ZETETIC INDISPENSABILITY AND EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION*

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Abstract

Robust metanormative realists think that there are irreducibly normative, metaphysically heavy normative facts. One might wonder how we could be epistemically justified in believing that such facts exist. In this paper, I offer an answer to this question: one's belief in the existence of robustly real normative facts is epistemically justified because so believing is indispensable to being a successful inquirer for creatures like us. The argument builds on Enoch's (2007, 2011) deliberative indispensability argument for Robust Realism but avoids relying on an overly pragmatic account of the sources of basic epistemic justification. In particular, I argue that the sources of basic epistemic justification are those belief-forming methods which are indispensable for zetetically indispensable projects, that is, projects which are constitutive of being a successful inquirer for embodied, agential creatures like ourselves.

1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are interested in finding out where lion's mane mushrooms are sold near your home. Perhaps you are looking to buy some for their purported cognitive benefits, or perhaps you are just curious. In inquiring into the answer to your question, you must engage in quintessential epistemic activities such as deductive reasoning, weighing and evaluating potential pieces of evidence, inference, and so on. However, if you are going to make any progress on answering your question, you must also engage in quintessential practical activities such as going out into the world to collect evidence. For example, you might take a trip to your local farmer's market to see if lion's mane is sold there. In doing so, you will likely face choice points regarding means (e.g., you might need to decide what kind of transportation to use) and practical problems that require practical solutions (e.g., you might need to decide how you will get around a car accident blocking your route). While searching for the answer to your question of where lion's mane mushrooms are sold, your epistemic and practical lives intertwine; your capacities for practical deliberation and intentional action are used in service of your epistemic project of seeking the truth.

This example illustrates what is essentially a truism: given the kind of agential inquirers we are, successful inquiry often involves practical deliberation, that is, deliberation about what to do where deliberation is understood minimally

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as a kind of complex mental action.[1] But, as I will argue, more can be said: it is not just that one often deliberates about what to do while inquiring, but that the practical deliberative project is part and parcel to our identities as successful inquirers. Indeed, in a core case, acting in light of one's deliberation about what to do is part of or constitutive of successfully *seeking* the truth—as opposed to fortuitously happening upon it—for finite, embodied, agential creatures like us. For creatures like us, engaging in the project of practical deliberation is constitutive of being a successful inquirer.

I will use these reflections on the constitutive features of being a successful inquirer to offer an indispensability argument for the claim that we are (prima facie) epistemically justified to believe in the existence of *robustly real* ethical facts, where robustly real ethical facts are irreducibly normative, psychology-independent, and metaphysically "heavy" facts about what we ought to do.[2] The argument I propose has the same strucure as but improves upon Enoch's (2011) influential deliberative indispensability argument.[3] His argument starts from a vindication—or grounding explanation—of the sources of basic epistemic justification, that is, the belief-forming methods that we can employ without possessing epistemic justification for doing so but which produce prima facie epistemically justified belief. The vindication (first developed in Enoch and Schechter 2008) states that if a belief-forming method is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then the method is, for this reason, a source of basic epistemic justification. Enoch then argues that a belief in the existence of robustly real ethical facts is an output of one such vindicated source of basic epistemic justification. McPherson and Plunkett (2015) offer a compelling objection to the proposed vindication: it paints a picture of the foundation of epistemic justification that fails to respect the positive connection between epistemic justification and truth. Insofar as McPherson and Plunkett are right, Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument rests on shaky epistemic grounds.

I show that there is a more plausible vindication of the sources of basic epistemic justification that can support an indispensability argument for Robust Realism—one which respects the basic connection between epistemic justification and truth that McPherson and Plunkett (M&P from here on out) emphasize in their critique. The key thought is that it is not an intrinsically indispensable project that can convey epistemic justification through instrumental indispensability but a project which is *zetetically indispensable*.[4] Roughly, a project is zetetically indispensable for a thinker just in case it is essential, given the thinker's relevant capacities, to being a successful inquirer. I then build on the above reflections

[1] See Arpaly and Schroeder 2012, Sec. 1 for an account of deliberation as a complex mental action.

[2] Throughout, I make a distinction between ethical and epistemic (normative) facts. Ethical facts should be understood broadly as referring to the normative and evaluative facts that govern our practical lives.

[3] I use the presentation of the deliberative indispensability argument in Enoch 2011, ch. 3, which is based on Enoch 2007 and Enoch and Schechter 2008 (see also Enoch and Schechter 2006); the focus here is largely on material drawn from Enoch and Schechter 2008.

[4] I take 'zetetic' here from Friedman 2020. I see this essay as contributing to the burgeoning literature on zetetic epistemology (Friedman Forthcoming).

on the practical nature of inquiry for thinkers like us to argue that the practical deliberative project is not just intrinsically indispensable for thinkers like us but also zetetically indispensable. Since we need to believe in robustly real ethical facts for practical deliberation and we need practical deliberation to be successful inquirers, we need to believe in robustly real ethical facts to be successful inquirers. This is why a belief in Robust Realism is epistemically justified. I call this the *zetetic indispensability argument for Robust Realism*.

The upshot of the zetetic indispensability argument is thus two-fold. The first upshot is metaepistemological: the argument offers a plausible vindication of the sources of basic epistemic justification which honors the positive connection between epistemic justification and truth. The second upshot is metanormative: the argument improves upon an existing influential argument for Robust Realism, thus marking progress for the view.[5]

The plan for the rest of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I review Enoch's version of the indispensability argument for Robust Realism as well as M&P's objection to its assumed vindication of the basic belief-forming methods. In Section 3, I offer an alternative vindication of our basic belief-forming methods—what I call *Zetetic Vindication*. In Section 4, I argue that Zetetic Vindication properly respects the positive connection between epistemic justification and truth. Finally, in Section 5, I show how Zetetic Vindication can be used to ground an indispensability argument for Robust Realism.

