

# Seeking Confirmation: A Puzzle for Norms of Inquiry\*

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## Abstract

Like other epistemic activities, inquiry seems to be governed by norms. Some have argued that one such norm forbids us from believing the answer to a question and inquiring into it at the same time. But another, hither-to neglected norm seems to permit just this sort of cognitive arrangement when we seek to confirm what we currently believe. In this paper, I suggest that both norms are plausible and that the conflict between them constitutes a puzzle. Drawing on the felicity conditions of confirmation requests and the biased interrogatives used to perform them, I argue that the puzzle is genuine. I conclude by considering a response to the puzzle that has implications for the debate regarding the relationship between credences and beliefs.

## 1 Introduction

Like other epistemic activities, inquiry seems to be governed by norms, which, following Jane Friedman (ming), I will call ‘zetetic norms’—a term derived from the ancient Greek word for inquiry, *zêtêsis*. In this paper, I present an intriguing puzzle consisting of two plausible zetetic norms that sharply conflict with one another. After offering some reasons to think that the conflict is genuine, I will consider a response to the puzzle that holds implications for the debate regarding the relationship between credences and beliefs.

In its most general sense, inquiry is an attempt to figure out answers to questions. An agent who inquires into a question like *whether it is raining* undertakes certain actions, such as looking out the window or asking a trustworthy informant, in order to obtain a correct

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answer. It seems possible, however, for one to perform such actions without genuinely inquiring—perhaps in order to mislead others. This suggests that what distinguishes *genuine* from *ersatz* inquiry is the agent’s state of mind. Let’s say that in order to genuinely inquire into a question,  $Q$ , an agent must have an inquiring attitude toward  $Q$ . One way to investigate zetetic norms, then, is to ask when an agent is (zetetically) permitted, obligated, or forbidden to adopt an inquiring attitude toward  $Q$ . This is the approach I will take in what follows.

There are various folk-psychological states that might play the role of inquiring, e.g. wonder, curiosity, contemplation, investigation, deliberation or, perhaps, suspending judgment. Friedman (2013) calls these interrogative attitudes (IAs) and characterizes them, in part, as question-directed—not only is their content a question, rather than a proposition, but they also aim, like inquiry itself, at settling or answering that question. In keeping with what I take to be Friedman’s sense of the term, I use ‘inquiring’ to pick out the generic determinable attitude-type of which IAs are determinates—i.e. if an agent,  $\alpha$ , is inquiring into  $Q$  at  $t$ , then  $\alpha$  is wondering or investigating or contemplating or deliberating or suspending judgment or curious or. . . about  $Q$  at  $t$ .

In what follows, I present two plausible zetetic norms that both purport to govern the interaction of IAs and (full) beliefs. The first prohibits believing the answer to a question and inquiring into it at the same time. The other, however, permits this combination when an agent inquires by seeking to confirm a proposition she believes to be true. The puzzle lies in the conflict between these two plausible norms.

## 2 Don’t Believe and Inquire

The first zetetic norm I want to consider draws support from some paradoxical-sounding sentences. Consider the following.

(1a) # I believe that Marti parked the car, but I wonder whether Marti parked the car.

(1b) # Marti parked the car, but I wonder whether Marti parked the car.

(1c) # Marti parked the car, but did Marti park the car?

Much like G.E. Moore's (1993) famous paradox involving sentences like 'It's raining, but I don't believe that it is raining,' (1a–c) sound very odd, yet do not appear to be logically absurd.<sup>1</sup> An attractive explanation of the paradox appeals to the normative relationships among the attitudes denoted by the clauses in (1a), namely *believing that* Marti parked the car and *wondering whether* Marti parked the car. If it is zetetically irrational, incoherent, or impermissible for an agent to *believe that p* and to *wonder whether p* at the same time, that would explain why (1a) strikes us as odd. To explain (1b & c), we would need to extend the analysis by citing attitudes that speakers typically express when they utter declarative and interrogative clauses more generally. It is widely thought that speakers must believe a proposition in order to properly assert it—e.g. Bach (2008); Grice (1989) as well as those who, following Williamson (2000), endorse the Knowledge-Norm of assertion. Under this assumption, we can again appeal to the incompatibility between *believing that p* (i.e. the attitude expressed by asserting the declarative clause) and *wondering whether p* to explain the oddity of sentences like (1b) (Friedman, 2017a: 9–10). We may extend this insight even further if we suppose that when I ask whether Marti parked the car, I express an IA, such as wondering, toward the question of whether Marti parked the car. Associating utterance of the declarative clause in (1c) with the expression of a belief and utterance of the second, interrogative clause with the expression of an IA like wondering, we can explain the oddity of (1c) by once again appealing to the incoherence of simultaneously believing that *p* and wondering whether *p*. Letting  $p^Q$  denote a proposition that completely answers the question *Q*, Friedman formulates a zetetic norm that encodes this incoherence as follows.<sup>2</sup>

