the questions that help novices figure out the landscape of a new subject matter, or which help experts to dig deeper into cutting-edge and controversial debates, are simply not questions with easy entailments. Notice that questions of the form *why p?*, which are ubiquitous in philosophy and science (among many other domains), don't have easy entailments, nor are they easily translated into questions which do have easy entailments. So, this strategy has significant limits.

Second, this strategy is ad hoc and psychologically unrealistic. Many inquirers simply won't retreat to asking questions with easy entailments precisely *because* they are inquiring from starting points which are mistaken or confused. It won't occur to many of these inquirers to hedge or to reformulate their questions to be such that they are more likely to have true answers. This is especially salient in the case of inquiries involving young children. A child will not have the sophistication or foresight to ask: "Assuming that the tooth fairy exists, why did she only leave me \$2?" More broadly, when an inquirer has no reason to suspect that their question has a false presupposition, they will not hedge their questions, nor should they. From their perspective hedging will seem unnecessarily cautious or awkwardly pedantic. It's far more appropriate and natural for them to inquire into an unqualified question.

Third, and most importantly, it's not clear that one is really doing any better *as an inquirer* if they ask a question with an easy entailment, compared to a more direct and informative question with a false presupposition. For example, in *Culture Shock* would it have really been all that much better if Jade had formulated her question as *is there a coffee shop in town or not* instead of *where's the local coffee shop*. The difference between these inquiries seems negligible. In either case, by asking the question, Jade can figure out that there is no local coffee shop.³⁴

To sharpen this point, imagine that in hopes of conforming to Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm an inquirer makes the following blanket declaration: "henceforth, all questions I inquire into shall have an implicit qualifier, namely: 'if all the question's presuppositions are true', in front of them." This is a sure-fire way to guarantee that one's inquiries will never violate these norms. But should we think of this inquirer as now faring better *as an inquirer*? Surely not. It would be a waste of time and energy for inquirers to reformulate their questions in this way. We should thus be skeptical of this response to the cases in §3, and more generally, we should be suspicious of the idea that these norms are tracking genuine constraints on permissible inquiry.

³³ Many thanks to Chris Willard-Kyle for raising this objection and for very helpful conversation.

³⁴ By directly asking "where is the local coffee shop?" in this cultural context, Jade might come across as rude or presumptuous, but this doesn't mean that the question is bad from the perspective of inquiry. There are many questions that are culturally insensitive, overly presumptuous, intrusive, or rude to ask (e.g., "how much do you weigh?" or "when are you going to have children?"), but which may be permissible to inquire into.

5. Epistemic Improvement

Let's take stock. We started with the plausible assumption that there was something seemingly wrong about inquiring into questions with false presuppositions (e.g., "Is Toronto in Italy, or France?"). Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm offer explanations for why inquiries into these questions seem defective: such inquirers ought not to investigate questions which lack true answers. However, these norms are unable to explain the permissibility of inquiry across a broader range of cases. Sometimes one can permissibly inquire into a question, even if they don't know that the question has a true answer, and even if their knowledge doesn't entail that their question has a true answer.

Inquiry isn't always conducted from an initially knowledgeable or accurate starting point. But this shouldn't be seen as a flaw of inquiry or as an indication that the inquirer has engaged in impermissible inquiry. Instead, it's reflective of a well-known and humble fact about our predicament as human beings: sometimes we make mistakes and have misguided beliefs about the world. And this, in turn, can influence which questions we investigate. But, by engaging in inquiry we are often better able to overcome our epistemic limitations. Indeed, inquiry is a crucially important activity for creatures like us to engage in precisely *because* we're fallible.

The epistemic status of one's belief—and specifically, whether the question one is inquiring into relies upon a false or mistaken belief—doesn't settle the permissibility of inquiry. This is where Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm lead us astray. We can explain what feels off about inquiries into questions with false presuppositions in terms of the inquirer holding a false or confused *belief*. Inquiring while lacking the knowledge that these norms require is not the problem. Indeed, as we saw, inquiring is often a part of the *solution*: it can help us to identify and revise our false beliefs.

I propose that we adopt a more forgiving and flexible zetetic norm.

Epistemic Improvement: Inquiry into Q is permissible at t only if it's not rational to be sure at t that by inquiring one won't improve epistemically upon Q .

