

# The Zetetic

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## 1. Introduction

Zetetic epistemology is an approach to epistemic theorizing which centers upon our practices of inquiry. Unlike more traditional approaches in epistemology, which tend to focus primarily upon justified belief and knowledge, zetetic epistemology considers the entire process of inquiry whereby one comes to have beliefs and knowledge.

Inquiry is a crucial part of every-day life. Without the ability to inquire life would be dull, uneventful, and much more difficult. When we're not sure of something, we inquire. If we need to perform basic daily tasks—if we're hungry, lost, or confused—we inquire. When we're fascinated by a topic, we inquire to learn more about it. Inquiry is also an important activity for self-discovery and personal growth. We often direct our inquiries inward to learn more about ourselves, as well as outward to learn more about others, especially those with whom we share close personal relationships.

In what follows, I outline some of the historical roots of zetetic epistemology (§2), as well as more recent defenses of it (§3). I then consider ways that one might resist a zetetic approach to epistemology, and along the way I suggest future directions and under-explored questions in this area (§4).

## 2. Historical Background

The word “zetetic” comes from the Greek word “zētētikos”, meaning roughly proceeding by inquiry. Zetetic epistemology is a relatively new and emerging area of contemporary epistemology, but it has deep historical roots. It can be traced back to at least Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian skepticism. The Pyrrhonian skeptic is characterized as perpetually engaged in inquiry, suspending judgment on all matters, leaving all questions open and unsettled. Relatedly, in Kant's *Lectures on Logic*, he talks of “the zeteticus”, referring to the Pyrrhonian skeptic, and describing them as “one who reflects on his cognitions and examines them.” Inquiry is also famously central to Plato's *Meno*, where Meno challenges Socrates with a paradox: how can we inquire and learn about virtue without already knowing what virtue is (Fine 2014)?

Inquiry, and specifically the practice of asking questions, is also reflected in Socrates' signature approach to doing philosophy. His distinctive method of questioning his interlocutors until they recognize flaws in their thinking has come to be known as the Socratic *elenchus*. Inquiry is also an important topic among pre-Socratics, especially within Parmenides' poem (Assaturian Forthcoming).

More recently, and drawing inspiration from Socrates, Hintikka (2007) has developed an approach to epistemology which he calls *Socratic Epistemology*. On this view, knowledge acquisition is an interrogative capacity—it concerns an inquirer's ability to ask and answer questions. Socratic epistemology is a version of zetetic epistemology because it shifts the focus from evaluating knowledge

and justification, and instead considers how knowledge and justification (and information more broadly) are acquired in the first place. Hintikka says:

Epistemology cannot start from the experience of wonder or doubt. It should start from recognition of where the item of information that we are wondering about or doubting came from in the first place. Any rational justification or rational distinction of such wonder or doubt must be based on its ancestry (Hintikka 2007, 18).

Hintikka proposes a logic of questions and answers, which he argues is fundamental to epistemology.

Zetetic approaches to epistemology are also central to the pragmatist tradition. This influence is embodied throughout the more contemporary scholarship of Christopher Hookway, an early proponent of zetetic epistemology. Hookway (2006) critiques what he calls the *doxastic paradigm* in epistemology. According to this paradigm the project of epistemology is to evaluate doxastic states, most notably beliefs, to determine whether they are justified or constitute knowledge (Hookway 2006, 96). Hookway defends an alternative paradigm on which epistemology: “concerns how it is possible to be good at inquiry rather than, more simply, what it is to have justified beliefs or knowledge” (2006, 101).

Over roughly the last decade, zetetic epistemology has grown in popularity, and it is undergoing a resurgence across recent literature. Next, I consider recent defenses of zetetic approaches to epistemology.

### 3. Zetetic Epistemology: Why?

What is the relationship between inquiry and epistemology? Approaches to zetetic epistemology come in varying degrees of strength. Some philosophers have recently defended a strong relationship between inquiry and epistemology, arguing that all epistemic norms are norms of inquiry.

