**Evoked Questions and Inquiring Attitudes**

Christopher Willard-Kyle, Jared Millson, & Dennis Whitcomb

**Abstract**: Drawing inspiration from the notion of evocation employed in inferential erotetic logic, we defend an ‘evoked questions norm’ on inquiring attitudes. According to this norm, it is rational to have an inquiring attitude concerning a question only if that question is evoked by your background information. We offer two arguments for this norm. First, we develop an argument from convergence. Insights from several independent literatures (20th-century ordinary-language philosophy, inferential erotetic logic, inquisitive epistemic logic, and contemporary zetetic epistemology) all converge on the evoked questions norm. Second, we show that suitably interpreted, the evoked questions norm correctly predicts several underappreciated kinds of bad questions. It does this, in part, by recovering versions of previously defended ignorance and knowledge norms. Some of those bad questions cannot be predicted by either norm singly, but only when corporately taken to reflect a common normative category. We identify this category as evocation.

**Keywords**: interrogative attitudes, erotetic logic, zetetic epistemology, inquiry, questions

1. historical backdrop

Some questions, it has been written, ‘do not arise’. Strawson and Geach wrote as much about certain questions involving reference failure, e.g. ‘Is phlogiston dangerous?’. Collingwood, writing earlier, took it that questions ‘do not arise’ when they have presuppositions that are *not being made* by the people who would ask them. Sellars, writing later, took it that a question ‘does not arise’ when it has a presupposition that’s *false*. These theorists all invoked the same thing: the phenomenon whereby questions don’t arise. What is that thing? [[1]](#footnote-0)

When questions don’t arise, they are in *bad standing*. Asking them would be a *mistake*. Not just any mistake though. Asking a stranger a very personal question might be a social or moral mistake; yet it would not be the kind of mistake at issue here. *This* kind of mistake is (in some sense) theoretical or rational. There are interesting extant discussions of it. Those discussions started with Belnap (1969) and Bromberger (1971). Bromberger’s question-centric writings, idiosyncratic at the time, helped inspire the now-mainstream epistemological discussions of interrogative attitudes.[[2]](#footnote-1) Along with Belnap’s work, they also inspired the widely studied notion of ‘evocation’ in inferential erotetic logic (IEL), a notion designed to explicate the idea of a question’s ‘arising’.

Against this historical backdrop lies our project, which is to apply evocation—as theorized in IEL—to interrogative epistemology.[[3]](#footnote-2) We’ll use evocation to build and argue for a norm, the ‘generic evoked questions norm’. This norm is briefly mentioned in Whitcomb and Millson (forthcoming) and builds on the insights of the ignorance and knowledge norms for inquiry; we’ll discuss it at length.[[4]](#footnote-3)

1. the evoked questions norm

Not to bury the lede, here’s our norm:

generic eqn

Rationality requires that you have an IA toward Q only if your background information evokes Q.

IAs (‘inquiring attitudes’) are question-directed attitudes, like wondering or being curious, that in some sense aim at resolving the questions that are their contents. The rationality requirement in generic eqn is wide scope and synchronic. It says that you are being irrational if you have an IA toward a question your background information fails to evoke. We take the notion of evocation from IEL, where it has two components we call ‘soundness’ and ‘affirmative openness’:

evocation

Your background information evokes Q iff Q is both sound and affirmatively open relative to it.

We’ll discuss soundness and affirmative openness below. But to a first approximation: background information renders sound those questions whose presuppositions it *establishes*, and it renders affirmatively open those questions whose answers it does not *supply*. generic eqn thus amounts to the claim that you are being irrational if you have inquiring attitudes towards questions whose answers are supplied by, or whose presuppositions are not established by, your background information. Soundness and affirmative openness encode two ways our questions should relate to our background information.

We endorse generic eqn. But interpreting it is complicated. How exactly should we define soundness, affirmative openness and background information? We aren’t confident enough to endorse answers here; but we do have preferences on the matter. That is, we endorse generic eqn and prefer (without endorsing) a certain interpretation of it.

In what follows, we’ll simultaneously walk two paths. First, we’ll give a recipe for cooking up different interpretations according to epistemic taste. Our central thesis is that this norm holds on some interpretation or other. Second, we’ll give our favored interpretation, our ‘chef’s recommendation’, and bring out some of its virtues.

Here’s generic eqn in expanded form:

Rationality requires that you have an IA towards Q only if

(1) your background information establishes that Q has a true, direct answer, and

(2) your background information does not supply any direct answer to Q.

There are several things to explain here. First, ‘direct answers’. We take that notion from IEL, where formal systems associate questions with sets of declarative formulas. The direct answers of a question are the elements of its associated set. We think of the formulas at issue as standing for propositions—the things people believe and know. Thus, we think of questions as being associated with certain sets of propositions. Those propositions are their direct answers.For example: the question *Who won: Smith, Jones, or Abbott?* is associated with {*Smith won*, *Jones won, Abbott won*}. Its direct answers, then, are the elements of that set. Using the notion of direct answers, we can define answers of other sorts. For instance, a question’s ‘partial answers’ are disjunctions of some but not all its direct answers; and its‘eliminative answers’ are negations of its direct answers.

If this gruel is too thin for your tastes, you can thicken it in various ways. For instance, you can take the ‘associated with’ relation to be identity. On this take, a question just is the set of its direct answers. Alternatively, you can think of questions as decision problems. Here, you would take the question above to be a decision problem whose options are *Smith won* and *Jones won* and *Abbott won*. A question’s direct answers would then amount to the propositions among which it requires a choice.

You can also think of direct answers in terms of how they relate to ‘partitionism’. That view identifies questions with partitions of logical space the elements of which it calls ‘complete answers’. The notion of direct answers is a generalization of this notion of complete answers. These notions play the same role, but aren’t subject to the same constraints. Complete answers are always mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. Direct answers are like complete answers, but without those constraints.