2. Enoch's Deliberative Indispensability Argument

Given that the zetetic indispensability argument has the same form as Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument, I briefly review his argument and M&P's objection to it, focusing on the epistemological core of the argument.

Enoch is working within a foundationalist picture of the structure of epistemic justification according to which eventually epistemic justifications come to an end. For some belief-forming methods, we are epistemically justified in using them in virtue of their being licensed by other belief-forming methods; but eventually such derivative justifications come to an end; for some belief-forming methods—the *basic* belief-forming methods—we are epistemically justified in using them without possessing an epistemic justification for doing so. As Enoch puts it, "[we] don't employ basic belief forming methods because [we] employ other methods, but rather [we] employ other methods because they are licensed by the basic ones" (p. 58). The key proposal in Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument is a grounding explanation of the class of these basic belief-forming methods that can produce prima facie epistemically justified belief;

[5]That said, the indispensability argument I offer faces a number of other issues that have been raised for Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument, such as in Faraci 2012, Lenman 2014, and Cline 2016. I couldn't possibly respond to all objections to an indispensability argument for Robust Realism in this space; my focus is on offering an indispensability argument with a plausible account of epistemic justification at its core. Still, I will clarify Enoch's indispensability argument in an attempt to build the strongest indispensability argument I can in this space, and in doing so, I will respond to some objections other than that of M&P.

such vindicated methods are described as *default reasonable* or *sources of basic epistemic justification*. Given their status as basic, one possesses no epistemic justification for employing them, but ideally we as theorists can explain their status as epistemically justified nonetheless—we as theorists can make a principled distinction between the belief-forming methods that one should and should not employ as basic. For example, ideally we can explain why employing inference to the worst explanation as basic cannot produce epistemically justified belief while employing inference to the best explanation as basic can, despite lacking epistemic justification for employing either. More precisely then, we would like to be able to explain the features in virtue of which some belief-forming methods should, and some should not, be employed as basic. Such a grounding explanation is what Enoch calls a *vindication* of our sources of basic epistemic justification.

The vindication appealed to in Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument was first developed in Enoch and Schechter 2008 and makes use of two notions: *intrinsically indispensable* projects and a belief-forming method being *instrumentally indispensable* to a project. A project is intrinsically indispensable if it is rationally non-optional. Thus, that a project is intrinsically indispensable is a substantive normative fact or, as Enoch puts it, follows from some "general principle of rationality" (Enoch 2011, p. 62). A belief-forming method is instrumentally indispensable to a project just in case it cannot be eliminated without undermining—or at least significantly diminishing—whatever reason one had to engage in that project in the first place. Thus, instrumental indispensability requires not merely that the belief-forming method is helpful for or enables the project, but that it is crucial to establishing the attractiveness of the project (see Enoch 2011, Sec. 3.5).

In these terms, the proposed vindication is the following:

> (**Pragmatic Vindication**) One complete ground for the fact that a belief-forming method M is a source of basic epistemic justification is the fact that there is an intrinsically indispensable project P such that M is instrumentally indispensable to P.[6]

Using Pragmatic Vindication, Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument for Robust Realism is as follows:[7]

P1) (Pragmatic Vindication) One complete ground for the fact that a belief-forming method M is a source of basic epistemic justification is the fact that there is an intrinsically indispensable project P such that M is instrumentally indispensable to P.

P2) The project of practical deliberation is an intrinsically indispensable project.

[6]See Enoch 2011, pp. 63-64 and McPherson and Plunkett 2015, p. 111. Note that I have slightly adjusted the wording from what is in M&P, since I think this statement offers a better reading of Enoch's proposed vindication. Nothing substantive hangs on this adjustment, however.

[7]I adopt this presentation of Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument from McPherson and Plunkett 2015, pp. 108-109, with adjustments made in light of Footnote 6.

P3) The belief-forming method which outputs our commitments in practical deliberation is instrumentally indispensable to the deliberative project.

P4) Therefore, the belief-forming method which outputs our commitments in practical deliberation is a source of basic epistemic justification.

P5) In practical deliberation, we are committed to a belief in the existence of ethical facts, as they are conceived of by Robust Realism.

C) Therefore, (because sources of basic epistemic justification provide prima facie epistemic justification) we have prima facie epistemic justification for believing in the existence of robustly real ethical facts.

While (P3) is not my focus, let me say a few words that will hopefully strengthen its case and clarify the ensuing discussion around instrumental indispensability. For (P3) to be true, the sense of "commitment" in play must be stronger than merely, say, a commitment in some instance of practical deliberation or other. For (P3) to be true given the definition of instrumental indispensability and that it is the deliberative *project* which is intrinsically indispensable, the commitments in question must be those without which we lose—or at least significantly diminish—reason to engage in the deliberative project as a whole. We might describe such commitments as *essential presuppositions of practical deliberation as such*. For example, that my friend is in pain is a reason for me to help them is something I am committed to in at least some instances of practical deliberation, but I do not lose reason to engage in the *project* of practical deliberation without this commitment—this commitment is not an essential presupposition of practical deliberation as such. More generally, while there may be some substantive normative beliefs that count as "commitments" in my sense because without them one loses significant reason to engage in the deliberative project (e.g., the hypothetical imperative), the vast majority will not. On the other hand, the thought behind (P5) is that a commitment to the existence of some robustly real normative truths or other—the commitment to an ontology which includes robustly real normative facts—rationally upholds the project of practical deliberation; without such a commitment, we significantly lose reason to engage in practical deliberation. Thus, such commitment is one which is outputted by the instrumentally indispensable belief-forming method referenced in (P3).[8]