Kelp (2021) argues for the view that epistemology is the *theory of inquiry*. His approach to zetetic epistemology stems from the idea that inquiry is an activity with a constitutive aim, which he takes to be knowledge. This view draws a close comparison between inquiry and games, like chess. Chess is an activity with a constitutive aim, namely: to checkmate one’s opponent. Just as there are constitutive norms (or rules) governing the playing of chess, so too are their constitutive norms governing the activity of inquiry. Epistemic norms on this view are the norms that guide us in the achievement of inquiry’s aim.

A distinct approach to zetetic epistemology is defended by Friedman (2020). Friedman’s argument starts with a puzzle. Consider the following case (adapted from Friedman; 2020, 502-503):

Distracted Inquiry: Flavio is a server at a banquet hall, and he needs to know exactly how many portions of tiramisu are needed for dessert. The best way for him to figure this out is to do a quick headcount of the guests. There are many guests, and the wedding is a bustling and lively affair, so figuring this out requires his undivided attention. He starts counting but keeps getting distracted. During these distractions he comes to believe that the DJ is playing “Vivo per lei” by Andrea Bocelli, that one guest never finished their

eggplant Parmesan, that the man at table 13 has a ridiculously large handlebar mustache, and so on. These distractions prolong his inquiry and prevent him from figuring out how many guests there are, and hence, how many tiramisu portions are needed.

What should we think about Flavio's inquiry? Flavio (let's assume) comes to have several beliefs which are sufficiently based upon his evidence. So, he respects the following norm:

Epistemic Permission (EP): If one has excellent evidence for  $p$  at  $t$ , then one is permitted to judge  $p$  at  $t$  (Friedman; 2020, 514).

Friedman argues that EP is in the spirit of standard evidentialist norms, though it concerns the act of judging that  $p$ , opposed to evaluating doxastic states directly. So, while Flavio comes to have a range of evidentially supported beliefs, the evidence that he's attending to is entirely irrelevant to his inquiry. If all servers were like Flavio, then the tiramisu may never be served (a tragic result). Flavio violates the following norm:

Zetetic Instrumental Principle (ZIP): If one wants to figure out the answer to a question, then one ought to take the means necessary to figure out the answer to that question (Friedman; 2020, 503).

There isn't anything special about Flavio's situation. At any given moment we usually have an abundance of evidence available to us that we can come to have beliefs on the basis of. But, if we want to figure out the answer to a question, then (at some point) we must focus solely on what's relevant.

What's the puzzle? Friedman argues that EP and ZIP generate normative incoherence: EP says that Flavio is permitted to come to have beliefs—including beliefs which are irrelevant to his inquiry—so long as they are based on excellent evidence. But ZIP requires Flavio to ignore inquiry-irrelevant evidence and to focus on his inquiry. ZIP prohibits what EP permits.

How should we solve this puzzle? According to Friedman (2020), the best solution is to *take the zetetic turn*: to adopt an approach to epistemic normativity on which all epistemic norms are zetetic. This is a striking result, and it has been challenged in recent literature (Thorstad 2021, 2022, Haziza 2022, and Falbo 2023b).

Both Kelp and Friedman defend strong approaches to zetetic epistemology. On each view, though for different reasons, epistemic normativity is the normativity of inquiry. A more modest approach to zetetic epistemology holds that some but not all epistemic norms are zetetic.

For example, Thorstad (2021) defends a *focal point* view on which the norms of inquiry and the norms of belief concern distinct evaluative focal points, namely: inquiry and belief. He argues that the tension between zetetic norms and more traditional epistemic norms is unproblematic, and indeed that such norms can co-exist within one normative domain.

Fleisher (2022) defends the position that there are zetetic reasons, or what he calls *inquisitive* reasons, to be in belief-like states such as acceptance or endorsement when pursuing a theory in inquiry. For

example, Fleisher argues that the testability of a theory can be an inquisitive reason in favor of endorsing a theory, especially in fields like science. On this view, inquisitive reasons are epistemic because they help to promote successful inquiry, and thus are associated with epistemic aims like knowledge and truth.