Having explained direct answers, we’ll now build our preferred interpretation of generic eqn. This interpretation takes a stand on two decision points. The first is the interpretation of ‘background information’. We like the Williamson-inspired idea that your background information is your knowledge. Moreover, we suspect that knowledge can play the background information role in both conditions (1) and (2). The second decision point is to interpret ‘establishes’ and ‘supply’. Partly because it’s simple and well-understood, we favor using classical logical consequence (hereafter ‘entailment’) in both cases. Thus our favored interpretation of generic eqn:

chef’s eqn

Rationality requires that: you have an IA toward Q only if

(1) Your knowledge entails that Q has a true, direct answer, and

(2) Your knowledge does not entail any direct answer to Q.

This principle is a piece of ‘ideal theory’, a claim about the ideal which is rationality. Our cognitive limitations prevent us from fully conforming to that ideal. Nevertheless, there are reasons to take interest in it. Perhaps, as Carr (2021) Platonically argues, ideals are interest-worthy on account of being normatively ‘robust’, independent of contingencies. And perhaps ideals to which we cannot fully conform can nonetheless guide us in piecemeal ways. Consider the view that, despite never fully conforming to probabilism (the norm requiring probabilistic coherence), we can be guided by that norm in piecemeal ways—e.g. by attending to the conjunction fallacy when we’re around bank tellers. If that view is right, it gives probabilism some guidance-related interest despite being a piece of ideal theory. Perhaps something similar holds for chef’s eqn.

In any case, we violate chef’s eqn in extensive ways. For instance, we violate it whenever P is a logical truth and we wonder whether P. This result might seem objectionable, but we aren’t worried by it, for four reasons.

First, while we often speak of agents ‘being’ irrational, chef’s eqn needn’t predicate irrationality of agents. Courageous people sometimes act out of character by doing cowardly things; we say that those agents are ‘being cowardly’; we thereby predicate cowardice (not of the agents but) of their acts. Similarly, when applying chef’s eqn we can say that agents are ‘being irrational’ and thereby predicate irrationality (not of the agents but) of their combinations of attitudes.

Second, violating chef’s eqn does not provide adequate grounds for blame. As theorists frequently point out, we can violate norms excusably and thus blamelessly. When P is a logical truth and we wonder whether P, we often have a good excuse and thus are not blameworthy, despite violating chef’s eqn.

Third, chef’s eqn has reputable partners in crime. Again consider probabilism. Much like we violate chef’s eqn whenever we wonder whether a logical truth holds, we violate probabilism whenever we have a non-unity credence in a logical truth. To the extent that chef’s eqn is objectionable because we often violate it with logical *questions*, then, probabilism is similarly objectionable because we often violate it with logical *truths*. Probabilism is a live option, despite its results concerning logical truths. Similarly, chef’s eqn is a live option despite its results concerning logical questions.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, chef’s eqn can be altered to suit many different tastes. That’s because it’s just one among many ways of substituting terms into generic eqn. Again, that principle says

generic eqn

Rationality requires that you have an IA toward Q only if

(1) Your (a) *background information* (b) *establishes* that Q has a true, direct answer, and

(2) Your (c) *background information* does not (d) *supply* any direct answer to Q.

Here’s a partial menu of potential replacements:

| For (a), (c) | For (b), (d) |
| --- | --- |
| What you know  Your evidence  What you believe/accept/endorse  What you should believe/accept/endorse  What you have justification to believe  What you reasonably believe  What you are in a position to know  What you are epistemically certain of  What you are psychologically certain of  What is obvious to you  What you know that you know  What you omega-know[[5]](#footnote-4)  What is a ‘hinge’ proposition for you  What has one or more of the above features, while you are attending to them | Entails  Relevance-entails  Includes  Makes it probable for you that  Puts you in a position to know that  Makes it so you should know that  Makes it obvious to you that  Makes it certain for you that  Makes it reasonable for you to believe that  Does one or more of the above in a way that is, or should be, obvious to you  Does one of more of the above while you know/believe/should-believe that it does that thing, and/or you are attending to the fact that it does that thing |

These and other options cater to the tastes of many theorists, including many non-ideal theorists who’d have no complaints about wondering logical questions. In this way, generic eqn is robust across theoretical approaches. That’s one of its virtues.

Our main claim is generic eqn. Specificity is useful, though, so we’ll focus on the chef’s version and just call it eqn. We’ll offer two arguments for eqn, focusing closely on the details; then we’ll zoom out to view the case as a whole.

3. the argument from convergence

Evocation, as theorized in IEL, has two components: affirmative openness and soundness. These components can (we’ll argue) be naturally interpreted in ways that vindicate (near variants of) two widely discussed norms in interrogative epistemology: the ignorance norm (ign) and the knowledge norm (kni) for inquiry. We like these norms, so we take it as evidence for eqn that it recovers them.

But more than that, we think it is probative that IEL and interrogative epistemology have developed in this parallel way. eqn gets confirmatory evidence from the fact that those two approaches to interrogative normativity converge on it. Moreover, we’ll argue, two *other* approaches *also* converge on eqn: Inquisitive Epistemic Logic and the ordinary language philosophers’ practice of criticizing questions that ‘do not arise’. Thus we argue that eqn gains support from mutual theoretical convergence.

3.1. iel and interrogative epistemology

To begin this argument, consider the widely discussed ignorance norm for IAs:

Ignorance Norm (ign)

Rationality requires that you have an IA toward Q only if you don’t know any of Q’s direct answers.

Near-variants of this norm are endorsed by Whitcomb (2010: 674; 2017: 152), Friedman (2017: 311), Millson, (2021a: 685), Sapir & van Elswyk (2021), Willard-Kyle (2021, forthcoming), and Haziza (2023).[[6]](#footnote-5) Those authors defend it partly on the grounds that it explains why certain utterances aren’t felicitous (e.g. ‘I know that *p*, but I wonder whether *p*’). Wondering about a question when you already know the answer seems pointless, a thought captured by Plato (Fine 2014: 7), the Pyrrhonians (Annas & Barnes (trs.), 2000: Outlines of Scepticism II.i: 69–70), and, more recently, Kelp (2014, 2021).