**DON'T BELIEVE AND INQUIRE (DBI)** One ought not to: believe that  $p^Q$  at *t* and inquire into *Q* at *t*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>On many accounts, the oddity of Moorean sentences like 'It's raining, but I don't believe it,' arises from the violation of a norm that requires agents to believe that what they assert is true. For a nice overview, see Littlejohn (2019).

<sup>2</sup>In keeping with the dominant view in formal semantics (Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1996), Friedman (2013) treats complete answers to questions as single cells (and partial answers as unions of cells) in a partition of logical space.

<sup>3</sup>Friedman has proposed another norm according to which an agent is not zetetically permitted to adopt an

According to DBI, an agent who simultaneously believes that  $p$  and inquires into whether  $p$  is incoherent or irrational in at least some *zetetic* sense. While Friedman proffers DBI as an epistemic norm, I want to bracket the question of how epistemic and zetetic norms relate to one another. With that said, I will assume that DBI's prohibition need not be (and probably isn't) moral, prudential, or all-things-considered.

There are three features of DBI worth noting. First, the norm presumes the compossibility of believing and inquiring (Friedman, 2017b: 309-310). Second, the norm is synchronic; it prohibits an agent from having certain attitudes at *the same time*. Lastly, DBI's deontic operator scopes over its Boolean connective. An equivalent formulation would be: One ought to see to it that: if one believes that  $p^Q$  at  $t$ , then one does not inquire into  $Q$  at  $t$ . Since the 'ought' takes wide-scope over the conditional, the consequent cannot be detached with normative force (Friedman, 2017a: 23). DBI tells us that certain collections of states are incoherent; it does not instruct us on what constitutes a reason for or against adopting such attitudes.

While the most robust support for DBI comes from its ability to explain the infelicity of sentences like (1a–c), there are some additional reasons to accept it. We find it quite difficult to treat a subject as genuinely engaged in inquiry into a question when they are described as believing its complete answer (Friedman, 2017a: 5–11). DBI also helps to explain why belief is considered to be a kind of settled opinion—namely, because it forecloses further inquiry (Friedman, 2017a: 11–12).<sup>4</sup> DBI is thus a plausible zetetic norm.

### 3 The Puzzle

The puzzle I'm presenting arises once we consider a certain class of inquisitive activities we regularly engage in. We quite often describe agents who we take to be inquiring as seeking to confirm their opinion on some matter. For instance, I think that mushrooms are a good

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IA when she *knows* its true (complete) answer (Friedman, 2017b). Throughout the paper, I assume that what Friedman says about the general characteristics of that norm carries over to DBI. See also Whitcomb (2017) for a version of the INI applied to the speech act of asking a question.

<sup>4</sup>One of Friedman's arguments for zetetic norms rests on the claim that one must suspend judgment in order to have any IA. See Archer (2018) and Michal Masny (2018) for criticisms.

source of vitamin  $D_2$ , but I ask my partner, a dietitian, to confirm this. Similarly, you are confident that the fastest route to your destination puts you on the freeway, but you consult your GPS to confirm. In these cases, we deliberately seek out evidence that will bear on the correctness of our attitude. As I will use the term, an agent *seeks confirmation* if and only if she inquires into a question and is cognitively non-neutral with respect to its answer. An agent who is cognitively non-neutral about a question, has what I will call an *affirmative attitude* (AA) toward one of its possible complete answers. So, what distinguishes attempts at confirmation from other inquiries is the fact that the agent has an AA with the relevant content.

While I will assume that *beliefs* count as affirmative attitudes (AAs), I propose that the latter include any type of cognitive attitude that meets the following criteria. First, the attitude must aim at truth in the sense that, other things being equal, it is good or correct *qua* the attitude that it is when it is true, and bad when it is false. Second, it requires its bearer to have some modicum of confidence in its content's truth. I'll assume at least three types of attitudes meet these criteria: full beliefs, suspicions, and guesses. As I see it, the confidence requirement gives rise to a relative ranking—e.g. having a full belief that  $p$  requires a greater level of confidence than suspecting that  $p$ , which in turn requires a higher level of confidence than guessing that  $p$ . There may of course be many more attitudes—infinately many, in principle—that meet these criteria. The language of 'levels of confidence' naturally evokes reference to gradable attitudes, such as credences. While neither of the criteria on AAs excludes credences from their ranks, I want to temporarily bracket their inclusion. In the last section of the paper, I will lift this restriction and consider its consequences for the puzzle.

