

The Aim of Inquiry

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Abstract

I defend the thesis that the constitutive aim of inquiring into some question, Q , is improving one's epistemic standing with respect to Q . Call this the *epistemic-improvement view*. I consider and ultimately reject two alternative accounts of the constitutive aim of inquiry—namely, the thesis that inquiry aims at knowledge and the thesis that inquiry aims at (justified) belief—and I use my criticisms as a foil for clarifying and motivating the epistemic-improvement view. I also consider and reject a pair of normative theses about when inquiry goes awry or is inappropriate. The first is the normative thesis defended by Dennis Whitcomb who claims that inquiry goes awry if it culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge and that one should not inquire into Q if one already knows the answer to Q . The second is the normative thesis defended by Jane Friedman who claims that one should not inquire into Q if one already believes some complete answer to Q .

Keywords

Inquiry, knowledge, belief, opinion, epistemic improvement.

1 Introduction

An examination of our pre-philosophical intuitions about when an agent is inquiring quickly reveals that not every instance in which an agent engages in the sorts of activities we associate with investigation counts as inquiry. This point is illustrated by Jane Friedman's comparison of a pair of scenarios involving the British sleuth, detective Morse.¹ In the first scenario, the detective is called upon to investigate a murder where the identity of the murderer is unknown to Morse. When he arrives at the scene, Morse engages in some of the activities typically associated with a criminal investigation, like ex-

¹ Friedman 2019.

aming the crime scene, interviewing witnesses, and taking notes. Call this the *ordinary-Morse case*. In the second scenario, Morse is the one who committed the murder the night before, but is trying to conceal this fact from his fellow detectives. When he returns to the crime scene, he engages in the very same activities as in the ordinary-Morse case: examining the crime scene, interviewing witnesses, and taking notes. Call this second scenario the *criminal-Morse case*.

Intuitively, Morse is not engaged in genuine inquiry in the second scenario. On the contrary, we would say that he is merely going through the motions in the criminal-Morse case. Hence, not every case in which an agent engages in activities like examining a crime scene, interviewing witnesses, and so on, can be described as genuine inquiry. We may therefore ask what distinguishes the ordinary-Morse case from the criminal-Morse case; why does the former but not the latter count as a genuine case of inquiring? One answer is that in the ordinary-Morse case, he engages in the sorts of activities we associate with investigation with the aim of figuring out who committed the murder, while in the criminal-Morse case, he has no such aim given that he already knows the identity of the murderer. Hence, we may distinguish between genuine and ersatz cases of inquiry into a question by noting that in the former, the activities typically associated with inquiry are accompanied by the possession of a certain aim on the part of the agent. In the ordinary-Morse case, the agent has the aim of answering the question: who committed the murder? However, this aim is missing in the criminal-Morse case.

On the present suggestion, what distinguishes genuine from ersatz cases of inquiry is the presence or absence of a certain aim. Moreover, insofar as the aim in question is supposed to serve as a basis for distinguishing between those question-directed investigative activities that are instances of inquiry and those that are not, we are here concerned with the constitutive aim of inquiry. The constitutive aim of an activity, as I shall understand the expression, is that which makes that activity what it is and distinguishes it from all other activities. My goal in this paper is to go some distance towards clarifying what that aim is in the case of inquiry. To this end, I will be arguing that one is inquiring into some question, Q , only if one is gathering or analysing information that, from one's perspective, may potentially bear on answering Q with the aim of improving

one's epistemic standing with respect to Q .² Call this the *epistemic-improvement view*.

Significantly, the epistemic improvement view represents an attempt to capture the constitutive aim of inquiry; the possession of which determines if a piece of information gathering/analysis is genuine inquiry. In order to illuminate the process by which I arrive at the epistemic-improvement view, I will be employing two alternative accounts of the constitutive aim of inquiry as a foil: the first claims that inquiry aims at knowledge and the second claims that inquiry aims at (justified) belief. I shall argue that both of these alternative accounts should be rejected because they fail to preserve certain paradigmatic cases of genuine inquiry. I also consider, criticise, and ultimately reject the normative proposals due to Dennis Whitcomb and Jane Friedman regarding when inquiry goes awry or is inappropriate.