[8]One can see Worsnip's (2016) challenge to Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument as a challenge to (P3). Worsnip's objection relies on his particular reading of instrumental indispensability, and I contend that the best understanding of instrumental indispensability is somewhat weaker than Worsnip suggests. Instrumental indispensability does not (or at least should not) require, as Worsnip assumes, that one must employ an instrumentally indispensable belief-forming method if one is to have "any chance" of succeeding in the relevant project. Rather, it requires that giving up the beliefs outputted by the method would substantially undermine the reasons one had to engage in the project. Substantially undermining the reasons to engage in a project is not equivalent to making it impossible to engage in the project. People are capable of doing what they have little reason to do. Thus, in the case of practical deliberation, the relevant claim is not that one has no chance at engaging in practical deliberation without one's commitments in practical deliberation, but that one substantially rationally undermines the project in failing to take seriously (by believing in) what one crucially presupposes exists in practically deliberating. This seems to be the best understanding of instrumental indispensability for an indispensability argument for Robust Realism.

M&P's objection to the deliberative indispensability argument is targeted at Pragmatic Vindication. M&P object that Pragmatic Vindication fails to capture what is distinctive about epistemic justification rather than other forms of justification such as ethical or pragmatic justification. They argue that what is distinctive about epistemic justification is its connection to truth, and Pragmatic Vindication severs this connection. More precisely, M&P put forth the following condition on any vindication of the sources of basic epistemic justification:

> (**Truth-Directedness**) The sources of basic epistemic justification have the content that they do (in part) because of some positive connection between those sources and the truth of the beliefs that they govern. (McPherson and Plunkett 2015, p. 114)

Thus, according to Truth-Directedness, any vindication—that is, any grounding explanation for why a belief-forming method is a source of basic epistemic justification—must advert to some positive connection to the truth as a criterion on a putative source of basic epistemic justification. M&P's objection to the epistemological core of Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument for Robust Realism is that Pragmatic Vindication fails Truth-Directedness. Explaining why a belief-forming method is a source of basic epistemic justification by appealing to the fact that it is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project does not appropriately advert to the method's connection to the truth. In what follows, I take this objection to be a compelling one, one which must be taken seriously.

3. Zetetic Vindication

In this section, I present an alternative to Pragmatic Vindication that is similar in spirit but meets the Truth-Directedness constraint. The central idea is simple. Against the backdrop of a recent debate about the relationship between the norms of inquiry and epistemic norms,[9] we introduce the notion of *zetetic indispensability*. Roughly, a project is zetetically indispensable just in case it is essential, given the kind of creatures we are, to being a successful inquirer. Thus, a zetetically indispensable project is one required by the following substantive normative fact: one should engage in the projects that are essential, given the kind of creature one is, to being a successful inquirer. The proposed vindication is then the following:

> (**Zetetic Vindication**) One complete ground for the fact that a basic belief-forming method M is a source of basic epistemic justification is the fact that there is a zetetically indispensable project P such that M is instrumentally indispensable to P.

So the basic thought is that perhaps intrinsically indispensable projects that are not zetetically indispensable convey

[9] See, e.g., Friedman 2020, Thorstad 2022, Flores and Woodard forthcoming, and Steglich-Petersen 2021.

some other sort of justification such as ethical, pragmatic, or rational justification, but it is zetetically indispensable projects that convey *epistemic* justification.

Two aspects of the definition of zetetic indispensability require clarification: what being a successful rather than unsuccessful inquirer amounts to and the sense of essentiality at play in the idea of a project being "essential" to inquiry. On what being a successful rather than unsuccessful inquirer amounts to, I will assume that inquiry has a constitutive aim, namely the aim of truth;[10] and so being a successful inquirer is being someone whose inquiries sufficiently achieve this aim of truth. I do not pretend that citing truth as the aim of inquiry is very precise; rather, it is meant as a starting point for further theoretical work. Moreover, what it takes to sufficiently achieve the aim of truth in one's inquiries might be more precisely spelled out in terms of, e.g., the percentage of all inquiries which result in true belief or in terms of the proportion of inquiries that increase the accuracy of the inquirer's epistemic state. Like the aim of truth, I leave sufficient achievement of the aim of truth largely schematic.[11]

As for the sense of essentiality at play, in one sense of the word, the projects of eating and sleeping are essential to being a successful inquirer for creatures like us. But intuitively such projects have nothing to do with fixing the sources of basic epistemic justification. Further, eating and sleeping are essential to being a successful inquirer in an importantly different way than the way in which, say, practical deliberation is essential to being a successful inquirer. The difference seems to be between enabling and constitution, where both are understood to be capacity-relative. A project is *constitutive* of being a successful inquirer (for creatures like us) if part of what it is to be a successful inquirer is to engage in the project; one's being a successful inquirer is grounded in engaging in this project; or put another way, the project can be taken as a *constitutive means* to being a successful inquirer. An *enabling* project is necessary to being a successful inquirer, but engaging in it is not part of what it is to be a successful inquirer. It is projects which are constitutive (rather than merely enabling) of being a successful inquirer that are zetetically indispensable.