It turns out that eqn entails ign. To see as much, suppose you violate ign. Then you know some proposition P which is a direct answer to Q. Since P entails itself, then, your knowledge entails a direct answer to Q. Thus you violate eqn. This means that whenever you violate ign you also violate eqn, and hence that the latter entails the former.

There’s a debate about whether ign should be supplemented with (or even replaced by) Friedman’s (2019b) norm dbi. That norm prohibits holding an inquiring attitude toward a question while *believing* one of its complete (we’d say ‘direct’) answers. It is critiqued by Sapir & van Elswyk (2021), Archer (2021), Millson (2021b), and Falbo (2023), among others. We won’t weigh in on that debate, but we do want to point out that it can be replicated at the level of eqn. We derived ign from eqn by interpreting your background information as your knowledge. But interpreting it as your *beliefs* yields dbi. Interpreting it as *those propositions on which your epistemic state is unsurpassable*, at least for the affirmative openness clause, yields Archer’s (2021) and Falbo’s (2021, 2023) favored alternatives.[[7]](#footnote-6) Other interpretations yield other alternatives.[[8]](#footnote-7)

Two lessons follow. First, generic eqn can be seen as a point of agreement among several otherwise divergent views about inquiring attitudes. Second, the fault lines among those views can be understood in terms of how they interpret generic eqn’s details. These lessons recommend generic eqn.

Asking questions requires ignorance. Some have thought that it also requires knowledge: roughly, knowledge of the questions’ presuppositions. You shouldn’t wonder whether the king of France is bald without knowing there’s a king of France! Following Willard-Kyle (2023), we posit that:

knowledge norm for inquiry (kni)

Rationality requires that you have an IA toward Q only if you know all of Q’s presuppositions.

We’ll focus on kni itself. However, there are dialectical predecessors. Rescher (2000: 9, 15, 17–18, 50–1) calls questions ‘problematic’ when their presuppositions are not supplied by your ‘purported knowledge’. Other theorists have come close to endorsing belief-variants of kni. In order to bring this point out, we’ll need to say something about presuppositions. On the standard account (which we endorse here), Q presupposes P just if each of Q’s direct answers entail P. It follows that if at least one of Q’s direct answers is true, then so are all of Q’s presuppositions. So any theory requiring that if we have an IA towards Q we also believe it has a true direct answer, must also require that if we have an IA towards Q our beliefs entail all of Q’s presuppositions.

One principle committed to the former (and thus the latter) requirement comes from Jeffreys (1948: 378), who writes that (at least asked aloud) questions express the belief that the addressee knows the answer and so, as a consequence, that there’s a true answer to be known. A similar principle is offered by van Fraassen (1980: 151–2), who swaps in acceptance for belief. Borge (2013) offers a strengthened version of the principle, a version on which the presuppositions at issue must be *true* as well as believed.[[9]](#footnote-8) These theorists all come close to endorsing belief-variants of kni.

Others endorse norms that are weaker but still tether questioning to soundness. Braun (2011: 589) requires that those who ask Q *not* *believe* that there’s *not* a true answer to Q. Friedman (2017: 315–6) observes that when ‘S realizes that Q has some false presupposition or is similarly unsound …further inquiry into Q would be irrational or otherwise epistemically inappropriate’. Neither Braun nor Friedman require agents to secure the soundness of their questions; but for both, rational inquiry is allergic to the belief (or knowledge) that one’s question is *un*sound.

Now return to kni itself. It requires (when you have an IA towards Q) not just that your knowledge *entails* all of Q’s presuppositions, but additionally that you *actually know* all those presuppositions. This is a demanding norm. Indeed, it’s so demanding that Willard-Kyle (forthcoming) uses a narrower, non-standard notion of question- presupposition in order to evade certain objections.

We won’t explore reasons for accepting the strongest version of kni here. Instead, we note that kni, like ign, is closely related to eqn. While eqn’s affirmative openness condition entails ign, its soundness condition is *entailed by* kni. Recall: the soundness condition is the requirement that your knowledge entails that Q has a true direct answer. Since your knowledge entails itself, this requirement follows from kni.

kni and eqn develop the same basic idea: an agent who has an IA toward a question must *secure* that the question has a true, direct answer. For kni, the agent’s way of securing this proposition is immediate: the agent must know the very proposition that a question has a true, direct answer. For eqn, the source of the security can be more distal: all an agent needs to know is information that *entails* that Q has a true, direct answer. But if kni and eqn differ over security protocols, there’s no disagreement about what is to be secured: soundness.

It is significant that versions of ign and kni can be reverse-engineered from IEL via an interpretation of generic eqn, especially since the literatures on iel and norms of inquiry have rarely touched. Two paths lead to the same place: eqn.

3.2 inquisitive epistemic logic

A third path leads there too—Inquisitive Epistemic Logic, a body of theory that augments traditional epistemic logic with modal operators corresponding to ‘wonders’.

Inquisitive Epistemic Logic is based on Inquisitive Semantics (IS) (Ciardelli et. al., 2018). The key innovation of IS is that it evaluates sentences not at individual worlds, but instead at sets of worlds—‘information states’or simply ‘states*’.* While sentences are *true* at a world, they are *supported* by an information state. Semantic interpretations are generated by associating each sentence with a nonempty, downward-closed set of states that support it—the *issue* it raises. Since a state, *s*, supports a declarative sentence just in case that sentence is true in all the worlds contained in *s*, the truth conditions of declaratives can be easily recovered from their support conditions. But in the case of interrogatives, which are not ‘true at a world’, support captures *resolution* conditions. If *s* supports an interrogative, then *s* contains enough information to settle or resolve the issue that it raises—what we’ll call its *question*.

