

# There are no epistemic norms of inquiry

## Abstract

*Epistemic nihilism for inquiry* is the claim that there are no epistemic norms of inquiry. Epistemic nihilism was once the received stance towards inquiry, and I argue that it should be taken seriously again. My argument is that the same considerations which led us away from epistemic nihilism in the case of belief not only cannot refute epistemic nihilism for inquiry, but in fact may well support it. These include the *argument from non-existence* that there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief; the *linguistic argument* that epistemic norms of belief are needed to capture the semantics of ordinary epistemic talk; and the *argument from theoretical roles* that epistemic norms are needed to play key theoretical roles for rational belief. I conclude by sketching an alternative Gibbardian picture on which norms of inquiry are all-things-considered norms governing action.

## 1 Introduction

There are no epistemic norms of inquiry. We have no epistemic duties to open inquiry and no epistemic duties to close it. There are no epistemic duties to gather evidence, to avoid trivial inquiries, or to investigate weighty subjects. Call this view *epistemic nihilism for inquiry*. In this paper, I hope to convince you that epistemic nihilism for inquiry is true. That is a tall order, so let me begin with three preliminary motivations.

First, until recently epistemic nihilism was the received stance towards inquiry. Many epistemologists claimed that epistemic norms govern doxastic attitudes rather than the inquiries that produce them, and some defended the further claim that epistemic norms are purely synchronic (Doughtery 2014; Feldman 2002; Hedden 2015). While these views are no longer as popular as they once were, it is important to make sure that they get their day in court.

Second, many recently proposed norms of inquiry, or *zetetic norms*, do not look epistemic. These norms make straightforward appeal to traditionally non-epistemic factors such as an agent's interests and goals. For example, both classic (Harman 1986) and modern (Friedman 2018) formulations of clutter avoidance understand it as a norm against

inquiring into matters unrelated to the inquirer's interests and desires. And Jane Friedman has defended a number of explicitly instrumentalist norms, such as the following:

**(Zetetic Instrumental Principle (ZIP))** If one wants to figure out  $Q$ ?, then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out  $Q$ ?. (Friedman forthcoming).

In this vein, many zetetic epistemologists have claimed that rational inquiry has a significant practical component (Friedman forthcoming; Harman 2004; Lord 2020), and some have questioned whether epistemic normativity provides the most interesting lens into rational inquiry (Thorstad forthcoming). A natural way to make sense of these trends would be to claim that zetetic norms are not, in fact, epistemic norms, but rather instrumental, practical, moral or all-things-considered norms.

Third, it has recently been claimed that plausible zetetic norms such as ZIP are in tension with traditional epistemic norms (Friedman 2019b, forthcoming). If zetetic norms are also epistemic norms, this tension threatens to imply that traditional epistemic norms are in need of revision. But if zetetic norms are not epistemic norms, then this tension may be no more surprising or problematic than familiar tensions between epistemic and all-things-considered norms.

These are, of course, only preliminary motivations. They are not decisive arguments for epistemic nihilism about inquiry, and there is plenty that could be said in reply. What would the strongest case for epistemic nihilism about inquiry look like?

Ideally, epistemic nihilists would begin by addressing existing arguments against epistemic nihilism for inquiry. A problem for this strategy is that few direct arguments have been given against epistemic nihilism for inquiry. So while I will address the most extended argument of which I am aware (§6.3), we may need to look elsewhere in order to ensure that epistemic norms are given a fair shake.

My proposal is to return to the arguments which originally led us to posit a distinctive type of epistemic normativity governing belief, and ask whether these arguments also give us good grounds to posit epistemic norms governing inquiry. In each case, I show that the

arguments fail to generalize as arguments against epistemic nihilism for inquiry, and that in many cases the arguments tell in favor of epistemic nihilism for inquiry. If successful, this strategy will put the burden on defenders of epistemic norms for inquiry to produce new grounds on which epistemic norms should be posited. It may also suggest that epistemic nihilism about inquiry is supported by the best case *against* epistemic nihilism for belief, or that epistemic norms for inquiry should be regarded as an overgeneralization on the original motivations for positing epistemic norms governing belief.

Here is the plan. In Section 2, I make six remarks to clarify my project. Sections 3-5 survey three leading arguments against epistemic nihilism for belief: the *argument from non-existence* that there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief; the *linguistic argument* that epistemic norms are needed to account for the semantics of epistemic terms; and the *argument from theoretical roles* that epistemic norms are better-suited than all-things-considered norms to play key theoretical roles associated with rational belief. In each case, I show that these arguments fail to generalize, and in many cases tell in favor of epistemic nihilism for inquiry. Section 6 discusses objections. Section 7 concludes by developing an alternative Gibbardian picture on which norms of inquiry are all-things-considered norms governing action.

## 2 Clarifying the view

Before beginning, I want to say six things by way of clarifying my target. First, epistemic nihilists about inquiry do not claim that recently proposed zetetic norms such as ZIP are false or unimportant. Quite the opposite: a problem for zetetic epistemologists is that many zetetic norms look more like instrumentalist norms than traditional epistemic norms. My aim is to explain why these norms can be true and important, even if we are disposed to deny that instrumentalist norms of belief would be true or important.

Second and relatedly, we need to distinguish the question of whether zetetic norms are epistemic norms from the question of whether zetetic epistemology is properly understood

as a type of epistemology. Zetetic epistemologists have given compelling arguments that the study of zetetic norms is an important project within epistemology: rational inquiry is a central component of theoretical rationality (Kelly 2002, 2003; Thorstad forthcoming); throughout history, epistemologists have often been concerned with inquiry (Friedman 2017b; Misak 1987; Striker 2001); and a purely synchronic epistemology risks engaging in temporal parochialism, by which we study attitudes while ignoring the temporally extended processes that produced them (Friedman forthcoming). None of these arguments turns in any obvious way on the claim that zetetic norms are epistemic norms. And as Friedman (forthcoming) has emphasized, even in the case of belief there have often been instrumentalists, pragmatists and other skeptics about epistemic normativity. We may think that these theorists are wrong about what rationality requires, but we do not often go to the extreme of denying that they are doing epistemology.