Engaging in practical deliberation more than enables our being a successful inquirer—part of what it is to be a successful inquirer for embodied, agential creatures like us is to be someone who deliberates about what to do in seeking out the truth. This follows from the fact that a core instance of successful inquiry for creatures like us—that is, an instance of a type of successful inquiry which is common and important in our inquiring lives—is partially constituted

[10] As Friedman (2020, Footnote 11) notes, this much is common ground in the debate over the aim of inquiry. There is disagreement about what relationship to the truth one is aiming at (e.g., whether it is knowledge or whether something weaker will do).

[11] Zetetic Vindication should thus be seen as a schematic vindication. Its exact extension will depend on how one more exactly understands sufficient meeting of the aim of truth. One important constraint on a fully spelled-out account of being a successful inquirer is that whether something has the property of being a successful inquirer cannot depend on facts about epistemic justification. The projects that convey basic epistemic justification through instrumental indispensability on Zetetic Vindication are therefore not those that are essential to being a successful seeker of, e.g., knowledge or justified true belief. Thus, even if the aim of inquiry is, say, *knowledge* of the truth (see Footnote 10), inquirers will be judged as successful or unsuccessful inquirers *for the purposes of fixing the sources of basic epistemic justification* only in reference to their—to put it roughly—accuracy. The reason for this restriction is to avoid circularity; indeed, since this grounding story for the sources of basic epistemic justification depends on what it is to be a successful inquirer, what it is to be a successful inquirer should not depend on facts about epistemic justification.

by acting *thoughtfully* in pursuit of truth; practical deliberation is, in a core instance of successful inquiry for creatures like us, a constitutive means to inquiring.[12]

It is important to understand the nature of the constitution claim I am making about practical deliberation. First, sometimes—maybe even often—we successfully inquire without practically deliberating about what to do in the process. Some successful inquiries are what you might call *easy* inquiries—we know what to do without giving it explicit prior thought (perhaps because we have engaged in a very similar inquiry many times before). So I am not saying that practical deliberation is constitutive of *any* successful inquiry for creatures like us. What I am claiming is that *in a common and important kind of successful inquiry*, practical deliberation is part of the inquiry and such an inquiry would likely not be successful if it weren't. The prevalence of successful inquiry through practical deliberation is further bolstered by the fact that even inquiry that takes place solely within one's mind (e.g., figuring out the best next chess move while staring motionlessly at the ceiling) involves intentional mental action and thus, often, practical deliberation. For example, one might deliberate about which of a number of possible chess moves to consider in more depth.[13] More generally, a project is constitutive of being a successful inquirer not because any successful inquiry is partially constituted by engaging in the project, but because a common and important kind of successful inquiry is partially constituted by engaging in the project and such an inquiry would likely be unsuccessful if it weren't.

Thus, a core instance of successful inquiry for creatures like us is *hard* inquiry, i.e., inquiry which is partly constituted by practical deliberation and which, if attempted without practical deliberation, would likely not be successful. In light of this, the project of practical deliberation is genuinely constitutive of *being* a successful inquirer for creatures like us, even though a successful inquirer relevantly like us can sometimes engage in token inquiries without engaging in practical deliberation.

Second, the constitution claim is capacity-relative. Perhaps there could be a successful inquirer—perhaps even a human one—who does not rely on practical deliberation in any core instance of successful inquiry. But my claim is that such an inquirer would have relevantly different capacities and so what is zetetically indispensable for them is not what is zetetically indispensable for us. For example, one might imagine a human who always decides what to do without prior deliberation in inquiry yet is extremely lucky and so always answers her questions correctly.[14] I agree that such an extremely lucky human inquirer is possible in some sense, but she is also not like us in the relevant sense. She is

[12] I don't have space to attend to M&P's three purported counterexamples to Pragmatic Vindication (see their Section 5.3.2). I'll just say briefly that once you fully appreciate the centrality of practical deliberation to success in our *epistemic* lives, the purported counterexamples should no longer look like counterexamples.

[13] There is an ongoing debate about the extent of our capacity for intentional mental action (see, e.g., Strawson 2003). In other work, I try to vindicate our having a robust capacity for intentional mental action (Kelley 2024).

[14] As another example, one might imagine a human who is able to relegate any practical deliberation in any inquiry to someone else. Thanks to Dan Friedman and Adam Zweber for inspiring these examples.

lucky to an extreme degree that us actual humans are not, and this difference matters for determining the sources of basic epistemic justification for us actual humans.[15]

To summarize, a more precise account of zetetic indispensability is as follows:

> (**Zetetic Indispensability**) a project P is zetetically indispensable for a thinker T just in case an inquirer relevantly like T (e.g., one with similar psychological and physical capacities), whose inquiries sufficiently meet the aim of truth, engages in P in what is a core instance of successful inquiry for them and would not sufficiently meet the aim of truth in this core instance if they did not engage in P.[16]

It is worth noting that in their first development of Pragmatic Vindication, Enoch and Schechter (2008) briefly consider the similar idea of restricting to epistemically non-optional projects rather than merely rationally non-optional projects (see their Footnote 17). They note that doing so would "make it easier to rebut the charge that [they] conflate epistemic and pragmatic justification" (p. 551). Still, they choose not to go this route for three reasons: the account would lose explanatory power, it would not be extensionally adequate, and there are reasons to doubt the possibility of isolating a purely epistemic set of goals. Let me set aside the first and third worry, since more is said about the second.