Importantly, the search for confirmation is a type of inquiry and hence, an activity that requires the adoption of an IA. If you're looking to confirm that your flight leaves at 10pm, it is typically just as appropriate to describe you as inquiring/wondering/investigating/curious about whether your flight leaves at 10pm. So, the following is plausible:

**CONFIRMATION AS INQUIRY (CAI)** If  $\alpha$  seeks to confirm that  $p$  at  $t$ , then  $\alpha$  inquires into whether  $p$  at  $t$ .<sup>5</sup>

As long as the attitude an agent holds toward the proposition she seeks to confirm is something other than belief, there is no conflict between CAI and DBI—indeed, the former is not even a norm. However, if, as I’ve suggested, *belief* belongs among the possible AAs an agent seeks to confirm, then the following appears to be a plausible, wide-scope zetetic norm.

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

Since, according to CAI, to seek confirmation is to inquire, it follows from ICB that one may: inquire into whether  $p$  (by seeking  $p$ ’s confirmation) at  $t$  and believe that  $p$  at  $t$ . But this is just what DBI forbids. Thus, *together*, CAI and ICB permit exactly the sort of cognitive arrangement that DBI prohibits.

DBI and ICB are both wide-scope synchronic norms of inquiry and yet, if CAI is correct, then one forbids what the other permits. Since we seem perfectly capable of inquiring without normative incoherence, the plausibility of these two incompatible zetetic norms poses a puzzle. Of course, it may be that this puzzle is merely apparent. I’ve already canvassed the reasons to accept DBI. In the next section, I’ll try to make that case that CAI and ICB are plausible as well.

## 4 Biased Interrogatives and Confirmation Requests

What reason have we for accepting CAI and ICB? As with DBI, the strongest support for them comes from the behaviour of certain linguistic expressions, namely, conversational patterns that regularly arise in contexts where a speaker is seeking confirmation. In this section, I’ll muster this evidence in support of CAI and ICB.

We have already seen that DBI promises to explain the oddness of sentences like ‘I believe it is snowing, but is it (snowing)?’ by claiming that the latter’s interrogative clause expresses the speaker’s IA. An important class of such clauses are known as *neutral* polar

<sup>5</sup>Although I won’t argue the point here, it’s possible that CAI generalizes beyond ‘whether’ interrogative complements such that if you seek to confirm that  $p$ , then you’re inquiring into a question that you take to be possibly (completely) answered by  $p$ .

interrogatives, e.g. (2)—so-called because their utterance typically presents the speaker as being cognitively neutral with respect to the answer (Romero and Han, 2004). (↑ and ↓ indicate rising and falling intonation, respectively.)

(2) Is gold an element↑? [neutral polar interrogative/question]

However, there are other sentence-types that seem to present a speaker as seeking a confirmation.

(3a) Gold is an element↑? [rising declarative]

(3b) Gold is an element, isn't it↑? [rising tag-interrogative]

(3c) Gold is an element, isn't it↓? [falling tag-interrogative]

(3d) Isn't gold an element↑? [negative polar interrogative/question (NPQ)]

In contrast with (2), (3a–d) are recognizably *non-neutral*, *biased* or, using Bolinger's (1957) term, *conducive* to a particular answer. Linguists largely agree that speakers use these biased interrogatives to request confirmation of their assumption, commitment, or what I am calling affirmative attitudes. For instance, Gunlogson (2008) argues that rising declaratives are used to express the speaker's commitment to its content. Fiengo (2007) claims that by uttering (3a), a speaker asks a confirmation yes/no question and thereby presents herself as having some level of belief in the answer. Malamud and Stephenson (2015: 286) claim that interrogatives with positive declarative anchors and negative tags (e.g. 3b & 3c) 'involve some degree of... speaker commitment to the anchor proposition.' Romero & Han (2004: 610) argue that sentences like (3d) 'necessarily carry the epistemic implicature that the speaker believes or expects that the positive answer is true.' And in the conversational analysis tradition, Heritage & Raymond (2012) have argued that all of these sentence-types enable 'the questioner [to claim] pre-existing access to the information under question.'

Since such acts represent the speaker as seeking confirmation, the felicity conditions on (utterances of) biased interrogatives provide a clue as to the attitudes that agents must have

in order to seek confirmation more broadly. If speakers express both beliefs that  $p$  and IAs toward *whether p* when they request confirmations via biased interrogatives, then there is good reason to accept CAI and ICB. I will now attempt to discharge this conditional.