Third, to deny that there are epistemic norms governing inquiry is not to deny that there are epistemic *reasons* for inquiry. The fact that some inquiry would promote the acquisition of truth, knowledge, or understanding is certainly a reason to engage in that inquiry, both because these epistemic achievements are valuable in their own right and also because they tend to conduce towards achieving our practical ends. What epistemic nihilists deny is that there are epistemic norms governing inquiry: that there is any sense in which we ought, or are rationally required to inquire as we have most epistemic reason to inquire. I return to this distinction in Section 4 and Section 6.4.

Fourth, we need to distinguish the question of whether there are epistemic norms governing the *activity* of inquiry itself from the further question of whether an agent's inquiries can affect the normative status of her doxastic attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Epistemic nihilism about inquiry deals with the first question, but says nothing about the second. For example, it has long been held that gathering evidence can increase the justification of an agent's beliefs, by providing evidence to support them. And more recently, some authors

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<sup>1</sup>This discussion will become more complicated if you think that inquiry requires adopting a certain doxastic attitude: suspension of judgment (Friedman 2017a). We could avoid this complication by holding that the relevant sort of suspension is not a doxastic attitude (McGrath forthcoming) or by posing challenges to the requirement (Lee forthcoming; Masny 2020; Millson 2021; Palmira 2020).

have held that failures to gather evidence can make an agent's beliefs unjustified (Baehr 2009; Miracchi 2019). Both of these claims should be distinguished from a further claim about inquiry: that we have epistemic duties to gather evidence in order to increase the justification of our beliefs. Many traditional epistemologists have denied the existence of these and other inquiry-related duties, while leaving room for the claim that inquiries can affect the normative status of beliefs (Feldman 2002). I return to this example in Section 4.

Fifth, my discussion in this paper is not premised on the denial of pragmatic, instrumentalist, or other traditionally non-epistemic views about rational belief (Rinard 2019; Steglich-Petersen and Skipper 2019). Quite the opposite: arguments for epistemic nihilism about belief may provide good support for epistemic nihilism about inquiry.<sup>2</sup> However, I aim to show that even if the traditional case against epistemic nihilism for belief is compelling, that case does not tell against epistemic nihilism for inquiry, and may well support it.

Finally, what does it mean to call a norm epistemic? It has recently become clear that there are many things this claim could mean (Conee 2016; Cohen 2016a,b; Lyons 2016; McGrath 2016). Some of these will be my targets in this paper, whereas others will not.

Here are two examples of what my target might be. On a *value-based conception*, epistemic norms are picked out by a special type of epistemic value they direct us to promote, honor or instantiate. The value-based conception is familiar from recent work in epistemic consequentialism, as well as from Richard Foley's Aristotelian conception of rationality (Foley 1987). I discuss the value-based approach in Section 6.4. On an alternative *knowledge-based conception*, epistemic norms are picked out by their close relationship to knowledge. Traditionally, epistemic justification was understood to pick out whatever plays the role of the 'J' in the JTB + X analysis of knowledge, although broader versions of the knowledge-based conception are possible.<sup>3</sup> I discuss a version of the knowledge-based conception in Section 5.1.

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<sup>2</sup>This is one way to read Steglich-Petersen (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup>Here are two broader examples. Conee (2016, p. 858) holds that "epistemic justification is the kind of justification that pertains especially to knowledge or cognition" and Fricker (2007) holds that injustice is epistemic when it wrongs agents in their capacity as knowers.

Here are some examples of what my target is not. Some theorists understand the term ‘epistemic’ to pick out norms governing belief, as opposed to norms governing other objects such as inquiry. On this conception, epistemic nihilism for inquiry would be trivially true. Alternatively, Jessie Munton suggests we use the term epistemic “to indicate a flaw that arises in virtue of an irrational response to information, or through a lack or loss of information” (Munton 2019, p. 231). On this conception, most or all norms of inquiry may count as epistemic, since inquiry involves gathering, storing and responding to information, in which case epistemic nihilism for inquiry would be trivially false.

What distinguishes those conceptions of the epistemic which concern me from those that do not? I am interested in conceptions of epistemic normativity that would generate a nontrivial distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic norms of inquiry and ground arguments for dedicating a significant portion of zetetic epistemology to the study of epistemic norms governing inquiry. Because several different conceptions of the epistemic could be at play here, my strategy will be to focus not on any particular conception of epistemic normativity, but rather on the arguments which have been traditionally given for positing a distinctive type of epistemic normativity. If I am correct that these arguments do not generalize to the case of inquiry, then more work will be needed to ground a call for the study of epistemic norms governing inquiry.

Summing up, epistemic nihilism for inquiry does not claim that zetetic norms are false, unimportant, or not a subject for epistemologists. Nor do epistemic nihilists deny the existence of epistemic reasons for inquiry. Epistemic nihilism is only a claim about the norms governing inquiry, not about the normative status of beliefs that result from inquiry. Epistemic nihilism for inquiry takes no stance on the correctness of epistemic nihilism for belief. And epistemic nihilism targets any conception of epistemic normativity that would generate a nontrivial distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic norms of inquiry, grounding arguments for dedicating a significant portion of zetetic epistemology to the study of epistemic norms governing inquiry.

With these clarifications in mind, I survey three motivations that could be given for

rejecting epistemic nihilism about belief. In each case, I argue that these motivations may well be compelling against epistemic nihilism for belief, but cannot tell against epistemic nihilism for inquiry and in many cases, may even support it.

### 3 The argument from non-existence

One of the most common arguments against epistemic nihilism for belief is that there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief. In this case, we must posit a distinct type of epistemic rationality governing belief on pain of outright nihilism about norms of belief. Call this the *argument from non-existence*. We might try to extend the argument from non-existence to show that there are no non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. This extended argument from non-existence would tell against epistemic nihilism for inquiry.