For instance, ‘Is Igor hilarious?'’ is resolved by all those information states that specify whether Igor is hilarious. These include not only the set of worlds in which Igor is hilarious and the set of worlds in which he isn’t, but also e.g. the set of worlds in which he is hilarious and curmudgeonly. The first two sets are maximal supporting states in the sense that they are not subsets of any other state that resolves the question. IS calls these *alternatives*; they provide just enough information to settle the question, and they play the role of direct answers in the IS framework.[[10]](#footnote-9) Notice that the third state, in which Igor is hilarious and curmudgeonly, still resolves the question, but it provides more than enough information; all of its elements are contained in the first state. Declaratives raise self-resolving or *trivial* issues, since their only alternative is the state containing all the worlds in which the declarative is true.

Inquisitive Epistemic Logic extends traditional epistemic models by assigning to agents both a set of epistemically possible worlds, σ, called her *epistemic state,* and an issue, Σ, called her *inquisitive state* (Ciardelli & Roelofsen, 2015). The latter contains all the states that resolve the agent’s questions. We can think of this as her overall epistemic goal or her total question—the question which, if answered, answers all her other questions. An agent knows that φ just in case her epistemic state supports φ. When φ is a declarative, this simply amounts to its being true in every world in σ—i.e. every epistemically possible world. But φ can also be interrogative, enabling the model to capture knowledge-wh ascriptions. An agent knows-wh φ iff her epistemic state resolves—i.e. is contained in—the issue raised by φ.

Since Inquisitive Epistemic models characterize the agent’s epistemic goals, they can also characterize what she *wonders.* An agent wonders φ just in case (1) φ is supported by all the information states that resolve her inquisitive state—i.e. φ is settled if her total question is—and (2) she doesn’t know-wh φ. The latter condition ensures that agents never wonder questions whose answers they know. As in traditional epistemic logic, knowledge is taken to be closed under entailment. It follows that agents in Inquisitive Epistemic models will never wonder a question if their knowledge entails one of its answers. They thus conform to eqn’s second condition.

They also conform to its first condition. To see why, consider the following requirement which is imposed on all Inquisitive Epistemic models: *An agent’s inquisitive state, Σ, is resolved in all and only those worlds that are epistemically possible.* In other words, σ = ∪Σ. An agent’s total question thus ‘carves up’ her epistemic possibility space.

This requirement ensures that every world in σ belongs to at least one of Σ’s alternatives. So, an agent’s total question has a true direct answer at every epistemically possible world. But, agents know whatever is true in all epistemically possible worlds. So, the agent knows that her total question has a true direct answer. Since she only wonders questions that have true direct answers if her total question does, she only wonders questions that she knows have true direct answers. Thus, agents in Inquisitive Epistemic Logic conform to eqn’s first condition as well as its second.[[11]](#footnote-10)

So three largely independent literatures converge on eqn: Inquisitive Epistemic Logic, interrogative epistemology, and IEL. Each of these literatures was partly motivated by another that also supports eqn: the ordinary language literature criticizing questions that ‘do not arise’. eqn is supported by this literature because it suggests a partial interpretation of ‘arising’: questions arise only if they are evoked by one’s knowledge.[[12]](#footnote-11) Many paths lead to eqn.

4. the argument from bad questions

Intriguingly, a suitably interpreted version of generic eqn yields (variations of) both kni and ign. In some ways, that’s no surprise. We think both kni and ign are insightful, and so we’ve intentionally tried to interpret the evocation norm, as inspired by IEL, in a way that recovers them. What is perhaps more surprising is that recovery has been so seamless. IEL proposes an openness and a soundness condition on when our information evokes a question. And lo! Those categories just happen to line up with two widely discussed norms from zetetic epistemology.

The norms that we’ve developed aren’t kni and ign *exactly*, but they are sympathetic, IEL-inspired variants. Moreover, if eqn is right, then kni and ign aren’t mutually isolated: they (or their variants) are parts of a broader norm involving evocation.

This framing raises several questions. Do the IEL-inspired variations on kni and ign help us to see anything *new*? And do soundness-side and openness-side constraints really work *corporately*, not merely generating two independent norms like kni and ign but instead forming an explanatorily significant common normative category?

We think the answers are *yes* and *yes*. On the first question, we’ll argue for eqn on the grounds that it predicts six new kinds of bad questions and corresponding new norms.[[13]](#footnote-12) On the *second* question, we’ll argue that *some* of these bad questions are best explained by *holistically combining* soundness- and openness-side considerations. This suggests that rationality for IAs tracks the broader category of evocation, not just its narrower (soundness- and openness-side) aspects.

Our discussion of these new kinds of bad questions involves three kinds of cases. First, there are *soundness violations*. These cases vindicate (our variant of) kni and (thus) the soundness aspect of eqn. Second, there are *openness violations.* These cases vindicate (our variant of) ign and (thus) the openness aspect of eqn. Third, there are *holistic violations*. In these cases agents can satisfy eqn’s soundness aspect, and they can satisfy its openness aspect, but they *can’t* satisfy *both*. This third, holisticcategory is of special interest because it suggests that eqn’s soundness- and openness-side constraints work corporately to form an explanatorily significant common normative category.

4.1 soundness violations

Sometimes, an agent can’t wonder each question in a given set without violating (our variation on) kni, and thus violating eqn, for at least one of them. These cases come in several underappreciated varieties including (at least) cases of inconsistent questions, neglectful questions, and Moore-Paradoxical questions.

4.1.1 inconsistent questions

Intuitively, some questions contradict one another. To explicate that intuition, we’ll define jointly inconsistent questions as those whose presuppositions jointly entail contradictions.[[14]](#footnote-13) An example:

How was the burger you ate? And why haven’t you eaten anything?

There’d be something wrong with wondering both of these questions at once. eqn explains why. In stating this explanation, we’ll use a certain principle. The soundness condition of eqn requires that an agent’s knowledge entails that Q has a true, direct answer. Since all of Q’s presuppositions are true if Q has a true direct answer, then, it follows that

entailment of presuppositions (ep)

If S satisfies eqn with respect to Q, then S’s knowledge entails all of Q’s presuppositions.