Flores and Woodard (2023) have recently argued that epistemic normativity extends to action, and specifically, to the act of evidence gathering. They appeal to our practices of epistemic criticism—the fact that it often seems appropriate to epistemically criticize gullible and lazy inquirers who fail to gather evidence well—to defend this view. This practice of epistemic criticism, they argue, is evidence for a genuinely *epistemic*, opposed to merely practical, norm on evidence gathering. Hall and Johnson (1998) are also early defenders of the view that there are epistemic norms on evidence gathering.

There is also a growing body of work in epistemology which considers zetetic norms governing inquiring attitudes, such as wonder and curiosity, which are directed towards questions during inquiry. Perhaps some of the earliest discussions of inquiring attitudes are found among Brentano's heirs (as documented by Mulligan 2018).

For example, consider an *ignorance norm* on inquiry, which rationally prohibits one from inquiring into (and hence having an inquiring attitude towards) a question, Q, while knowing Q's answer (Friedman 2017; Sapir and van Elswyk 2021). In response, various philosophers have raised objections to this norm, arguing that it can sometimes be rational to inquire into a question, even if one already knows its answer (Archer 2018, 2021; Falbo 2021, 2023a; Woodard 2022).

Relatedly, Willard-Kyle (2023) argues that there is a *knowledge norm* of inquiry which says that one shouldn't inquire into Q, unless one knows that Q has a true answer. Whitcomb and Millson (2023) defend a related norm according to which one shouldn't inquire into Q unless one's background knowledge entails that Q has a true answer. These norms seem to explain why it often seems impermissible to inquire into questions with false presuppositions (e.g., *why do triangles have eight sides?*).

Zetetic epistemology, in both its strong and weak formulations, is appealing because it is designed to provide guidance to agents who are in the pursuit of inquiry. Indeed, one might begin to question why we should even care to conform to epistemic norms if they aren't zetetic (Friedman 2020, p. 533). Shouldn't epistemic norms help us to overcome our ignorance and figure out the answers to our questions?

#### 4. Resisting Zetetic Epistemology

There are several reasons why one might hesitate to accept a zetetic approach to epistemology.

*Is zetetic epistemology incomplete?* You're taking a nap, but then a loud bang startles you. You wake up and immediately come to believe that there was a loud noise. You didn't arrive at this belief via inquiry—you were sleeping! One concern with strong conceptions of zetetic epistemology, which say that all epistemic norms are norms of inquiry, is that they risk being incomplete. Zetetic norms aren't designed to evaluate the rationality of beliefs which don't result from inquiry. But majority of our beliefs don't result from inquiry; instead, they are the result of immediate perception or testimony.

One response is to adopt a thinner conception of inquiry. For example, Kelp (2021, 57-58) argues that even automatically formed perceptual beliefs can be the result of inquiry. This view, however, seems to be in tension with a common-sense view of inquiry as an intentional and goal-directed activity.

When developing a zetetically-grounded epistemology it's thus crucial to consider the *metaphysics* of inquiry. How should we understand the nature of inquiry such that zetetic norms can yield a robust and adequately complete epistemology, namely: an approach which can explain the rationality of all our doxastic states, including those which appear to be wholly unrelated to inquiry?

*Is the zetetic epistemic?* Some defenders of zetetic epistemology have argued that (at least some) zetetic norms are epistemic because the goal of inquiry is epistemic (Friedman 2020 and Forthcoming). However, it's worth carefully considering the inference from the claim that inquiry has an epistemic goal, to the claim that inquiry is governed by epistemic norms. Just as the goal-directed activity of brushing one's teeth, which aims at an oral-hygiene goal, isn't governed by oral-hygiene normativity, by similar reasoning, one might argue that inquiring activity, which aims at an epistemic goal, isn't necessarily governed by epistemic normativity (Falbo 2023b).

Another strategy is to argue that (at least some) zetetic norms are epistemic because the activity of inquiry can be the object of epistemic criticism. Here is an example adapted from Flores and Woodard (2023):

Hasty Inquiry: Claudia gets all her nutrition news from a blog which tends to promote trendy diets that aren't supported by the current science. After reading the blog, Claudia comes to believe that it's a healthy choice to add 1 tbs of coconut oil to her coffee, which (let's grant) is true. The blog doesn't offer any substantial evidence for this claim, and Claudia doesn't inquire into this matter further.