In this section, I survey three leading arguments against the existence of non-epistemic reasons for belief and ask whether any of them tells against the existence of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. I show that each of these arguments not only fails to support the conclusion that there are no non-epistemic reasons for inquiry, but in fact supports the existence of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry.

A traditional motivation for the claim that all reasons for belief are epistemic is due to Thomas Kelly (2002; 2003). Normative reasons for belief should be potential motivating reasons, reasons on which our beliefs can be based. But Kelly argues that non-epistemic reasons cannot be motivating reasons for belief, and hence cannot be normative reasons for belief. For example, the desire to go to heaven can be a reason to gather and attend to evidence for God's existence. This desire can also be a reason to adopt belief-like attitudes such as acceptance or faith. But I cannot believe that God exists on the basis of my desire to go to heaven. That belief must be based on my assessment of the available evidence.<sup>4</sup> On this basis, Kelly argues that defenders of non-epistemic reasons for belief commit the *consequentialist mistake* of assuming that since the consequences of actions bear on their

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<sup>4</sup>For pushback, see Leite (2007) and Rinard (2015).

rationality, the consequences of beliefs bear on their rationality as well. In doing so, we ignore the fact that consequences can be motivating reasons for action, but not for belief.

This argument poses no threat to the existence of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry, because inquiry is an activity. Non-epistemic reasons can be, and frequently are motivating reasons for inquiry. We can inquire about the weather in order to gain knowledge (Kelp forthcoming) or assuage our curiosity (Whitcomb 2010), but also to plan a picnic. In this way, denying the existence of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry commits the *reverse-consequentialist mistake* of assuming that since the consequences of beliefs do not bear on their rationality, the consequences of inquiries which produce belief do not bear on the rationality of inquiry (Thorstad forthcoming).

Kelly himself is quite friendly to this conclusion. Kelly holds that theoretical rationality is a hybrid virtue. While the rationality of belief is a purely epistemic matter, theoretical rationality encompasses both belief and inquiry. A lively mixture of epistemic and non-epistemic reasons are relevant to rational inquiry. In asking which questions to inquire about, whether to gather evidence, or how much of the available evidence to use during reasoning, we draw not only on epistemic considerations about truth and knowledge but also on non-epistemic considerations such as the importance of answering questions and the cognitive resources consumed during inquiry. To take a purely epistemic perspective towards theoretical rationality would be a mistake, because the epistemic stance ignores a variety of systematic, difference-making reasons that rational agents respond to during inquiry.

A second motivation for the claim that there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief is due to Nishi Shah (2003; 2006). Shah's argument begins with a deliberative constraint on reasons:

**(Deliberative Constraint)**  $R$  is a reason for  $X$  to  $\phi$  only if  $R$  is capable of disposing  $X$  to  $\phi$  in the way characteristic of  $R$ 's functioning as a premise in deliberation whether to  $\phi$ . (Shah 2006, p. 485).

The second step in Shah's argument is to appeal to the *transparency* of belief:



**(Transparency)** The deliberative question *whether to believe that  $p$*  inevitably gives way to the factual question *whether  $p$* . (Shah 2006, p. 481).

Together, the deliberative constraint and transparency imply that  $R$  is a reason for  $X$  to believe that  $p$  only if  $R$  is capable of disposing  $X$  towards believing that  $p$  in the way characteristic of  $R$ 's functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation. And, Shah argues, only epistemic considerations dispose us towards belief in this way.

Transparency poses no threat to the existence of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. That is because the questions of whether and how to inquire into  $p$  are not transparent to whether  $p$ . Perhaps there are some epistemic statuses towards  $p$  which are descriptively or normatively incompatible with inquiry into whether  $p$ , such as belief or knowledge that  $p$  (Friedman 2017a,b). But in the typical case where we neither know nor believe  $p$ , the deliberative questions of whether and how to inquire into  $p$  are answered not only by our current evidence about  $p$ , but also by the importance of the question, the cognitive costs of answering it, and the other inquiries we could engage in instead.

In fact, if we think that normative reasons are the types of considerations that settle deliberation we will be hard-pressed to avoid admitting a large and systematic class of non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. The reason for this is that it is not clear if epistemic reasons alone typically, or even ever settle deliberation about whether or how to inquire. I make this case in Section 5.2.

A third motivation for denying the existence of non-epistemic reasons for belief is the relocation strategy (Way 2012). This strategy redescribes purported non-epistemic reasons for belief as epistemic reasons for some activity such as getting ourselves to believe. For example, it is held that the importance of a comfortable retirement is not a reason to hold many accurate beliefs about retirement. The importance of a comfortable retirement is a reason to get ourselves to hold many accurate beliefs about retirement.

But how do we get ourselves to hold accurate beliefs about retirement? Sometimes we can shift our beliefs by attending church or popping belief pills. But the typical route to getting ourselves to have beliefs is through inquiry. If you want to form many accurate

beliefs about retirement you should read books, take classes, and consult your financial planner. This means that relocated non-epistemic reasons for belief will often turn out to be non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. In this way, the relocation strategy protects against the existence of non-epistemic reasons for belief by relocating large classes of non-epistemic reasons from belief to inquiry.

In this section, we considered the argument from non-existence, which holds that we must posit epistemic norms governing belief because there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief. We asked whether the argument from non-existence could be extended to establish that there are no non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. We considered three strategies for pressing the argument from non-existence in the case of belief. We saw that, by contrast to the case of belief, each of these strategies grounds an argument for the existence of non-epistemic reasons governing inquiry. As a result, the case against epistemic nihilism for inquiry cannot be made on the grounds that there are no non-epistemic reasons for inquiry. In the next section, I consider a second argument against epistemic nihilism: the linguistic argument.

## 4 The linguistic argument

Roderick Firth (1956; 1959) introduced the notion of epistemic rationality in order to account for our ordinary epistemic talk.<sup>5</sup> Chisholm (1956) had proposed to account for epistemic talk using the familiar ethical notion of ought. Firth claimed that we could get a better analysis by positing a novel type of epistemic rationality, and concluded that we should posit such a notion. Call this the *linguistic argument*.