2 Preliminaries

Before delving into my examination of some competing views of the aim of inquiry, let us circumscribe the focus and limits of the present investigation. Following Friedman, I hold that inquiry is an activity that takes place over a certain time interval, with an inquiring subject (or subjects) who may be credited with performing the activities associated with inquiry.³ I group said activities under the heading of information gathering and analysis. Information gathering involves seeking out or being attentive towards information that is relevant to answering a question, and paradigmatically includes the sorts of evidence gathering activities associated with the sciences. However, there are domains, like logic and mathematics, in which inquiry is less concerned with acquiring evidence and more concerned with analysing concepts in ways that may reveal heretofore unrecognized relationships and yield deeper understanding. Including analysis

² The present investigation will be limited to inquiry into/about a question. I wish to remain neutral with respect to whether the object of inquiry is always a question. However, I restrict my attention to inquiry into/about a question in order to keep my task in this paper more manageable.

³ Friedman 2019: 297.

among the list of activities associated with inquiry is meant to accommodate such cases. If there are other investigative activities that do not fall under the umbrella of information gathering and analysis, then I am open to my account of inquiry being expanded to include such activities. However, the two broad classes of investigative activities I have identified—information gathering and analysis—seem like a plausible starting point.

One issue on which pre-theoretical intuitions appear to diverge is whether one can inquire into a question one takes oneself to already have the answer to for the sake of persuading others to accept said answer. For example, suppose that I firmly believe that all life on earth has a common ancestor and that I consequently take myself to already have the answer to the following question:

(Q1) Does all life on earth have a common ancestor?

Nevertheless, I may gather information that I take to bear on (Q1) in order to persuade my creationist neighbour to accept a positive answer to (Q1). Insofar as I take myself to already have the answer to (Q1), it is a widely held pre-theoretical intuition that I am not genuinely inquiring. However, while this appears to be the dominant intuition regarding information gathering/analysis carried out solely for the benefit of others, it is not clear that this intuition is universally held.

In cases in which our pre-theoretical intuitions fail to decisively settle a matter, I believe we may safely leave it up to our theorising to do so in a way that best preserves theoretical values like comprehensiveness, consistency, and usefulness. However, if our pre-theoretical intuitions lean more heavily in one direction (as I believe to be true in the present case), then our theorising should (all things being equal) favour the position that most closely aligns with the most widely held pre-theoretical intuitions. Given these methodological assumptions, and given the observation that most competent English speakers would not regard the information gathering I engage in solely for the purpose of persuading my creationist neighbour as genuine inquiry on my part, I think we may safely stipulate that, on the theoretical account of inquiry currently on offer, an agent engaged in information gathering and analysis qualifies as inquiring into some question only if the agent responsible for the information

gathering/analysis is among the potential epistemic beneficiaries of said information gathering/analysis. Given this stipulation, information gathering/analysis that is carried out for the purpose of persuading others may count as inquiry, but only if the person responsible for the information gathering and analysis also intends to derive some personal epistemic benefit from doing so. Otherwise, I will say that the agent is engaged in *mere information gathering*, but that this information gathering does not qualify as genuine inquiry.

3 The knowledge-aim views

One natural suggestion for what makes an instance of information gathering/analysis qualify as inquiring into some question, Q , is the fact that it is carried out in order to achieve knowledge of the answer to Q .⁴ Insofar as the present suggestion purports to tell us which instances of information gathering/analysis are genuine cases of inquiry and which are not, it is a metaphysical thesis. As such, I shall call it the *metaphysical knowledge-aim view*.

Of no less interest to the metaphysical knowledge-aim view is the following pair of normative claims defended by Dennis Whitcomb: (1) that inquiry goes awry if it culminates in a cognitive state that falls short of knowledge, and (2) that inquiry goes awry if one inquires into a question to which one already knows (or takes oneself to know) the answer.⁵ Let us refer to the conjunction of the preceding pair of normative claims defended by Whitcomb as the *normative knowledge-aim view*. Unlike the metaphysical knowledge-aim view, the normative knowledge-aim view is silent on the question of which instances of information gathering/analysis are cases of inquiry and which are not. Instead, it purports to tell us when a particular instance of inquiry goes awry.