Enoch and Schechter worry that not all belief-forming methods that we are justified in employing as basic are plausibly instrumentally indispensable to epistemically non-optional projects, and a vindication which provides a unified explanation of the sources of basic epistemic justification is to be preferred. But once we notice the central role that practical deliberation plays in our epistemic lives, the one purported counterexample they give fails. Indeed, they offer the belief-forming method of relying on normative intuitions, which (in Enoch and Schechter 2008) is taken to be instrumentally indispensable to practical deliberation.[17] The guiding thought in this paper is that practical deliberation is a respectable *epistemic* project in the relevant sense, and so belief-forming methods that are instrumentally indispensable to it are sources of basic epistemic justification. Thus, if Enoch and Schechter were right about the instrumental

[15] With these two qualifications on the sense in which practical deliberation is constitutive of being a successful inquirer for us, I am largely in agreement with the reflections of Arpaly and Schroeder (2012) on the somewhat limited value of deliberation more generally. Indeed, the value of practical deliberation to inquiry is intermittent and contingent. Still, as Arpaly and Schroeder admit, (practical) deliberation is nonetheless crucial (to inquiry) for creatures like us.

[16] As those cited in Footnote 9 discuss at length, the relationship between norms on inquiry and epistemic norms is a matter of substantial debate. This might make us wonder whether Zetetic Vindication can really capture epistemic justification, as opposed to some form of justification associated with the (potentially distinct) set of norms of inquiry. I do not think one needs to side with those that see norms of inquiry as properly epistemic norms to see that Zetetic Vindication can capture epistemic justification. Insofar as Zetetic Vindication is grounding the positive status of the method in some truth-tracking feature of it—and the right sort of truth-tracking feature—it is the idea behind Truth-Directedness that this positive status is, at least partly for this reason, an epistemic one. And I argue that Zetetic Vindication is grounding positive status in the right sort of truth-tracking feature in Section 4.

[17] To be clear, I am skeptical that relying on normative intuitions is instrumentally indispensable to practical deliberation. As discussed in Section 2, we would have plenty of reason to continue to engage in the deliberate project without relying on any given one or even any given subclass of our normative intuitions. What might be instrumentally indispensable is to rely on at least some normative intuitions at least sometimes; but how could *this* fact entail that all of our *particular* normative intuitions are (prima facie) epistemically justified? So it seems to me that insofar as relying on normative intuitions is an epistemically respectable belief-forming method, the justification for this is not going to come from Zetetic Vindication *or* Pragmatic Vindication. Relying on one's commitments (understood as essential presuppositions) in practical deliberation, on the other hand, is rightfully deemed a source of basic epistemic justification on both Zetetic Vindication and Pragmatic Vindication.

indispensability of relying on normative intuitions to practical deliberation, then Zetetic Vindication would deem this method a source of basic epistemic justification. So their objection fails.

It is also quite easy to see that the intuitive sources of basic epistemic justification that they mention—inference to the best explanation, Modus Ponens, relying on memory, relying on our peceptual faculties—are all instrumentally indispensable to zetetically indispensable projects. For example, deliberation of any kind would lose much of its attractiveness if Modus Ponens could not be relied upon as a belief-forming method, given that the method is the backbone of reasoning. Moreover, engaging in explanation, planning for contingencies, and engaging with the external world all seem to be essential in the relevant sense to being a successful inquirer for creatures like us; thus, all of the examples that Enoch and Schechter give of intrinsically indispensable projects are also zetetically indispensable. So with regards to extensional adequacy, Zetetic Vindication seems quite plausible.

4. The Truth-Directedness of Zetetic Vindication

I now turn to arguing that Zetetic Vindication meets Truth-Directedness in a way that makes it a plausible grounding of the sources of basic epistemic justification.[18] First, it is clear that Zetetic Vindication grounds being a source of basic epistemic justification in *some* positive connection between the belief-forming method and the truth of the beliefs that the method governs: the beliefs that are directly outputted by a vindicated method promote the downstream formation of largely true beliefs via inquiry; this is because the beliefs directly outputted by such a method rationally uphold projects that are constitutive of being a truth-tracking inquirer for creatures like us.[19] So given how purposefully ecumenical Truth-Directedness is, it seems clear that the condition has, technically speaking, been met by Zetetic Vindication.

But one might reasonably worry that Truth-Directedness is *too* ecumenical, such that meeting it does not suffice to secure the plausibility of a proposed vindication. In particular, one might worry that it is not just *any* positive connection to the truth that is necessary for a plausible vindication—there are constraints on an *acceptable* positive connection or on what counts as a "positive" connection at all. To illustrate this worry, consider a possible vindication—which I'll call *Bad Zetetic Vindication*—that grounds being a source of basic epistemic justification in the conjuctive property of (a) being instrumentally indispensable to a zetetically indispensable project and (b) being unreliable.[20] Bad Zetetic Vindication presumably meets Truth-Directedness: the feature that grounds the sources of basic epistemic justification

[18] Thanks to two anonymous referees, Dan Friedman, and Kiran Luecke for helping me with this section.

[19] I am thus understanding "govern" in Truth-Directedness to not require that the positive connection be between the source and the beliefs that the source *directly outputs*. The positive connection can be between the source and the beliefs that the method governs more broadly in the sense that the method's operation has some causal, rational, or constitutive explanatory connection to the beliefs. More on this soon.

[20] I'll operate with an intuitive and imprecise definition of reliability according to which a belief-forming method is reliable insofar as it tends to directly output true beliefs.

according to it involves an appeal to *some* in some sense "positive" connection to truth.[21] But the positive connection seems like the wrong kind of positive connection.