As before, the linguistic argument does give some traction against epistemic nihilism for belief. Consider your favorite belief that is epistemically irrational, although highly beneficial, such as the belief that you are a good dancer or that your son is innocent of a

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<sup>5</sup>Firth and Chisholm regarded their project as a matter of conceptual analysis. We moderns often have the weaker project of accounting for the semantics of epistemic terms, and so I have softened my presentation of the linguistic argument to match this weaker project.

crime. The folk say without hesitation that such beliefs are irrational. We say also that they are unjustified; unreasonable; and should or ought not be held. We hurl any number of colorful criticisms at these beliefs. And we will see in Section 5.1 that an epistemic reading of justification in such cases is also needed to account for knowledge attributions.

This data provides some motivation for positing epistemic norms governing belief as the best way to systematize and explain our ordinary epistemic talk. It also suggests that epistemic norms are important, insofar as they figure in what is arguably the most natural reading of most ordinary epistemic talk.

By contrast, consider the belief that you are a good dancer, or that your son is innocent. We most commonly say that such beliefs are irrational, unjustified, unreasonable, and should not be held. There may be a sense in which such beliefs are praiseworthy, although this is controversial. And we will see that this sense cannot be the sense of justification that is at issue in knowledge attributions. Here, I think, we should say at best that the linguistic data provides little support for a separate, non-epistemic reading of rational belief. If anything, it threatens to tell against the existence of non-epistemic norms, since these norms do not figure centrally in much of our ordinary epistemic talk.

But the situation with norms of inquiry is precisely the reverse. Consider, for example, one of the best-known epistemic norms on evidence gathering:

**(HJ)** For any proposition that is less than certain on one's present evidence, one has an epistemic duty to seek more evidence about that proposition. (Hall and Johnson 1998, p. 133).

How strong is the linguistic evidence for HJ? Whatever the correctness of HJ, I think we should admit that the linguistic evidence behind this norm is not very strong.

Consider a detective who stops gathering evidence each night so she can spend time with her family. We say without hesitation that she ought to go home rather than continue gathering evidence; that going home is reasonable, justified, and rational. It is controversial whether there is any sense in which she is criticizable for going home. By contrast,

if she were to stay home late to gather evidence we would say that she had acted as she ought not; that her actions were unreasonable, unjustified, and irrational; and that she is liable to criticism for breaking her familial obligations.

In the case of belief, the linguistic argument took the opposite data to support the existence and importance of epistemic norms governing belief, and to provide at best little support for the existence of non-epistemic norms governing inquiry. By the same token, defenders of the linguistic argument should take the same data to support the existence and importance of non-epistemic norms governing inquiry, and to provide at best little support for the existence of epistemic norms governing inquiry. Here, again, we see that a classic motivation against epistemic nihilism for belief provides at best no traction against epistemic nihilism for inquiry.

Now Hall and Johnson are aware of this criticism. They respond by holding that the duties described by HJ are only *prima facie*, but can be outweighed. At this point, two responses are in order. First, as I said in Section 2, I do not deny that there are epistemic *reasons* for inquiry, but only that these reasons combine to determine a distinctive ought, rationality or similar requirement. The claim that HJ is a *prima facie* duty is most naturally interpreted in a Rossian-style framework in which duties replace reasons or value as the weighted notion which aggregates to determine what ought to be done. In this framework, the claim that we have *prima facie* epistemic duties as inquirers is simply the relevant rephrasing of the claim that we have epistemic reasons to inquire, a claim which I do not deny. What needs to be shown is that we have a distinctive class of proper, or full-stop epistemic duties, and a Rossian turn at best fails to settle this matter.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the retreat to *prima facie* duties looks like an unnecessary duplication of normative terms. Hall and Johnson motivate HJ by appealing to what looks like a value-first framework in which rationality is a matter of promoting value. Because gathering evidence about uncertain propositions promotes epistemic value, Hall and Johnson hold that we have a duty to gather evidence. But within this framework, we already have a

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<sup>6</sup>Ross thought that there is a single proper duty in any given case, which might seem to suggest that all-things-considered duties of inquiry are the only proper duties that inquirers have.

weighted notion, value, which aggregates to determine what ought to be done. We can, of course, posit a second notion of prima facie duty, whose existence and strength correlates precisely with the value that would be promoted by fulfilling the duty. But unless we are told more about the work that this notion is meant to do, it looks like an idle posit that should be rejected on grounds of parsimony. I return to this issue in Section 6.4.

So far, we have seen that epistemic nihilism for inquiry, unlike perhaps epistemic nihilism for belief, cannot be rejected on linguistic grounds or on the grounds that there are no epistemic reasons for inquiry. In the next section, I consider a third reason for positing epistemic norms: that they are the best candidates to play important theoretical roles attached to the concept of rationality.

## 5 Theoretical roles

A third argument against epistemic nihilism for belief is that the notion of epistemic rationality is needed to play key theoretical roles that we would like the notion of rational belief to play. These include figuring in the conceptual analysis of knowledge (§5.1) and settling doxastic deliberation (§5.2). Although these may be good motivations for positing epistemic norms governing belief, I argue that they do not generalize to motivate epistemic norms for inquiry, and in fact that the second role is best-played by all-things-considered norms rather than epistemic norms for inquiry.

### 5.1 The analysis of knowledge

For the early analytic epistemologists who introduced and popularized the notion of epistemic justification, the notion of epistemic justification was strongly, and sometimes even constitutively identified with its role in the analysis of knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Epistemic

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<sup>7</sup>For a representative early view, Bonjour (1985, p. 5) holds that epistemic justification is “the sort of justification pertaining to and appropriate to knowledge.” This view is echoed in recent authors such as Conee (2016), Greco (2011), and Goldberg (2016). And prior to 1948, the term ‘epistemic’ was not even associated with a type of justification: it simply meant ‘of or pertaining to knowledge’ (Marcucilli 2019).

justification was needed to play the role of the 'J' in the JTB + X analysis of knowledge. Although some contemporary epistemologists, including many knowledge-firsters, have soured on this project (Kelp forthcoming; Williamson 2000), a considerable fraction of epistemologists would like to make room for the traditional analysis of knowledge.