Now suppose that S has IAs about some questions that are jointly inconsistent. If S satisfies the soundness condition for each of those questions, then (by ep) S knows information that entails all of their presuppositions. But S cannot know that information, because that information entails a contradiction. That contradiction explains the felt conflict in asking inconsistent questions. Since the relevant information entails a contradiction, some of it must be false; and since knowledge is factive, S fails to know information that entails the soundness of each question in the inconsistent set. Hence, S fails to satisfy the soundness condition for at least one of the questions at issue and therefore also fails to satisfy eqn for at least one of them. This means that whenever you wonder inconsistent questions you violate eqn. Thus, eqn explains why wondering jointly inconsistent questions is irrational.

Sometimes the inconsistent set of questions is a singleton. For instance:

Why are there no questions that take an answer of the form ‘Because…’? [[15]](#footnote-14)

It would be irrational to wonder that question; eqn explains why. Similarly, consider

Why doesn’t this question have any true direct answers?

There’d be something very wrong with wondering that. Again, eqn explains why. The question presupposes, inconsistently, that none of its direct answers are true and also that at least one of them is true.

In sum, eqn predicts an independently plausible underappreciated norm: don’t have IA’s towards inconsistent questions.

4.1.2 neglectful questions

Another norm: avoid neglectful questions. That is, don’t have IAs towards questions whose direct answers don’t exhaust the possibilities given your knowledge.[[16]](#footnote-15) Suppose that Xander and Willow are in a Literature class, and their assignment is to read exactly one of the books *Frankenstein*, *Ulysses*, and *Beloved*. Xander understands the assignment, knows Willow will do it, has no idea which book she’ll read, and nevertheless wonders: Will Willow read *Frankenstein* or (rather) *Ulysses*?

Xander is neglecting a certain possibility. For all he knows, Willow will read *Beloved*. Better, then, would be for him to wonder *this* question: Will Willow read *Frankenstein, Ulysses*, or *Beloved*?[[17]](#footnote-16)

eqn straightforwardly identifies the problem: it’s that Xander’s knowledge fails to entail his question’s presupposition. Here again, the soundness aspect of eqn rightly predicts a kind of bad question.

4.1.3 moore-paradoxical questions

Now to some especially shameful creatures: ‘Moore-paradoxical questions’, stipulatively defined as questions having presuppositions that are jointly consistent yet jointly unknowable in virtue of their form. For instance, consider

(Qt): How come the train already left and I don’t know the train already left?

There is something wrong with having IAs towards questions like Qt, and the soundness aspect of eqn makes noteworthy progress toward explaining that fact; or so we’ll now argue. In these arguments we’ll appeal to

**weak closure**: Necessarily, if (i) S knows *p* and (ii) S is in a position to know that *p*⊨*q*, then (iii) S is in a position to know that *q*.

This principle employs the concept of being in a position to know, which we assume conforms to (at least) these conditions:

If S knows *p*, then S is in a position to know *p.* (K⇒PtK)

It is possible that S is in a position to know *p* but S does not know *p*. (PtK⇏K)

If S is in a position to know *p*, then it is metaphysically possible that S knows *p*. [[18]](#footnote-17)

(PtK⇒♢K)

Importantly, being in a position to know *p* is logically weaker than knowing *p*. As a result, closure principles appealing to the former tend to be less demanding and thus more plausible than those appealing to the latter.

The plausibility of **weak closure,** however, is due not only to the fact that it restricts the class of relevant entailments to those the agent is in a position to know, nor to the fact that it requires agents merely *be in a position to* know the entailed propositions, but also to the fact that the entailment is strictly of the single-premise variety. It therefore speaks to the preface-paradoxical concern that perhaps we can know each member of a set of propositions yet still not be in a position to know their conjunction.

Given **weak closure**, eqn makes noteworthy progress toward explaining why it’s irrational to have IAs toward Moore-paradoxical questions. To see how, suppose (for *reductio*) that S satisfies (the soundness aspect of) eqn with respect to Qt in a particular way: by knowing the proposition *that* Qt *has a true direct answer*, as opposed to merely knowing something else entailing this proposition. Plausibly, all agents (S included) are in a position to know the following fact:

*Qt has a true direct answer* entails *the train already left and I don’t know that the train already left*.

Thus, S knows *p* (that Qt has a true direct answer), and S is in a position to know that *p* entails *q* (that the train already left and they don’t know the train already left). Given **weak closure** then, S is in a position to know *q*. Yet *q* has the form ⌜*r* but I don’t know that *r*⌝, and, for familiar reasons, it is impossible to know such propositions.[[19]](#footnote-18) Since S *can’t* know *q*, it follows from contraposition on (PtK→♢K) that S isn’t in a position to know *q*: a contradiction.

So, given **weak closure**, eqn explains why agents who know that there is a true direct answer to a Moore-paradoxical question are being irrational if they adopt IAs toward that question. While this explanation does not show why it’s *always* irrational to have IAs towards Moore-paradoxical questions, it does make noteworthy progress in that direction.

Can this progress be furthered? Perhaps; but there’s an important difficulty: the most obvious way to expand on the above explanations is by strengthening their closure principle, but closure principles decrease in plausibility as they increase in strength.

For instance, we might replace the single-premise entailment in **weak closure** with multiple-premise entailment. Holding the other assumptions fixed, the resulting principle (**stronger closure**) enables eqn to explain the irrationality of those who, e.g. wonder Qt while being in a position to know that their knowledge entails its (unknowable) presupposition—i.e. that the train already left and they don’t know the train already left. Remove from **stronger closure** the requirement that agents be in a position to know such entailments and we obtain a principle—**even stronger closure**—that lets eqn explain why it is *always* irrational to have an IA towards a Moore-paradoxical question.[[20]](#footnote-19) Sadly, though, **stronger closure** and **even stronger closure** are controversial principles that many theorists (including ourselves) aren’t wholly willing to endorse.