One might be tempted to build on this example by claiming that *really* what we want from a vindication is that the vindicated sources are what they are in virtue of being in some sense or other reliable belief-forming processes.[22] This would be to require that the positive connection to the truth appealed to in an acceptable vindication be one of reliability. But this is essentially to require a process reliabilist foundation of epistemic justification, that is, a process realiabilist vindication of the sources of basic epistemic justification (Goldman 1979). Zetetic Vindication is clearly not process reliabilist; the sources of basic epistemic justification are not what they are in virtue of directly outputting beliefs that tend to be true. But it is well-known that process reliabilism faces serious problems, many of which Zetetic Vindication will avoid in moving away from process reliabilism. For example, Zetetic Vindication does not fall prey to the New Evil Demon Problem (Cohen 1984, Wedgwood 2002).[23] More generally, it would be dialectically improper to insist on one particular theory of the foundation of epistemic justification or one particular connection to the truth in objecting to the indispensability argument. The indispensability argument is not supposed to be convincing to, say, the committed reliabilist. It is meant to illustrate what sort of epistemological commitments can be made such that a belief in Robust Realism comes out as prima facie epistemically justified. The more these epistemic commitments do not fly in the face of foundational, widely shared epistemological beliefs, the better. Truth-Directedness is meant to capture one of these foundational, widely shared beliefs; the truth of process reliabilism, on the other hand, is not a foundational, widely shared belief. So to require that the positive connection appealed to in meeting Truth-Directedness be reliability is too strict. We need some way to make Truth-Directedness less ecumenical without imposing one particular theory of the foundation of epistemic justification.

If we return to Bad Zetetic Vindication, we find a clue to how we might thread this needle. What is obviously wrong with Bad Zetetic Vindication is not that it is not a reliabilist vindication but rather that the feature which grounds whether a method is a source of basic epistemic justification is in itself a guarantee that the method is unreliable. But surely the foundation of *epistemic* justification—as opposed to rational or pragmatic justification—should not involve

[21] If one is not convinced that this connection to the truth is in some sense positive, one can interpret this example as showing us that we need further precisification of what counts as a "positive" connection.

[22] There is a related worry that Zetetic Indispensability allows problematic trade-offs. For example, if one unknowingly uses an unreliable belief-forming method, then Zetetic Indispensability will deem one (prima facie) justified in doing so if, without the method, one's inquiries more generally would be seriously undermined. Thus, belief-forming methods are to be "sacrificed" for the greater zetetic good on Zetetic Indispensability. I will set this issue aside because as Berker (2013) points out, the vast majority of contemporary epistemology is consequentialist in nature, and consequentialism generally is subject to trade-off objections.

[23] In fact, Lutz (2021) argues against Truth-Directedness as a constraint on a vindication because a vindication that meets it will face the New Evil Demon Problem. However, Zetetic Vindication shows that this is false. It meets Truth-Directedness, and your radically deceived counterpart does have epistemically justified beliefs according to it. Indeed, a successful inquirer relevantly like the radically deceived—who would themselves not be radically deceived—would rely on certain projects in their inquiries; and according to Zetetic Vindication, the radically deceived individual can form prima facie epistemically justified beliefs by employing as basic the belief-forming methods that are instrumentally indispensable to engaging in those projects, even if the methods in fact output all or mostly false beliefs.

such a blatant lack of regard for the epistemic importance of truth. This suggests that for some positive connection between the method and the truth to be an acceptable one, the positive connection should itself be a pro-tanto reason in favor of, not against, the method's being reliable. Call this the *Reliability Constraint* on a positive connection to the truth. So the Reliability Constraint does not require that the positive connection to the truth *be* reliability but rather be a pro-tanto reason in favor of, not against, reliability. The Reliability Constraint, unlike the truth of process reliabilism, seems to be a more obvious or intuitive commitment about the role of reliability in a theory of epistemic justification. Thus, I propose that a plausible vindication must meet Truth-Directedness while also respecting the Reliability Constraint.[24] By combining the Reliability Constraint with Truth-Directedness, we've made Truth-Directedness less ecumenical without problematically imposing one particular theory of the foundation of epistemic justification.

Finally, I claim that Zetetic Vindication, unlike Bad Zetetic Vindication, satisfies Truth-Directedness in a way that meets the Reliability Constraint. The positive connection between a source of basic epistemic justification and the truth, which grounds a method being a source of basic epistemic justification according to Zetetic Vindication, is that the source is instrumentally indispensable to some zetetically indispensable project. Recall that this means that the sources of basic epistemic justification are what they are because they rationally enable some project which is constitutive of being a successful inquirer for creatures like us. Now, I claim that being a method that rationally enables a project which is constitutive of being a successful inquirer for creatures like us is a pro-tanto reason to think the method is reliable. The argument for this claim has two key premises.

The first premise is the following:

> (A1) Barring special circumstances, if a belief-forming method that is instrumentally indispensable to a zetetically indispensable project were unreliable, then there would be few, if any, successful inquirers among us.

Why? Because, barring special circumstances, a method's unreliability would eventually make itself known to a user of it; but, barring special circumstances, we would be clear-eyed about this unreliability and not rely on the method, thereby rationally undermining the zetetically indispensable project that the method rationally supports. So (more or less rational) inquirers would not engage in that zeteticially indispensable project and thereby (by definition) fail to be successful inquirers.

The second premise is:

> (A2) There are, in fact, a significant number of successful inquirers among us.

[24] It would suffice for my purposes if meeting Truth-Directedness while respecting the Realibility Constrint were sufficient but not necessary for being a plausible vindication.

So (A2) entails, for example, that we are not all radically deceived by an evil demon. (A2) has been questioned by philosophers throughout history, but I take it that most would still agree we at least have a pro-tanto reason to think (A2) is true. So given the goal is only to establish a pro-tanto reason, not definitive proof, that the sources of basic epistemic justification are reliable on Zetetic Vindication, we can set aside such forms of radical skepticism. (A2) is also consistent with there being local domains in which we are not successful inquirers (e.g., particular scientific domains). I have been imprecise about what exactly it takes to sufficiently meet the aim of truth, but there are many reasonable ways of fleshing this out which are consistent with the plausibility of (A2).