If epistemic justification is meant to play its familiar role in the analysis of knowledge, then most plausible moral, prudential or all-things-considered notions of epistemic justification will be nonstarters. The reason is that these accounts generate the wrong kinds of pragmatic encroachment on knowledge. They say that beliefs can be justified, in the sense that counts towards knowledge, because it is valuable to be in a belief state itself. For example, a Pascalian belief that God exists might be justified as a safe ticket to heaven.

Now some philosophers do accept other patterns of pragmatic encroachment on knowledge. For example, practical stakes might raise the level of evidence needed for beliefs to be candidates for knowledge (DeRose 2009; Fantl and McGrath 2009). But I know of few philosophers who think that beliefs can be candidates for knowledge on the basis of the practical or all-things-considered utility of occupying a belief state itself as a means to achieving other goals.<sup>8</sup> A Pascalian true belief does not become a better candidate for knowledge if it turns out that the belief greatly improves your odds of reaching heaven.

Insofar as we want the notion of epistemic justification to play its traditional role in the analysis of knowledge, many philosophers have thought that we have good reason to posit a novel notion of epistemic justification because it is the best candidate to play this role.<sup>9</sup> This is, for philosophers interested in the analysis of knowledge, a compelling reason to reject epistemic nihilism for belief. But this argument does not give us any direct reason to reject epistemic nihilism for inquiry, since knowledge is a status which attaches to beliefs rather than inquiries. We saw in Section 2 that the mere observation that inquiries can alter important epistemic statuses of belief, such as justification and

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<sup>8</sup>Here Alston (1978, p. 277) is typical: "what counts towards *S*'s knowing that *p* is not that he is morally, prudentially, or legally justified in believing that *p*, but rather that his belief that *p* satisfies some specifically epistemic standards, standards that have to do with a kind of excellence that is appropriate to the quest for knowledge."

<sup>9</sup>Indeed, this argument was first made by Firth (1956) himself.

knowledge, does not yet force us to posit a derivative class of epistemic duties for inquiry.

So far we have seen that there is one theoretical role, figuring in the analysis of knowledge, which tells against epistemic nihilism for belief but not against epistemic nihilism for inquiry. Next, I argue that there is at least one prominent theoretical role which tells against epistemic nihilism for belief, but *in favor* of epistemic nihilism for inquiry.

## 5.2 Settling deliberation

There is a robust tradition in epistemology which links the rationality of belief to the conditions under which doxastic deliberation is properly settled (Kelly 2002; Shah 2003; Williams 1973). Here is a pared-down version of that tradition that many epistemologists would accept.

We can pose to ourselves the *deliberative question* of whether to believe that  $p$ . This question is settled by the factual question of whether  $p$ . And the factual question of whether  $p$  is settled by evidence for and against  $p$ . Now you might think that an important theoretical role for rational belief is to track the conditions under which the deliberative question of whether to believe  $p$  is properly settled. If that is right, then two consequences follow. First, we have good reason to posit a distinctively epistemic type of rationality that is responsive only to evidence, since evidence is what settles the deliberative question of whether to believe that  $p$ . Second, we have some evidence against other non-epistemic notions of rational belief, insofar as they do not track the considerations which settle the deliberative question.

This argument may well support the existence of epistemic norms for belief, but if anything it tells against the existence of epistemic norms for inquiry. We can also pose the deliberative question of whether or how to inquire into some question  $Q$ . Yet this deliberative question is not settled by the *epistemic question* of how we have most epistemic reason to inquire, but rather by the *all-things-considered question* of how we have most all-things-considered reason to inquire. There are two ways to see that the all-things-

considered question, rather than the epistemic question, settles the deliberative questions of whether and how to inquire.

First, many philosophers accept a Humean theory of motivation on which agents cannot be moved to act without the presence of desire or another conative state. A Humean theory predicts that the mere fact that some inquiry conduces to epistemic goods such as truth, knowledge and understanding will be insufficient to settle the deliberative question by moving us to inquire. If we have no desires, anxieties, curiosities or other partially-conative states caught up in the inquiries at hand, we may refuse to engage in inquiries while recognizing that we have most epistemic reason to do so.<sup>10</sup>

Consider an example due to Kelly (2003). I approach you at the ticket counter offering cost-free evidence in the form of movie spoilers. Epistemically speaking you have only truth to gain from accepting my offer, and truth to lose if you refuse. Yet you will likely refuse my offer, because movie spoilers are truths you desire not to learn. And if you have no desire for some epistemic good such as a true belief about the ending of a movie, then learning that you could achieve this good through inquiry will not settle the deliberative question in favor of inquiring.

Second, we can see that the deliberative question for inquiry is settled in an all-things-considered manner by reflecting on intuitions about proper settling. Suppose you are reading a philosophical book when you observe smoke coming from the kitchen. I submit that you both will and should put down your book to investigate the smoking kitchen. Now we can imagine ways of filling out the story on which you would learn more or weightier truths by investigating the smoke, but also continuations on which you stand to gain more truth, knowledge, understanding and other intellectual goods by continuing to read. The point here is that our judgments about what does, and should settle you in favor of investigating the smoking kitchen rather than the book in such cases are not only, or perhaps not even primarily sensitive to these epistemic questions. They track something

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<sup>10</sup>Would matters change if we took Peirce (1877) to show that the recognition of doubt grounds a type of anxiety which pushes towards the resolution of doubt? Not obviously, for we could still hold that these anxieties are often too weak to be motivationally decisive. For illustration, see the example by Kelly in the next paragraph and also Hertwig and Engel (2021).



more like the all-things-considered question of what you have most reason to do, and in this case that is dominated by practical considerations, such as the need to prevent your house from burning down.