This norm specifies a necessary condition on the permissibility of inquiry into a question, and it construes epistemic improvement in a permissive way, as encompassing a diverse range of epistemic transitions which exceed, but also fall short of, coming to know the answer to a question.

Epistemic Improvement helps to explain the permissibility of inquiry in the previous cases. Even if one can't come to gain knowledge of the question's answer, inquiry is still a valuable activity to engage in for a variety of reasons. For example, in cases like Culture Shock, where one is inquiring in a radically new and unknown environment, from a position of deep ignorance, sometimes the best way forward is to inquire into questions which may have false presuppositions. But, far from being improper, this is often the most effective way to learn, and to overcome one's ignorance.

Relatedly, Epistemic Improvement doesn't risk classifying early childhood inquiry as broadly impermissible. Instead, this norm allows children to make productive progress in inquiry, by

permissibly inquiring into questions with false presuppositions. So long as it is not rational for the child to be sure that by inquiring, they won't improve epistemically upon Q—for instance, if it's rational for the child to believe that they can learn more or gain a better understanding—then this norm permits inquiry into Q.

Additionally, sometimes inquiry in highly controversial or cutting-edge topics involves investigating questions with false presuppositions. But, as we saw in *Philosopher*, these inquiries are incredibly valuable, not just for the specific inquirer, but for the community of practitioners as a whole. They help the inquirer to improve epistemically by giving them a deeper understanding of the subject area.³⁵ Such inquiries also help the inquirer to explore objections to their views and to further refine their research questions, all of which significantly helps to push these subjects forward in valuable ways.

Is Epistemic Improvement *too* permissive? One might raise the following objection: if we're liberal about what counts as an epistemic improvement, then violations of Epistemic Improvement will be increasingly rare. It's nearly always possible to improve epistemically upon Q, so long as one lacks a maximally strong epistemic standing regarding the answer to Q. In other words, it seems difficult to ever violate Epistemic Improvement: perhaps no one—except for maybe an omniscient God—is ever in any real danger of violating this zetetic norm.

Epistemic Improvement is a permissive norm. This is a feature, not a bug. When we inquire, we are trying to learn more about the world. When we're successful in learning about the world, this takes the form of an epistemic improvement. We can almost always learn more about a given topic. This is true for even the most skilled experts in a field. That said, there are a range of inquiries which Epistemic Improvement classifies as impermissible.

Consider the following.

Happy Kitty: Savannah wants to figure out whether her cat Blaze is happy. So, she walks up to Blaze, looks him in the eyes, and seriously asks: *Blaze, are you happy?*

Is it rational for Savannah to be sure that her inquiry won't lead to an epistemic improvement upon Q? Plausibly, yes. Like most adults, Savannah is fully aware of the fact that cats—including her beloved Blaze—don't speak English. It is rational for her to be sure that she can't improve epistemically upon Q by engaging in this inquiry. Accordingly, Epistemic Improvement classifies Savannah's inquiry as impermissible.

Consider another case:

Historic Bread: Duff, a baker, is inquiring into the following question: *what is the exact weight of the first ever loaf of bread?* He quickly realizes that there is no way to make any real progress on this question. There is no historical record of when the first loaf of bread was baked, and he is aware of this fact. Still, Duff continues to pour

³⁵ For a related discussion see, for example, Hannon and Nguyen (2022), who argue that the primary intellectual aim of philosophy is understanding.

hours of his time and energy into this inquiry. He reads article after article, and he interviews several archaeologists and historians who specialize in prehistoric food remains. But, as expected, all his efforts fall short.

Duff shouldn't have engaged in this inquiry, or, at minimum, his inquiry shouldn't have gone on for as long as it did. At some point, it was rational for him to be sure that he couldn't epistemically improve upon this question by inquiring into it. At that point, Epistemic Improvement gives the verdict that his inquiry is impermissible.³⁶

Consider one more case:

Radiology: During the past few months, Marla has had several severe migraines and random spells of dizziness. At the instruction of her doctor, she has a series of brain magnetic resonance (MRI) images taken to help determine her diagnosis. She's feeling incredibly anxious and impatient, but she won't see her doctor for a few days. She already has access to her medical files through an online portal, so she decides to examine the MRI images on her own. She has no idea how to interpret them, so if there were any indications of inflammation, bleeding, blockages, aneurysms, tumors, or anything else that might help to explain her symptoms, she wouldn't be able to detect them. Still, she studies the images diligently for several hours, trying to figure out her diagnosis. Zero progress is made.