Putting (A1) and (A2) together, barring special circumstances, belief-forming methods that are instrumentally indispensable to zetetically indispensable projects are reliable. In light of this, I claim that a method's being instrumentally indispensable to a zetetically indispensable project is a pro-tanto reason in favor of, not against, the method's reliability.

Of course, this pro-tanto reason could be defeated, for example, if it became evident that one of these special circumstances were in play. For example, it could be that we use one of the methods which is instrumentally indispensable to a zetetically indispensable project despite being in some sense aware of its unreliability. Or we might not use an instrumentally indispensable method but nonetheless engage in the zetetically indispensable project it is instrumentally indispensable for, and thus do what we have little reason to do. Or it could be that we'd have no way of knowing if one of these instrumentally indispensable methods were unreliable. Where we have evidence that we're in one of these special cases with respect to some source of basic epistemic justification, the pro-tanto reason to think the method is reliable may be defeated. Still, it remains that a method's being instrumentally indispensable to a zetetically indispensable project is a pro-tanto reason to think the method is reliable in light of (A1) and (A2).[25]

In summary, part of the strength of M&P's objection to Pragmatic Vindication is the highly ecumenical nature of Truth-Directedness. But in responding to their objection by putting forth a replacement vindication, one needs to do more than meet the ecumenical constraint given by M&P. One needs to offer a plausible account of the foundation of epistemic justification. I've tried to argue that to do so, one must offer a vindication which not only meets Truth-Directedness but does so in a way that respects the Reliability Constraint. Finally, I argued that Zetetic Vindication meets Truth-Directedness in a way that respects the Reliability Constraint. I therefore hope to have secured a robust

[25]This leads to me to a final important point about the truth-directedness of Zetetic Vindication, which is that reliability matters not just for constraining what kind of positive connection can be appealed to in a plausible vindication. Reliability also works as a defeater of the default reasonableness of the sources of basic epistemic justification. This is a point that Enoch makes as well (Enoch 2011, p. 66) If there were some positive reason to think that a particular belief-forming method that is instrumentally indispensable to some zetetically indispensable project were unreliable, then this might very well defeat the method's default reasonableness and the prima facie epistemic justification for the beliefs that method outputs. Similarly to Enoch's original indispensability argument, I am not trying to use Zetetic Vindication to argue that we have *undefeated* epistemic justification to believe in the existence of robustly real ethical facts, only *prima facie* epistemic justification for such a belief. It would be too ambitious to attempt here to show that this belief is not defeated by any further epistemological challenge, including reasons to think the belief in Robust Realism is outputted by an unreliable process. For discussion of five epistemological challenges facing Robust Realism, see Schechter 2023.

enough connection between the sources of basic epistemic justification and the truth to provide a sturdy epistemological ground on which to build an indispensability argument for Robust Realism.

5. The Zetetic Indispensability Argument for Robust Realism

Before moving on, let me flag that the metaepistemological work done thus far could be taken on board without taking on board the metanormative argument to come. Indeed, I have proposed a unifying account of the belief-forming methods that are sources of basic epistemic justification, one that is similar in spirit to Pragmatic Vindication of Enoch and Schechter but improves upon it in capturing the crucial sense in which epistemic justification is connected to truth. If the account is plausible, then this result itself would be substantial metaepistemological progress, even if getting from it to a better argument for Robust Realism looks untenable.

With that said, we are now ready to offer an indispensability argument using Zetetic Vindication. Let *inquiry embedded practical deliberation* be practical deliberation in the service of inquiry; then the *zetetic indispensability argument for Robust Realism* is as follows:

P1*) (Zetetic Vindication) One complete ground for the fact that a basic belief-forming method M is a source of basic epistemic justification is the fact that there is a zetetically indispensable project P such that M is instrumentally indispensable to P.

P2*) The project of inquiry embedded practical deliberation is a zetetically indispensable project.

P3*) The belief-forming method which outputs our commitments in inquiry embedded practical deliberation is instrumentally indispensable to the inquiry embedded deliberative project.

P4*) Therefore, the belief-forming method which outputs our commitments in inquiry embedded practical deliberation is a source of basic epistemic justification.

P5*) In inquiry embedded practical deliberation, we are committed to a belief in the existence of ethical facts, as they are conceived of by Robust Realism.

C*) Therefore, (because sources of basic epistemic justification provide prima facie epistemic justification) we have prima facie epistemic justification for believing in the existence of robustly real ethical facts.

I do not claim to have fully defended all of the premises of this argument. As noted, my focus in this paper has been on offering an indispensability argument for Robust Realism that does not rest on an overly pragmatic picture of epistemic justification. That said, there is a particular worry about (P5*) that I will address. One might worry that

while there is some kind of practical deliberation which involves a commitment to ethical facts (as they are conceived of by Robust Realism), practical deliberation we perform in the service of inquiry involves no such commitment. In response, I will show that one should be no more suspicious that we are committed to the existence of ethical facts in practical deliberation within inquiry than in practical deliberation outside of inquiry.[26] That is, one should be no more skeptical of (P5*) than one is of (P5). (Of course, this leaves room to be very skeptical of both, for all I have to say.) In this way, the zetetic indispensability argument raises no new problems beyond those already present in Enoch's original indispensability argument.