It’s an open question just how far eqn can go, given just which auxiliary principles, in explaining why it’s irrational to have IAs towards Moore-paradoxical questions. But it bears repeating that noteworthy progress on that front can be made by combining eqn with a modest principle about closure.

4.2 openness violations

The foregoing (hitherto underappreciated) kinds of cases feature soundness violations; they provide evidence for (our variant of) kni and thus for eqn. Other underappreciated kinds of cases feature *openness* violations; *they* provide evidence for (our variant of) *ign* and thus, again, for eqn. To these cases we now turn.

4.2.1 duh questions

Duh questions, we’ll say, are those whose answers are entailed by what you know. Here are some examples. Tammy knows that the Red Sox have scored 4 runs, and that the Yankees have scored 2, and that whichever team has scored more runs is winning. Nevertheless, Tammy wonders which team is winning. Matt knows that his wallet is either in his pocket or on his nightstand, and that it is not in his pocket. Nevertheless, he wonders where his wallet is.

These agents are making mistakes. eqn explains why: it’s because they know information that entails the answer to the question that they are wondering. Here eqn goes beyond ign, which merely requires that people not inquire into questions while *knowing* some of their direct answers. Sometimes people *should know* the answer, but don’t.[[21]](#footnote-20) eqn rightly calls irrational certain inquiries that *should have* been resolved, not just those that *have* been. Affirmative openness is more demanding than ignorance.

We aren’t alone in finding something wrong with questions whose answers are too obvious. Consider a dialogue from Perry (1978, 23–4):

miller

Suppose we are sitting together watching the first game of a double-header. You ask me, ‘Is this game identical with this game?’ This is a perfectly stupid question, though of course, strictly speaking it makes sense and the answer is ‘yes’.

But now suppose you leave in the sixth inning to go for hot dogs. You are delayed, and return after about forty-five minutes or so. You ask, ‘Is this the same game I was watching?’ Now your question is not stupid, but perfectly appropriate.

weirob

Because the first game might still be going on or it might have ended, and the second game begun by the time I return.

miller

Exactly. …[The latter question] wasn’t stupid or trivial but significant.

Miller introduces the category of ‘stupid questions’. Such questions can be *sound*;Miller stresses that the relevant question has a true, direct answer. What then is the problem with them? Weirob implies it’s this: there is a particular answer to each question that *must* be true given the asker’s information. Intriguingly, Weirob’s proposed requirement is stronger than ign, since your background evidence can entail a direct answer you don’t know.

We’re not saying Perry was unequivocally endorsing eqn. We’re saying he joins us in criticizing questions whose answers are too obvious: in that sense, his judgment corroborates ours.[[22]](#footnote-21) eqn captures and refines this judgment by offering an interpretation of ‘too obvious’: rationality requires that agents not ask questions whose answers are already entailed by what they know.

In the same vein, consider a norm from Hubacher Haerle (2023: 137):

Zetetic Requirement (ZR): You ought not to inquire into *p* if the available evidence is such that you ought to have reached a firm conclusion about *p*. [[23]](#footnote-22)

eqn’s prohibition on duh questions helps us interpret zr: ‘the available evidence is such that you ought to have reached a firm conclusion about *p*’ if your knowledge entails a direct answer about *p*.

Duh questions are an important category of criticism for when people overextend inquiries under the guise of being open-minded. Sometimes people should close an inquiry, but they don’t because they discount marginalized testimony or are otherwise evidence-resistant. These people are making mistakes even though they don’t violate ign (since they don’t yet believe—and so don’t know—the answers). ign, unaided, cannot explain this; eqn can.

eqn’s interpretation of when an agent should have resolved a question in a way that makes the issue affirmatively closed for them is that they know information that entails one of its direct answers. As we’ve said, this means that we are being irrational whenever P is a logical truth and we wonder whether P. And, as we’ve said, we find this result unworrying even though many theorists would find it objectionable.[[24]](#footnote-23) To be honest, we actually *like* it. Much like probabilists think rationally ideal agents would have credence 1 in all the logical truths, we think rationally ideal agents wouldknow all the logical truths and thus wouldn’t wonder any logical questions.

Human beings fall short of these ideals. We’re not to blame for that; nevertheless, we should reiterate here that we’re open to substitutions for ‘entailment’, especially when doing non-ideal epistemology. The main thing to note, from our perspective, is that a question can be affirmatively closed (and thus not evoked) for an agent even if they don’t already know the answer to that question. The answer can be too obvious.

4.3 holistic violations

kni and ign identify different ways our IAs are rationally sensitive to our information. eqn treats these two kinds of sensitivity as captured by a unified notion of evocation. Implicit in its framing, then, is the thought that its soundness and openness conditions work corporately to form an explanatorily significant common normative category. It’s of particular interest, then, whether eqn’s soundness- and openness-side conditions jointly predict further cases of irrationality, beyond those they each predict singly. And, we’ll now argue, they do. These cases illustrate the holistic explanatory power of eqn, over and above its subconditions.

4.3.1 self-answering questions

We’ll say the members of a (possibly singleton) set of questions are ‘self-answering’ just if their presuppositions jointly entail one (or more) of their direct answers. Some self-attributions of self-answering IAs:

I wonder who ate all the ice cream, and also why you ate all the ice cream.

I wonder whether the daffodils have bloomed, and also why they bloomed early.

These attributions evince irrationality. Why? You might think the problem is that the questions they feature have inconsistent presuppositions. But that thought isn’t right. Those presuppositions are *consistent*, at least on the standard account of what presuppositions are. Rather, the problem is that the first question in each pair presupposes something the second one treats as open. eqn picks up on this, converting it into an explanation of why these attributions evince irrationality.