Hence insofar as rationality is meant to track what settles the deliberative question of whether or how to inquire, it is an all-things-considered rather than an epistemic reading of rational inquiry that we are after. Together with our earlier discussion of knowledge, this suggests that thinking about theoretical roles for rationality does not clearly support the existence of epistemic norms for inquiry. Some roles, such as the analysis of knowledge, apply only to belief and not inquiry, whereas others, such as settling deliberation, may support a non-epistemic reading of norms of inquiry. Of course, the defender of epistemic norms for inquiry is always free to identify new theoretical roles which epistemic norms are needed to play. The upshot of this section is then an open invitation to describe these roles and to explain why epistemic norms are needed to play them.

## **6 Objections and replies**

So far, I have defended epistemic nihilism for inquiry: the view that there are no epistemic norms of inquiry. My strategy was to examine motivations for rejecting epistemic nihilism about belief and ask whether these motivations also tell against epistemic nihilism for inquiry. I considered the argument from non-existence that there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief; the linguistic argument that an epistemic reading is needed to capture much of our ordinary epistemic talk; and the argument from theoretical roles that an epistemic reading is needed to play key theoretical roles associated with rationality. In each case, I argued, these motivations do not generalize to support the existence of epistemic norms for inquiry, and in many cases they tell against it. Non-epistemic reasons for belief exist. Many of the same locutions that naturally take an epistemic reading when applied to belief take a natural non-epistemic reading when applied to inquiry. And the theoretical roles used to motivate an epistemic reading of rational belief either do not apply

to inquiry, or motivate an all-things-considered notion of rational inquiry. These findings together put pressure on the existence of epistemic norms for inquiry and suggest that epistemic norms for inquiry may be an overgeneralization on what are otherwise strong motivations for positing epistemic norms of belief.

In this section, I consider and respond to four objections that can be raised to epistemic nihilism for inquiry.

## 6.1 All norms of inquiry are epistemic

The epistemic nihilist holds that no norms of inquiry are epistemic norms. Jane Friedman has recently defended a *unity view* on which all norms of inquiry are epistemic, including seemingly pragmatic or instrumental norms (Friedman forthcoming). If the upshot of Sections 3-5 is simply that we have no grounds to posit a distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic norms of inquiry, then why not take this to favor the unity view over nihilism?

I don't want to exaggerate the difference between nihilism and the unity view. In particular, nihilists are motivated by many of the same thoughts as unity theorists: a desire to make room for recently-proposed norms of inquiry within epistemology; the need to avoid a temporally parochial epistemology of the present moment; and a recognition of the practical importance of inquiry within our lives. At the same time, I think that nihilism has three advantages over the unity view.

First, several theorists have raised problems for the unity view and questioned whether these data are sufficient to motivate it (Steglich-Petersen forthcoming; Thorstad forthcoming). It can be fruitful to explore alternative views which are not subject to the same objections.

Second, the unity view is revisionary in its broad conception of what counts as an epistemic norm. The unity view asks us to accept that pragmatic, instrumentalist, and all-things-considered norms can be epistemic norms. By contrast, epistemic nihilism for inquiry allows us to maintain the traditional separation between epistemic, instrumental-

ist, and all-things-considered norms. Blurring the lines between these classes of norms can have downstream revisionary implications, since many of the motivations Friedman cites for the unity view could equally well be cited by discontented instrumentalists theorizing about belief.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Friedman thinks there is a good chance that her view will refute evidentialism and other popular norms governing belief (Friedman 2019b, forthcoming).

Finally, nihilism says something stronger than the unity view: purported epistemic norms of inquiry like HJ are false. By contrast, the unity view makes room for the weaker claim that traditional epistemic norms of inquiry are true alongside traditionally non-epistemic norms of inquiry such as ZIP. If the nihilist is right that we have no strong motivation for positing such norms and some motivation for not positing them, then we should avoid positing new normative claims without necessity and adopt nihilism in favor of the unity view.

## 6.2 A terminological matter?

In conversation, it is often put to me that epistemic nihilism about inquiry is a mere terminological matter. We can use the word ‘epistemic’ to pick out narrow classes of norms, focused on truth, knowledge or evidence. But we can also use it to pick out broad classes of norms, including instrumentalist or all-things-considered norms. And there is really nothing to argue about here, since we can use terms however we see fit.

Now I am not sure if our dispute is terminological. I do not see myself as proposing an expanded conception of epistemic norms, but rather denying that there are any epistemic norms governing inquiry. But even if you disagree, this dispute is certainly not a *mere* terminological dispute in any sense that would render the debate uninteresting or unimportant. Since the mid-1950s, the notion of epistemic normativity has structured research in epistemology, exerting a strong influence on the questions considered to be worth addressing as well as the types of normative considerations that can be brought to bear on

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<sup>11</sup>Indeed, this discussion has already been used to motivate an instrumentalist unification of belief and inquiry (Steglich-Petersen forthcoming).

them.<sup>12</sup> It is of primary importance that we settle on the most interesting, joint-carving normative questions to ask, or else we risk going wrong by asking the wrong questions.

Consider, for example, Kristie Dotson's (2018; 2019) critique of normative epistemology. Dotson has urged that our prevailing epistemic practices serve to suppress black rage at state-sanctioned violence, casting skepticism about the official narrative as unjustified and unreasonable (Dotson 2018). As theorists, we could react to such a criticism in two ways. On the one hand, we could take it to put pressure on existing accounts of rational belief and inquiry. On the other hand, we could dig in our heels and reply that, while interesting, the tendency of epistemic norms to countenance state-sanctioned violence is simply not the sort of thing that could count for or against a system of epistemic norms. The result of this second strategy would be that Dotson's critique, even if true, can be entirely ignored by epistemologists.

However you stand on this debate, I hope it is clear that the debate between Dotson and her opponents is not a mere terminological matter in any sense that would make the debate uninteresting and unimportant. It is of paramount importance that we decide the sorts of normative considerations that we take to be relevant to the most central and joint-carving questions in epistemology. And whatever we say about the norms governing belief, I must confess that in the case of rational inquiry I feel significant pressure to side with Dotson. For example, Dotson (2018) urges that many of us have a strong duty to gather evidence about the nature and causes of systemic injustice in order to better contextualize black rage against state-sanctioned violence. I think this claim is quite correct, and that it is important to develop and prioritize notions of rational inquiry that will ground such claims.