Moreover, being committed to the normative knowledge-aim view does not entail that one is committed to the metaphysical knowledge-aim view. For example, one may consistently hold that inquiry goes awry if it culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge (*a la* the normative knowledge-aim view) but reject the

⁴ For a defense of this sort of view, see Kelp 2014.

⁵ Whitcomb 2010: 676ff.

view that inquiry only qualifies as such if undertaken with the aim of achieving knowledge (*a la* the metaphysical knowledge-aim view). Nevertheless, the two views are consistent with each other. For example, I may consistently hold that an agent is genuinely inquiring into *Q* only if they have the aim of achieving knowledge of the answer to *Q* (*a la* the metaphysical knowledge-aim view) and also that inquiry goes awry if, as a matter of fact, it culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge or persists even after the agent has achieved knowledge (*a la* the normative knowledge-aim view). This point is worth noting since there may be a temptation to view the metaphysical knowledge-aim view as precluding the possibility of inquiring into *Q* if one already knows the answer to *Q*. However, the metaphysical knowledge-aim view imposes no such restriction. This is because the metaphysical thesis claims that an inquirer must have the *aim* of achieving knowledge and it is possible for an agent to have the aim of achieving knowledge even if they already possess knowledge. In sum, the metaphysical thesis still allows for the violation of the requirement imposed by the normative knowledge-aim view and is therefore consistent with the existence of said requirement. The upshot is that the metaphysical and normative formulations of the knowledge-aim views are independent but consistent theses.

Whitcomb motivates (1) with the example of an agent who ends inquiry with a belief that falls short of knowledge:

I pretty much always believe in late hours of the night that the grocery store is open, without checking any sort of schedule. Sometimes these beliefs are true and sometimes they are false. They never amount to knowledge; I hold them nonetheless. Something goes awry with these beliefs...Those beliefs end inquiry without knowledge...They are premature (and thus awry) just like it is premature (and thus awry) to stop eating before being nourished.(2010: 676)

By Whitcomb's lights, to stop inquiring before you know is like stopping eating before you are nourished; in both cases the activity in question has been halted before its goal has been achieved. It is important to note that Whitcomb is not claiming that once one begins inquiry into some question one is obliged to continue inquiring until knowledge is attained. After all, there will be many cases in which one would be justified in abandoning a piece of inquiry before said

inquiry is completed. One may run out of time, have more important obligations arise, or discover that the question one is inquiring into cannot or is unlikely to ever be answered. These may all constitute good grounds for abandoning a piece of inquiry. However, the key thing to note in all of these cases is that inquiry is being abandoned prior to its goal being achieved. The grocery store example is meant to illustrate that if a piece of inquiry ends with a belief that falls short of knowledge, then it has not yet achieved its goal. This is why, according to Whitcomb, something seems awry in the grocery store example: the agent treats his belief as though it were the satisfaction of a piece of inquiry despite the fact that the belief in question fails to constitute knowledge. Whitcomb concludes that “you should close inquiry with belief only if you do know.”⁶

Whitcomb motivates (2) with the example of an agent who continues to inquire into *Q* after they have acquired knowledge of the answer to *Q*:

I sometimes check my alarm clock five or more times before going to sleep. I know far before the fifth check that it is working, but still I continue to inquire. This continued inquiry goes awry. Why is that? Here’s why: continuing this inquiry is like continuing to eat after being nourished. (2010: 674)

While the grocery store example is meant to illustrate that inquiry goes awry when it culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge, the alarm clock example is meant to illustrate that inquiry goes awry if one already knows the answer to the question into which one is inquiring.

4 Objections to the knowledge-aim views

I maintain that both the metaphysical and normative knowledge-aim views are too restrictive. First, the metaphysical knowledge-aim view is unable to accommodate the possibility of someone engaging in inquiry with the aim of arriving at a belief that they recognize falls short of knowledge. Let us call a belief that the believer recognizes falls short of knowledge an *opinion*. I maintain that it is possible for

⁶ Whitcomb 2010: 680.

an agent to engage in genuine inquiry with the aim of arriving at an opinion. Consider the following case.