Here’s how the explanations go. Assume (for *reductio*) that Sam satisfies eqn in wondering each question Q*i* in a self-answering set. By ep, Sam knows information that entails all the presuppositions of the Q*i*’s, and since those presuppositions jointly entail a direct answer to some Q*i*, that information also entails a direct answer to some Q*i*. But then, Sam violates the affirmative openness condition for some Q*i*—contradicting our assumption that they satisfy eqn. The take-home point is that you cannot satisfy eqn in wondering each question in a self-answering set.

The irrationality here is most blatant when the set is a singleton. Some examples:

What color is your grey jacket?

How many people showed up to your unattended party?

Does this question have an answer?[[25]](#footnote-24)

These questions have true direct answers—grey, zero, yes. Intuitively, the problem is that they represent the inquirer as both knowing and not knowing their answers. These sorts of questions have received some attention from Rescher (2000: 11–3), who calls them ‘trivial’, and from erotetic logicians who call them ‘self-rhetorical’.[[26]](#footnote-25)

Self-answering questions go wrong by treating some information as both (entailed by what is) known in order to satisfy the soundness aspect of evocation and not (entailed by what is) known to satisfy the affirmative openness condition. Independently of our theorizing, it seems irrational to have IAs about these questions. Given our theorizing, we can say why: it is impossible to have IAs in those questions while satisfying eqn. Once again, eqn proves its mettle by correctly identifying an interesting class of bad questions: one that neither ign nor kni predicts by itself.

4.3.2 epistemically incoherent questions

Self-answering questions can all be open, and can all be sound, but can’t all be both (that is, they can’t all be *evoked*). Similarly with *epistemically incoherent* questions: that is, questions whose presuppositions jointly entail that the inquirer’s knowledge entails some direct answer to at least one of them.

Questions can be epistemically incoherent but not self-answering. This happens when their presuppositions entail that the inquirer knows some direct answer to at least one of them, while not entailing any *particular* direct answer to *any* of them. Some examples:

Am I the only omniscient being?[[27]](#footnote-26)

Who stole the tarts? Also: how come I know who stole the tarts? [[28]](#footnote-27)

These are bad questions; eqn explains why. In each case, the presuppositions of the questions jointly entail that the inquirer’s knowledge entails a direct answer to one of those questions. So if an inquirer satisfies the soundness condition with respect to *all* the questions at issue, then they know information that entails a direct answer to at least one of them. But then the latter question isn’t affirmatively open for them. eqn thereby explains why we can’t rationally have IAs towards epistemically incoherent questions, yet again earning its wages through its work.

5. putting it all together

Here’s the big picture. Our case for eqn has two parts. First, there’s the *argument from convergence* (§3): several literatures converge on eqn; each of them has some power taken singly; in concert their power multiplies. These literatures reside in several areas:

**Ordinary language philosophy**. Ordinary language philosophers (among others) criticized questions that ‘don’t arise’. eqn offers a (partial) interpretation of this criticism: questions ‘don’t arise’ if IAs towards them violate eqn.

**Inferential erotetic logic**. Evocation is central to IEL. eqn is a natural application that relation to the theory of rationality; it is the sort of ‘bridge principle’ from IEL to interrogative epistemology that immediately suggests itself.

**Inquisitive epistemic logic**. In addition to inferential erotetic logic, inquisitive epistemic logic is another highly developed approach to the logic of questions. It turns out, we’ve shown, that this approach models agents as conforming to eqn.

**Zetetic epistemology**. eqn does not set out anew in the theory of IAs, but instead builds on previous work. In fact, it amounts to the conjunction of (variants of) two widely discussed norms—kni and ign. Discussions of those norms, then, join the several literatures converging on eqn.

Except for ordinary language philosophy, from which the others draw inspiration, these literatures are largely independent of one another. That makes the fact that *each* of them has something to say in favor of eqn especially noteworthy.

There’s also the *argument from bad questions* (§4). In sum, eqn captures norms banning IA’s towards six underappreciated kinds of questions: inconsistent, neglectful, duh, Moore-paradoxical, self-answering, and epistemically incoherent questions. With inconsistent and neglectful questions, an old norm (our variant kni or ign) turns out surprisingly to have the new norm as a consequence. With duh and Moore-paradoxical questions, old norms deliver the new ones with help from auxiliary material (a substantive interpretation of zr in the one case, and a modest closure principle in the other). With self-answering and epistemically incoherent questions, no single old norm yields the new one, not even with help from auxiliary material. These two norms are delivered not by eqn’s parts but rather by the whole. By delivering these two norms holistically and the other four atomistically, eqn earns its keep.

Now recall that, while we prefer eqn, our main claim is the less committal generic eqn. Since eqn entails generic eqn, the foregoing case for the former also supports the latter. And generic eqn gets additional support, too, from the following points.

First, a wide range of theorists should find generic eqn copasetic because their favored interpretations of it amount to their favored views. Second, the fault lines of the disagreements among those theorists reside precisely where generic eqn predicts: at the junctures laid down by its placeholder terms ‘background information’, ‘establish’, and ‘supply’. These two points suggest a third: that we can understand the contemporary debate about norms of inquiry as a debate about how to add details to generic eqn. In this way generic eqn helpfully frames, and thereby helps us understand, the debate at issue.[[29]](#footnote-28)