Intuitively, Marla ought not to have inquired, or at least her inquiry shouldn't have lasted as long as it did. Epistemic Improvement can explain why. It may have initially been rational for her to think that by examining the images she might be able to improve epistemically, however, after her inquiry unfolds for several hours with no progress, it becomes clear to her that the images are far too complex and that she lacks the specialized skills required to properly evaluate them. At this point, it is rational for Marla to be sure that she can't improve epistemically by examining the images further.

It's also worth drawing attention to the fact that inquirers like Savannah, Duff, and Marla all conform to Knowledge Norm and Evoked Question Norm. None of these questions have false presuppositions, and it's safe to assume that each inquirer knows, or has background knowledge which entails, that their question has a true answer. These norms don't prohibit inquiry into Q, even when it's virtually impossible for an inquirer to make any meaningful epistemic progress on the question, either because there is no relevant evidence available to gather or because the inquirer

³⁶ For related cases see the literature in virtue epistemology on intellectual perseverance which considers the question of when it's intellectually virtuous to give up on an intellectual pursuit. For example, Battaly (2017) considers the case of Michael Chabon, an American novelist, who had spent five years working on a manuscript, which was fifteen hundred pages and which Chabon describes as getting him "nowhere closer to the end", only to abandon this project. Battaly argues that agents like Chabon: "don't have the virtue of intellectual perseverance because they don't quit when they should" (2017, p. 15). Also see, for example, Battaly (2020) and King (2019) for further related discussion.

lacks the skills needed to evaluate the evidence. In this way, Epistemic Improvement can explain why these inquiries are impermissible, while these other norms remain silent.

It's also important to keep in mind that Epistemic Improvement isn't the final word on whether someone should engage in inquiry; it's far from it. This norm does not settle whether inquiry is—all things considered—permissible. So, just because it's rational to believe that one can improve epistemically by inquiring, this doesn't mean that one *should* inquire. There might be a slew of other reasons why one shouldn't inquire into a given question. For example, there might be strong practical reasons not to inquire. Perhaps inquiring into Q doesn't help to advance the goals that one cares the most about, or maybe inquiry into Q is very dangerous, expensive, or time-consuming. Or perhaps the epistemic improvement that is expected to result from inquiry is so minimal (e.g., it's just a very slight reassurance in the answer to Q) such that engaging in inquiry is virtually useless, given one's practical purposes or reasons for inquiring. If so, then there will be straightforward practical considerations which tell against inquiring into a question.

There might also be important moral considerations which tell against inquiring. You shouldn't read your best friend's diary just because you're curious about what it says. This inquiry would transgress important privacy boundaries and result in a failure to meet the moral demands of good friendship. There may also be strong legal reasons not to inquire. Consider a police officer who conducts a search without having the required warrant. This inquiry might yield considerable epistemic improvements, but this, of course, doesn't mean that the officer should perform the search.

Epistemic Improvement thus encodes an important lesson about how to assess inquiry. Regardless of one's starting position with respect to a question—whether the inquirer knows, or has knowledge that entails, that their question has a true answer—we should ultimately assess inquiry in terms of whether one can improve epistemically. Instead of an approach which assesses the permissibility of inquiry in terms of whether an inquirer already occupies a particular epistemic position on the question, we should instead consider the potential for learning and growth that may result from inquiry.

Recognizing the value of inquiry as a tool for epistemic improvement also requires that we conceive of the value of inquiry as going significantly beyond figuring out the answers to questions. While gaining knowledge of the answer to a question is often a common and important form of epistemic improvement, inquiry has much more to offer us besides this. In addition to helping us figure out the answers to our questions, inquiry can also be an effective method for seeking out a kind of friction whereby we come to challenge our views and recognize mistakes in our thinking. And, as we saw, mistakes should be expected. We are fallible and non-ideal creatures. Of course, life would be easier if we didn't come to have mistaken or confused beliefs—but we can't always get what we want. However, sometimes, inquiry can help us get the epistemic improvements we need.

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