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<sup>12</sup>So for example, a recent paper by David Christensen (forthcoming) characterizes the traditional view as follows: "Epistemic rationality or justification . . . has been seen as in some sense aimed at truth, and the proper subject for epistemology. Pragmatic justification or rationality . . . has been seen as outside the purview of epistemology."

### 6.3 Grounds for positing epistemic norms

There is, to my knowledge, one extended argument in the recent literature for positing epistemic norms governing inquiry. This argument is due to Jane Friedman (forthcoming), in her defense of the unity view. That argument has a negative component and a positive component.

We have already met the negative component of Friedman's argument, which cites factors such as the need to avoid a temporally parochial epistemology of the present moment and the need to make room for instrumentalists, pragmatists and other non-evidentialist approaches within epistemology. As we have seen, these motivations are compatible with epistemic nihilism for inquiry. After all, the epistemic nihilist also thinks that epistemologists should study norms governing the temporally extended process of inquiry, and the nihilist makes room for non-evidentialist approaches to the study of zetetic norms. She simply denies that zetetic norms are epistemic norms.

On my best reading, the positive component of Friedman's argument gives three reasons why zetetic norms should be regarded as epistemic norms:

**(Govern Inquiry)** Zetetic norms govern the process of inquiry.

**(Rational Pursuit)** Zetetic norms are norms that rational subjects in pursuit of knowledge, understanding, or comprehension will follow.

**(Promotion)** Conformity to zetetic norms promotes the acquisition of knowledge, understanding or comprehension.

This argument is made in three passages (Friedman forthcoming, p. 5, pp. 10-11, p.26), focusing on the Zetetic Instrumental Principle (ZIP) introduced in Section 1. I have reproduced and annotated one such passage below to support my reading of Friedman's argument.

I think that ZIP has a good claim to being an epistemic norm ... **(Govern Inquiry)** ZIP is a norm that speaks to how we should inquire. **(Promotion)**

Whether or not we conform to ZIP is highly relevant to whether or not we come to know what we want to know and whether or not we succeed in understanding what we want to understand, and not merely in some superficial sense. **(Rational Pursuit)** ZIP tells us how to proceed when we want to come to know or understanding something. This counts in favor of thinking of ZIP as epistemic. ZIP is a norm that a rational subject trying to know more and understand better will conform to. (Friedman forthcoming, pp. 10-11).

If this is the correct reading of Friedman's argument, then how should an epistemic nihilist respond?

I don't think that Govern Inquiry will be convincing to those not already persuaded that zetetic norms are epistemic norms. Rational Pursuit would certainly be persuasive, but we need an independent argument for Rational Pursuit. On the most natural reading, Friedman accepts Rational Pursuit on the basis of Promotion: rational agents in pursuit of intellectually valuable states such as knowledge and understanding will follow zetetic norms because conformity to zetetic norms promotes intellectual value.<sup>13</sup>

Now while some epistemologists do take claims such as Promotion to be decisive evidence that a norm is epistemic, many others have wanted to push back here. Consider:

**(Sandwich Norm)** If you are inquiring for many hours, you ought to pause and eat a sandwich.

We might defend Sandwich Norm's status as an epistemic norm by citing Promotion: eating a sandwich will help you to efficiently pursue truth and knowledge. But many epistemologists have thought that this causal fact alone is insufficient to make Sandwich Norm a genuine epistemic norm.<sup>14</sup>

What is the issue in this discussion is whether the fact that engaging in some activity would promote epistemic value grounds an epistemic requirement to engage in that

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<sup>13</sup>This reading dovetails nicely with (Friedman 2019b).

<sup>14</sup>This discussion was popularized by Nomy Arpaly (2017), who attributes it to Sophie Horowitz.

activity. As it happens, there is one approach to epistemic normativity which says exactly this. I discuss this approach below, since it can ground an independently motivated objection to epistemic nihilism for inquiry.

#### **6.4 Existence is cheap, importance is expensive**

A final objection is that on some ways of thinking about our normative obligations, the bare existence of epistemic norms is cheap. For example, consider a strong value-based approach to normativity on which for any value  $V$  and any activity  $A$  which can promote  $V$ , we have a  $V$ -type duty to engage in  $A$  in a way that best promotes  $V$ .<sup>15</sup> On this account, we have epistemic duties to inquire in the ways that best promote epistemic value. We also have epistemic duties to sumo wrestle in the ways that best promote epistemic value, gustatory duties to inquire in the ways that best conduce to delectable culinary experiences, and epistemic duties to pause inquiry and eat a less delectable sandwich. If this is right, then it makes little sense to deny that there are epistemic norms of inquiry so long as we can identify a distinctively epistemic type of value that inquiry promotes.

A risk of this strategy is that it threatens to over-generate duties. As we have seen, it generates not only epistemic duties to inquire, but also gustatory duties to inquire and epistemic duties to sumo wrestle and eat sandwiches. Even if there is, perhaps, some thin sense in which these duties exist and are on a par, this is not the sense that epistemologists have usually been interested in.

When we initially posited epistemic duties governing belief, we argued that these duties had important work to do. We argued that there must be epistemic duties for belief because there are no non-epistemic reasons for belief; that epistemic duties are needed to explain key features of our normative thought and talk; and that epistemic duties play key theoretical roles such as settling inquiry and figuring in the conceptual analysis of knowledge. This allowed us to claim that epistemic duties exist in a thick and highly

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<sup>15</sup>This approach could be grounded in views by Foley (1987), Friedman (2019b) and recent work on epistemic consequentialism, although many of these authors may have intended a weaker reading of the value-based approach.

nontrivial sense.