Let's start with the claim that confirmation requests express speakers' IAs. Note that like (2), (3a–d) can be used to ask a question. Indeed, confirmation requests and the askings of yes/no questions elicit similar responses—e.g. 'yes,' 'no,' and 'I don't know' are felicitous responses to (2) and to (3a–d). All these utterances, it would seem, facilitate the same cognitive goal, namely, to obtain the answer to a question, and this is just the goal toward which IAs aim. The symmetry of responses between askings and confirmation requests thus suggests that both express IAs, in line with CAI.

Suppose, however, that confirmation requests do not express IAs. It should then be felicitous to combine biased interrogatives with the explicit denial of such attitudes. In other words, while (5) should strike us as odd, (6) should be perfectly acceptable.

(5) #I'm not wondering whether gold is an element, but is it/gold an element?

(6) #I'm not wondering whether gold is an element, but (gold is an element,) isn't it?

Yet, (6) sounds just as bad as (5). We've presumed that the infelicity of (5) arises from the the fact that in uttering the first (declarative) clause the speaker disavows an attitude she expresses when uttering the second (neutral polar interrogative) clause. So the most parsimonious and conservative explanation of (6)'s infelicity, relative to that given for (5)'s, is that, *contra hypothesis*, biased interrogatives also express IAs. This is just what CAI predicts.

Let's now turn to the claim that confirmation requests express speakers' current beliefs. Interestingly, confirmation requests exhibit the features of both askings and assertions (Reese, 2007; Reese and Asher, 2009; Gunlogson, 2008; Farkas and Roelofsen, 2017). Their felicitous responses include not only the provision of answers but also the issuing of challenges typically reserved for responses to assertions. The following exchange, for instance, is quite natural.

(4) A: Jim smokes, doesn't he?



B: That's not true. He quit last year.

Notice that if B's challenge-response is appropriate in this exchange, it would also be appropriate had A simply asserted that Jim smokes—suggesting that confirmation requests, like assertions, express speakers' current beliefs.

But there are two alternative hypotheses that are *prima facie* plausible. The first is that speakers who felicitously utter biased interrogatives express beliefs they previously held, but no longer do. The second is that speakers express weaker AAs, i.e. those corresponding to levels of confidence *lower* than that of (full) belief. To support ICB, I'll need to show that neither offers a better explanation of the behaviour of biased interrogatives than the hypothesis that their utterance expresses speakers' current beliefs.

Before considering the evidence, let's observe that not all biased interrogatives are thought to express the same level of confidence in their assertible content. Farkas & Roelofsen (2017) argue that rising declaratives (3a), rising-tag interrogatives (3b), and falling-tag interrogatives (3c) signal low, moderate, and high levels of confidence, respectively. Although Farkas & Roelofsen's comparison does not include negative interrogatives (NPQs) like (3d), experimental studies suggest that NPQs are preferred when their speakers are ascribed a high level of confidence in the assertible content (Domaneschi et al., 2017; Roelofsen, 2012).<sup>6</sup> It's therefore plausible that rising declaratives express weaker AAs, while tag-interrogatives and NPQs signal stronger AAs like belief.

To assess the rival hypotheses, let's assume, once again, that in order to properly assert that  $p$  at  $t$  a speaker must believe that  $p$  at  $t$ . Now, if there are contexts in which it is felicitous for a speaker to assert that  $p$  at  $t$  and to utter tag-interrogatives/NPQs with that same content at  $t$ , then we'll have reason to think that the latter can, like assertions, express a speaker's current, rather than past belief. If, moreover, rising declaratives are *not* felicitous in such contexts, then we'll have reason to think that it's beliefs rather than weaker attitudes being expressed in such contexts.

Consider the following example adapted from Farkas & Roelofsen (2017: 36).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Both Domaneschi et al. (2017) and Roelofsen (2012) report the results of experiments that support the hypothesis that in contexts where there is either no evidence for  $p$  or some evidence for  $\neg p$ , hearers find so-called Hi-NPQs (e.g. Isn't it the case that  $p$ ?) most natural when there is evidence that the speaker believes that  $p$ .

(7) *Amalia and Bert have a colleague, Carla, who is admired by everyone for her problem solving skills. One day, at a department meeting, the chair raises an issue, and Carla immediately finds a solution that makes everyone happy. Amalia to Bert:*

- (a) She always finds a solution that makes everyone happy.
- (b) #She always finds a solution that makes everyone happy↑.
- (c) She always finds a solution that makes everyone happy, doesn't she↑?
- (d) She always finds a solution that makes everyone happy, doesn't she↓?
- (e) Doesn't she always find a solution that makes everyone happy↑?