We tend to criticize agents like Claudia who make hasty judgements and exhibit poor inquiring practices. If there is a widespread practice of epistemically criticizing agents for not gathering evidence well, then, the argument goes, this is strong evidence for a distinctively epistemic norm on evidence gathering, and hence, for the view that at least some epistemic norms are zetetic.

Why do we criticize epistemic agents like Claudia? One might argue that we are critical of agents like Claudia, not because they violate an epistemic norm on evidence gathering, but because they have unjustified beliefs. If Claudia had instead suspended judgment, then it no longer seems appropriate to criticize her. If that's right, then this suggests that she isn't under any epistemic obligation to gather evidence.

Our practices of epistemic criticism may not provide us with strong evidence in support of an epistemic norm on evidence gathering. Instead, one might explain why epistemic criticism is often appropriate in these cases by appeal to more traditional epistemic norms governing doxastic states, for example, evidentialist norms which say that a belief is justified so long as it's sufficiently supported by one's evidence.

An alternative view would be to understand all goal-directed activities, of which inquiry is just an instance, as governed broadly by the same kind of normativity—*practical* normativity.

*Do zetetic norms overgeneralize?* Consider the following.

Hungry Inquiry: Marcello is studying for his upcoming logic exam. Earlier, he skipped breakfast, and now his blood sugar is low. He's starting to feel restless and distracted. For the past half hour, he's been stuck on the same logic problem, making zero progress. Marcello knows that if he eats a sandwich his blood sugar will rise, improving his cognitive functioning, and he will be much more focused and thus more likely to make progress on the logic problem.

Inquirers who aim to resolve their questions should carefully gather evidence and pay attention to what's relevant. But beyond this, good inquiry also requires that inquirers be well nourished. Hungry inquirers lack the energy that the brain needs to properly function, leading to confusion, shortened attention spans, and slower information processing. So, if you want to successfully resolve your inquiries, you should eat a sandwich. But, as Horowitz (2019) has persuasively argued, epistemology shouldn't tell us to eat a sandwich!

One area of potential concern for zetetic epistemology is that it may over-generate epistemic norms on sandwich eating, as well as: getting enough sleep, eating your fruits and vegetables, drinking coffee, taking deep breaths to manage stress, wearing comfortable shoes, and so on, resulting in an overly inflated picture of epistemic normativity.

*Should epistemic norms help us to achieve our zetetic goals?* A part of what attracts some to zetetic epistemology is that it offers guidance for how to successfully resolve our inquiries. However, one might worry that this makes epistemology oddly contingent upon the idiosyncratic interests and personal goals of inquirers. Additionally, it can sometimes be beneficial to inquiry to have beliefs which go blatantly against the evidence. For example, imagine a self-conscious scientist who is better able to conduct his experiments if he comes to believe that he's the most adored researcher in the lab, even though his evidence strongly suggests that he isn't.

Sometimes holding counter-evidential beliefs can promote successful inquiry. An instrumental norm like ZIP—which says to take the means necessary to figure out the answer to your question—appears to permit problematic trade-offs: an inquirer can sacrifice or “trade” the epistemic goodness of one of their beliefs in order to promote zetetic success overall (Falbo 2023b). This worry is analogous to trade-off style objections that have been developed against epistemic consequentialism.

Of course, zetetic epistemology need not proceed in this way. Instead, one might develop an approach which posited *categorical* zetetic norms that apply irrespective of an inquirer's specific zetetic goals (Steglich-Petersen 2021), or a view which evaluated agents based on their cultivating specific zetetic virtues like open-mindedness (Zagzebski 1996, Baehr 2011). Developing each of these approaches further, I think, would be a worthwhile project within zetetic epistemology.

We have considered various approaches to zetetic epistemology, as well as some ways of challenging these views. Along the way, we also homed in upon several areas that merit further attention and exploration. There is, of course, much more meta-inquiry to be done in this area of epistemology.

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