The reason there are no new problems raised in moving from (P5) to (P5*) is that it is the nature of practical deliberation *as such*, when viewed from a first-personal perspective, that underwrites whatever plausibility there is to (P5). Following Enoch's argument for (P5), from the first-person perspective, practical deliberation as such is the process of trying to make the decision it makes most sense for one to make, where "making the decision is up to you, but which decision is the one it makes most sense for you to make is not" (Enoch 2011, p. 73). Thus, in practical deliberation, one presupposes that there is something it makes most sense to do, something one *ought* or at least has *reason* to do, that one is trying to discover. Now note that this phenomenological description of practical deliberation as aimed at discovering some ethical fact does not at all rely on an assumption about what further end the practical deliberation is or is not serving.

In response, one might object that when practically deliberating within inquiry, all one is trying to do is identify the best practical means to a successful inquiry. For example, return to the example with which we began where you are trying to find out if lion's mane mushrooms are sold at the farmer's market. You decide that in order to answer your question, you will need to go to the market. Now, you are faced with a practical problem: how to get to the market. So you deliberate about whether to drive or walk. Your deliberation about whether to drive or walk might seem merely like an empirical inquiry into what the most efficient, safe, environmentally friendly, and so forth method is for getting to the market.[27] It might seem like there are no normative commitments around in coming to this conclusion. However, it is one thing to settle on what the best means is to achieve your aim, where this arguably involves a purely theoretical examination of the empirical facts (though see Footnote 27), and it is another to settle that taking that best means is the

[26] I won't say much about the issue of whether our commitment to *robustly real* ethical facts depends on whether we are within a context of inquiry. But if you look at this part of Enoch's indispensability argument (Enoch 2011, Sec. 3.9), the argument for our needing robustly real facts in particular appeals to what kind of fact is needed from the perspective of the deliberating agent. Thus, insofar as the essential presuppositions (and perhaps phenomenology) of deliberation do not change depending on the broader aim or purpose of the deliberation, which seems plausible, then a focus on inquiry embedded practical deliberation should not affect the plausibility of it being robustly real ethical facts, in particular, that we are committed to. Thanks to David Plunkett for pressing me on this.

[27] While I will not pursue this line of argument, it seems that in coming to a conclusion about what a "best" means looks like, one is committed to ethical facts, in particular, to there being certain features of a potential means that one *ought* to care about in evaluating it, e.g., it being efficient, safe, environmentally friendly, and so forth.

thing it makes most sense to do.[28] In the inquiry embedded practical deliberation under discussion, one does not merely settle that driving would be the best method for getting to the market; one also settles that driving to the market is the thing it makes most sense to do. In moving from a determination of the best means to a determination of what to do, one is committed to the normative fact *I ought to drive to the market* and, more generally, *one ought to take the best known means to one's end*. Thus, it is in settling that driving is the thing it makes most sense to do—not in settling the (arguably) factual question of what the best means is to getting to the market—that one is committed to the existence of ethical facts.[29]

I conclude with a final objection one might have to the zetetic indispensability argument, namely that its conclusion is importantly weaker than Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument. One might object that for inquiry embedded deliberative indispensability, we need only specific kinds of robustly real ethical facts, and so the zetetic indispensability argument only establishes (prima facie) epistemic justification to believe in the existence of specific kinds of robustly real ethical facts. This may be so, but note that Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument establishes only that we have epistemic justification to believe the following weak existential proposition: there exist ethical facts as conceived of by Robust Realism. That this is the conclusion of Enoch's argument is made clear when he notes that the argument is most directly against a global metanormative error theory and fails against more local error theories (Enoch 2011, p. 81). Moreover, as discussed in Section 2, to have reason to engage in the intrinsically and zetetically indispensable project of practical deliberation, we clearly do not need to believe in most particular ethical facts; we just need to be committed to an ontology that includes some ethical facts or other. And it seems quite obvious that (prima facie) epistemic justification for beliefs in particular ethical facts—such as that the useless killing of innocent persons is wrong—should come from something like normative reflection, not from anything about the constitutive features of successful inquiry. Thus, the conclusion of the zetetic indispensability argument is as strong as it should be and no weaker than that of Enoch's deliberative indispensability argument.

6. Conclusion

M&P have greater ambitions than arguing against Pragmatic Vindication. They also argue against the following stronger thesis: if a belief-forming method is indispensable to the project of practical deliberation, then that method is a source

[28] Enoch's discussion of why desires are not enough for practical deliberation is relevant here (see Enoch 2011, pp. 75-76).

[29] I imagine that worries remain, worries that are inherited from Enoch's original argument. For example, it is not clear that one is committed to a *belief* that there are normative facts in (inquiry embedded) practical deliberation, as opposed to something more like an acceptance (Bratman 1992); and, as briefly discussed already, it is not clear that one is committed to a belief that there are normative facts *as construed by Robust Realism* in (inquiry embedded) practical deliberation (Footnote 26). These are important objections that I will have to set aside here but are worth further thought. As noted multiple times, the goal here is to present for further thought a new indispensability argument for Robust Realism with a plausible epistemic core.

of basic epistemic justification. They argue that not only does Pragmatic Vindication fail, but there is *no* way to vindicate belief-forming methods that are indispensable to practical deliberation—any such vindication would fail to satisfy Truth-Directedness.[30] An upshot of the argument here is that M&P were too quick in making these more general claims: Zetetic Vindication vindicates belief-forming methods that are indispensable to (inquiry embedded) practical deliberation *and* it satisfies Truth-Directedness. Once we notice that practical deliberation is part and parcel to our identities as successful inquirers, we see why our commitments in practical deliberation are a source of basic epistemic justification and why we have prima facie epistemic justification to believe in the existence of robustly real ethical facts.

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[30] See their Section 5.4.

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