In this example, Amalia can felicitously assert (7a), but it seems no less felicitous for her to utter the tag-interrogatives (7c–d) or the NPQ (7e). Given this co-permissibility, there's no more reason to think that Amalia expresses a past belief in uttering (7c–e) than that she does so in uttering (7a). In contrast, it would not be felicitous for Amalia to utter the rising declarative (7b)—i.e. the biased interrogative associated with low levels of confidence—suggesting that the attitude she has is *not* weaker than that required for assertion, i.e. belief. It's thus plausible that what Amalia expresses when she utters tag-interrogatives/NPQs is a current belief rather than a previous belief or a weaker AA.

## 5 A Response to the Puzzle

What are we to make of the puzzle? Note that the support for ICB offered above hangs on the assumption that assertions express speakers' beliefs. Rejecting this claim would cast doubt on the reality of puzzle, but it would also run counter to something approaching consensus among philosophers of language. There's a more tempting response—one I hinted at when introducing the concept of affirmative attitudes. Lifting the previous embargo, suppose we *include* credences among the AAs for which agents seek confirmation. Doing so fits nicely

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<sup>7</sup>Many contend that the felicity of biased interrogatives depends not only on the speaker's attitude, but also on the level of contextual evidence for or against the proposition in question (Domaneschi et al., 2017; Roelofsen, 2012). To control for this factor, I've chosen an example in which the contextual evidence (Carla's finding the solution) supports the proposition in question.

with how Farkas & Roelofsen (2017) explain the behaviour of biased interrogatives in terms of ‘levels of confidence,’ since credences are quintessential *gradable* attitudes. But now that we have AAs corresponding directly to levels of confidence, the puzzle comes to depend upon the relation that these attitudes, i.e. credences, bear to full beliefs.

Those who endorse the so-called Lockean Thesis hold that there is a threshold  $r$  such that a rational agent believes that  $p$  if and only if  $cr(p) \geq r$ . If this threshold is high (Foley, 1992; Hawthorne and Bovens, 1999; Pettigrew, 2016) or even maximal (Levi, 1991; Wedgwood, 2012; Clarke, 2013; Greco, 2015), the puzzle remains and continues to draw support from the behaviour of falling-tag interrogatives and NPQs—i.e. the biased interrogatives associated with higher, possibly maximal, levels of confidence.

The Lockean Thesis, however, is not universally accepted, and those who deny it contend that a subject might have a high credence without having the corresponding belief (Buchak, 2014; Jackson, 2019, 2018; Staffel, 2016). If they’re right, then the puzzle begins to unravel. First, the behaviour of biased interrogatives no longer supports ICB, since it can now be explained in terms of the expression of credences—obviating appeal to a speaker’s full beliefs. Second, using an example of questions concerning the outcome of infinitely-many tosses of a fair coin, Friedman (2017a: 12–14) argues that inquiry is permissible even in cases where the subject has maximal credences. If such credences are compatible with inquiring, a defender of DBI can consistently accept CAI, acknowledging that seeking confirmation involves IAs, while simultaneously doing justice to its cognitive non-neutrality by citing the credences, rather than outright beliefs, that agents aim to confirm.

Aside from the dialectical burden incurred by rejecting the Lockean view, the proponent of this response must explain why certain confirmation requests are felicitous in the same contexts as bald assertions—e.g. (7) above. It’s not clear how they would do so without challenging the widely-held view that assertions express speakers’ full beliefs. Furthermore, a speaker typically signals credences by deploying probabilistic vocabulary (e.g. ‘is likely’) or epistemic modals (e.g. ‘might,’ ‘should’), but neither appear in the examples above. In contrast, all of the data can be accommodated by positing AAs that are, *inter alia*,

distinguished by their level of confidence.<sup>8</sup>

While a thorough assessment of the anti-Lockean response is beyond the scope of this paper, its plausibility suggests a deep connection between the normative dimensions of inquiry and the most fundamental questions concerning the nature of our doxastic lives. If nothing else, this connection signals the need for further philosophical reflection on inquiry, its associated attitudes, and the norms that govern them.

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<sup>8</sup>The idea that the explanatory advantages of credences might be recovered by a panoply of doxastic states, such as guesses and suspicions, has been argued for by Carter et al. (2016). A similar sort of strategy has been pursued by Turri (2010) regarding varieties of alethic speech acts.

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