If epistemic duties for inquiry are to be thicker than gustatory duties for inquiry, we need to be given a story which thickens them, for example by showing how they figure in our ordinary evaluative practices, or play important theoretical roles associated with rationality. The purpose of Sections 3-5 is to show that the same ways in which epistemic duties for belief were thickened will not serve to put much flesh on the bones of epistemic duties for inquiry. So if thickening is called for, it must come from somewhere else.

If we do nothing to thicken the value-based notion of epistemic duties for inquiry, then this objection will not get the defender of epistemic norms of inquiry what she wants. Defenders of epistemic norms think not only that epistemic norms exist, but also that they are *important*. They want to motivate a research program which sets out and studies the epistemic norms governing inquiry, and perhaps even to put the brakes on competing all-things-considered normative programs. But so far, we have not seen any motivations for doing this, whereas by contrast we have seen several motivations for privileging the study of all-things-considered norms.

One way to read this paper is as an invitation to defenders of epistemic norms of inquiry to thicken those norms by explaining the roles that these norms play in our thought, our talk, and our lives. But this invitation cuts both ways, since I have as yet told only a partial story about the role and importance of non-epistemic norms for inquiry. It is time to remedy that. In the last section, I sketch a Gibbardian picture on which thinking how to inquire is thinking how to live, then use this picture to motivate a view on which norms of inquiry are all-things-considered norms governing action.

## 7 Thinking how to live

Inquiry is an activity. It is something we do, like building a house or writing a book. For humans, inquiry is a central activity which guides other activities by showing us how to achieve our goals. It is through inquiry that we learn to build sturdy houses and write



good books. Our inquiries have profound effects on our lives and the lives of those around us. Through inquiry, we sent astronauts to the moon and became the dominant species on this planet.

Allan Gibbard taught us that thinking how to act is thinking how to live (Gibbard 2003).<sup>16</sup> The actions that we take determine the life that we will lead and the effects of our lives on the world around us. Nowhere is this truer than in inquiry, for our inquiries play a guiding role in almost everything that we do. Our inquiries determine whether we will obtain truth, knowledge and understanding, satisfy our curiosity and relieve doubt; but also shape whether we will be rich or poor, sick or healthy, and loved or unloved. Thinking how to inquire, like any other case of thinking how to act, involves considering all of these myriad consequences that our inquiries might have.

Consider the choices that an inquiring detective must make in investigating a murder. In *question-selection* she must decide whether to take the case, putting the question of who committed the crime onto her research agenda (Enqvist 2012; Olsson and Westlund 2006).

In *evidence gathering* she must decide how much evidence to gather, and from whom (Hall and Johnson 1998; Smith 2014). Does she interview most plausible witnesses, or only a few? Does she interview the victim's fiancé, or dismiss her as hysterical?

In *strategy selection* she must decide which reasoning strategies to use during inquiry (Lieder and Griffiths 2017; Marewski and Schooler 2011). Should she think fast, using quick and efficient heuristic rules, or think slow, using effortful non-heuristic rules?

Through *inter-activity tradeoffs*, she must determine how to balance inquiry against the other activities in a rich and full life ([removed]). Does she spend her Friday nights working on the case, or go home and eat dinner with her family?

In *double-checking*, she must decide whether to double-check her conclusions before accusing a culprit (Friedman 2019a). Might she even be required to triple-check, given the magnitude of the accusation?

In *inquiry termination*, she must decide whether to halt inquiry after leads dry up,

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<sup>16</sup>To be clear, I take no stance on whether Gibbard himself would endorse the view that follows.

perhaps turning the matter over to a judge, or if there is not enough evidence, closing inquiry without making a final judgment and letting the case grow cold.

In all of these questions, epistemic goals such as truth and knowledge are inextricably bound up with the non-epistemic context in which the detective's inquiry occurs. To determine whether the detective should take the case, we need to know not only whether she is curious about the outcome, but also that a murder trial is at stake. To see that unusually large amounts of evidence should be gathered; stringent double-checks should be made; and unusually demanding inference rules should be applied, we need to know not only how difficult it is to identify a suspect but also what will happen if the detective's inquiry fails. In confronting inter-activity tradeoffs, we need to know not just what her inquiry will bring but also what the effects of this inquiry will be on the detective's life at home. To see that the victim's fiancé should be interviewed, we need to note not only that she is likely to have relevant information, but also that this inquiry occurs against a context in which women's testimony is often prejudicially dismissed, causing direct harm by failing to recognize women as knowers (Dotson 2011; Fricker 2007).

These remarks are not intended to marginalize traditionally epistemic considerations such as truth and knowledge, nor to suggest that rational inquiry often involves vices such as wishful thinking or slovenly reasoning meant to prevent us from discovering uncomfortable truths. If Clifford (1877) taught us anything, is it that sloppy inquiry often has devastating downstream consequences. Failing to test the seaworthiness of a ship can lead it to sink at sea. But even as we retain Clifford's epistemic lesson that some degree of evidence-gathering is often warranted, we should not neglect the broader lesson: that an inextricable part of what warrants inquiry is the effect that inquiry will have on our lives and the lives of those around us.

If thinking how to inquire is thinking how to live, then what types of consequences bear on how we ought to inquire? All of them. We can no more neglect the effects our inquiries will have on the world than we can neglect the effects that any other action will have. If thinking how to inquire is thinking how to live, then thinking how to inquire is

an all-things-considered matter. There are many ways in which our inquiries affect the world, and all of them must be considered to determine how to inquire.

We can, if we wish, tell a very different story about the norms governing belief. On this story, all reasons for belief are epistemic reasons. Seeming non-epistemic reasons for belief are really non-epistemic reasons for actions such as inquiry. Epistemic evaluations of belief states play an important role in our ordinary language, and play important theoretical roles such as figuring in the analysis of knowledge and tracking the factors which settle doxastic deliberation.

But as we have seen, this story cannot be told about inquiry, any more than it can be told for any other activity such as building a house. And that is no accident. Thinking how to inquire is thinking how to act. Thinking how to act is thinking how to live. Thinking how to live is an all-things-considered matter.

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