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*University of Glasgow, UK*

*Rhodes College, USA*

*Western Washington University, USA*

1. Strawson (1950: 330, 343–4; 1952: 18, 173–4), Geach (1950), Collingwood (1940: 26), Sellars (1981/2007: 285). Cavell (1979: 57) tells us that the phrase ‘the question does not arise’ is something ‘the ordinary language philosopher…is [in some contexts] likely to say’. Austin (1962: 50–1, 136–7) argues that instead of saying ‘the question [of whether certain sentences are true] does not arise’ we should say *utterances* of those sentences are *void*, like contracts signed by people unauthorized to sign them. Anscombe (1957/2000: 9) thinks actions are intentional when certain reasons-involving why-questions ‘are given application’—a notion similar to ‘arise’. O’Brien (2023) models Anscombe here with erotetic logic. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Friedman (2013: 162–3). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. IEL’s definition of evocation traces to Wisniewski (1991, 1995). Also in IEL see e.g. Leszczynska-Jasion and Chlebowski (2015), Pelis (2016), Millson (2019, 2020), Cordes (2020), Whitcomb and Millson (forthcoming), and—for a survey—Wisniewski (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. For originating discussions, see Whitcomb (2010, 2017) and Friedman (2017) on the ignorance norm and Willard-Kyle (2023) on the knowledge norm. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. You omega-know *p* just if you know *p*, know that you know *p*, and so on. Goldstein (forthcoming) argues that omega-knowledge permits the cessation of inquiry. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. For criticisms see Archer (2018), Falbo (2021, 2023), and Woodard (2022). The norm was anticipated by Hawthorne (2004: 24) and Fitzpatrick (2005: 143) and resonates with the view that asked questions express ignorance—on which see Jeffreys (1948: 378), Searle (1969: 66), and Fiengo (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Woodard (2022) is sympathetic to the epistemic improvement line in Archer (2021) and Falbo (2021, 2023). Archer (2018) anticipates that line by arguing that we may permissibly inquire to improve our epistemic position from knowing to knowing *occurrently.* Palmira (2020: 4959) suggests that we may permissibly inquire when knowing but not being objectively certain. Interpreting background information in the affirmative openness clause as *what one is objectively certain of* coheres with this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Whatever you think *evidence* is will seem a good candidate for ‘background information’ in the soundness clause; whatever you think *the goal of inquiry* is will seem a good candidate for it in the affirmative openness clause. Alleged goals (or duties) of inquiry other than knowledge (Kelp 2014, 2021; Carter & Hawthorne forthcoming) include truth (Kvanvig 2003: 145–6), evidence-fitting belief (Feldman 2005), understanding (Kvanvig 2013), omega-knowledge (Goldstein forthcoming), and maximally epistemically valuable credence (Beddor forthcoming). Theories of evidence are similarly diverse. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Sorensen (1981: 159): ‘...the questioner should have reason to believe that the questionee knows the answer’. Schaffer (2006: 98): ‘…a plausible norm for questioning is that one should ask someone a question only if she knows the answer’. Schaffer’s norm is defended at length by Haziza (2023). It requires that our questions *have* true direct answers—and thus that their presuppositions are all true. Compare Sellars’ (1981/2007: 285) view that questions *don’t arise* if they have presuppositions that are *false*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Cf. Ciardelli et al (2018: 167-172). ‘Direct answers’ in IEL and ‘alternatives’ in IS do differ. The former are syntactic entities (formulas); the latter are semantic entities (sets of worlds). IEL has no constraints on how direct answers can relate to each other; IS has it that alternatives can’t entail each other. Still, direct answers and alternatives play the same role: they are what questions call for us to choose among. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. For further discussion of the normativity of Inquisitive Epistemic Logic, see van Remmen (2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. The IEL definition of evocation comes from Wisniewski (1991, 1995: 3–24), who viewed it as a good explication of ‘arising’. We don’t endorse that view; we like the ‘only if’ part of it, but not the ‘if’ part. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Well, these norms are new *in a sense*. It’s not like nobody has ever noticed anything in their vicinity. Indeed, we’ll show how the (mostly) pre-zetetic-turn literature anticipates some of them. But they’ve been discussed at most fleetingly in the literature on IAs. In that sense, they are new to that literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Rescher (2000: 13) says these questions ‘preempt’ one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. That example is Rescher’s (2000: 17-18); he calls such questions ‘self-refuting’. Van Fraassen (1980: 139) calls them ‘foolish’. His example: ‘Did you wear a hat which is both black and not black, or did you wear one that is both white and not white?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Cf. Millson (2021: 225–7) and Willard-Kyle (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. Hawthorne (2003: 78): ‘[I]n asking whether *p* or *q*, I represent myself as knowing the disjunction of *p* or *q*’. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. These conditions are widely endorsed, including by Williamson (2000), Hawthorne (2004), Rosenkranz (2007), Heylan (2016), and Kearl & Willard-Kyle (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Suppose for *reductio* that you know ⌜*r*, but I don’t know *r*⌝. Then since knowledge distributes over conjunction, you know *r* and you know ⌜I don’t know *r*⌝. But then since knowledge is factive, you don’t know *r*: a contradiction. See Salerno (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. Suppose for *reductio* that S satisfies eqn with respect to some Moore-paradoxical question Q. By ep, S’s knowledge entails some unknowable presupposition, P, of Q. Assume that S is in a position to know that this entailment obtains. By **stronger closure** then, S is in a position to know P. But since P is unknowable, S is not in a position to know P: a contradiction. The proof from **even stronger closure** works similarly, save the assumption that S is in a position to know the entailment. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
21. This is the thought that motivates positive epistemology, which encodes obligations to know, e.g. Goldberg (2017), Ichikawa (2022), and Simion (2024). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
22. As does Ichikawa’s (2022: 17): ‘An ideally rational agent would always judge accurately on any question they consider, if their evidence is conclusive for the answer’. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
23. Compare Friedman (2019a). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
24. For instance, Thorstad (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
25. This question presupposes that its true direct answer is either *yes* or *no*. If it’s *no* then it’s *yes*, so it’s *yes*. (Thanks to Adam Carter for discussion.) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
26. See e.g. Wisniewski (1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
27. Whitcomb (2017: 148). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
28. These questions are epistemically incoherent yet not self-answering. But some questions are both. (Who stole the tarts? Also, how come I know it was the Queen?). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
29. Thanks to Arianna Falbo, Joshua Habgood-Coote, Tim Kearl, Jack Lyons, Josh Thorpe, The Inquiry Conference at the Cogito Epistemology Research Centre at the University of Glasgow, and two anonymous reviewers for useful feedback. Funding for this project was provided, in part, by Therme Group. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)