MODEST ECONOMIST: An economist recognizes that there is not currently sufficient information available for her to know that a heretofore untried economic policy proposal would yield the projected results. However, she carefully examines the limited information available bearing on the question with the aim of arriving at an informed opinion on the question.

As the term is ordinarily employed, the economist's act of examining the limited information available in order to arrive at an informed opinion would qualify as a genuine case of inquiry. This remains true despite the fact that the informed opinion she seeks constitutes a belief that she recognizes falls short of knowledge. Hence, our pre-theoretical conception of inquiry allows for the *possibility* of an agent inquiring about some question with the explicit aim of arriving at an informed opinion on (as opposed to knowledge of) that question.

MODEST ECONOMIST also poses a challenge to (1), the claim that inquiry goes awry if it culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge. This is because it is entirely appropriate for the modest economist to end her inquiry with the formation of an informed opinion as opposed to knowledge. Indeed, if we were to imagine that the modest economist knows that knowledge is unattainable due to the limited information available bearing on the question, it may arguably be inappropriate for her to seek to attain anything more than an informed opinion under the circumstances.

If this is right, then there must be something else going on in Whitcomb's late night grocery store example that accounts for the intuition that something is going awry. An alternative, and I believe much more natural, explanation of why it is problematic for the agent to believe that the grocery store is open without checking any sort of schedule is that the agent's belief is unjustified. On the present suggestion, the problem in the grocery store case is not that the agent's inquiry culminates in a belief that falls short of knowledge—which, as the modest economist example illustrates, is not intrinsically problematic—but rather that the agent's belief is based on insufficient evidence.

Significantly, the immediately preceding diagnosis of what is

wrong with the agent in the grocery store example has little to do with the aim of inquiry *per se*. The grocery store example is a standard case of an agent forming a belief based on insufficient evidence, and this would be true whether the agent in question aimed at justified belief, knowledge, or certainty. For example, suppose I was merely interested in forming a justified belief about when the grocery store was open and that I assumed that it was open without checking any kind of schedule. We would naturally conclude that I have no business believing that the grocery store was open given my lack of evidential support for this conclusion. This diagnosis would also apply if I were seeking knowledge or certainty about when the grocery store was open. Hence, the fact that we find the agent in the grocery store case problematic does not seem to turn on the fact that he stopped inquiring before securing knowledge since we would conceivably find the agent problematic if they were only interested in securing a justified belief. If this is right, then it seems as though Whitcomb misdiagnoses what is going awry in the grocery store example.

Let us now turn to (2), the claim that inquiry goes awry if one inquires into a question to which one already knows (or takes oneself to know) the answer. One problem with (2) is that it is unable to accommodate the appropriateness of someone engaging in inquiry with the aim of ratcheting up their knowledge to the status of complete certainty.⁷ This possibility is illustrated by the following example:

OTHER MINDS: Jeanie recognises that while she knows both (i) that there is thinking currently taking place, and (ii) that other people have experienced mental states like pain, anger, and belief; she is only completely certain (in the sense that she could not conceive of herself as being mistaken) about (i). One of her philosophy professors, who is generally reliable about such matters, informs Jeanie that there are philosophical arguments that would allow her to achieve the same complete certainty about (ii) that she currently enjoys with respect to (i). Moreover, she comes to believe it is possible to achieve said certainty based on her professor's testimony. Not satisfied with merely *knowing* that other

⁷ Palmira (2018: 13) has emphasized the need to make room for inquiry in this context.

minds exist, Jeanie desires to know this fact with complete certainty. To this end, she borrows several books from the university library on the topic of other minds in the hope that she could find an argument that would allow her to ratchet up her knowledge that other people have minds to the status of complete certainty.

As I am here using the expression, being *completely certain that P* entails that one is unable to conceive of oneself as being mistaken about the truth of **P**. For example, I am unable to conceive of my being mistaken about the fact that there is thinking currently taking place. However, some caution is required on this score: saying that one cannot conceive of oneself as mistaken about the truth of **P** is different from saying that it is impossible to imagine **P** being false. I can imagine a world in which neither I nor anyone else existed and in that world it would be false that there is currently thinking taking place. Hence, I have no difficulty imagining a world in which the proposition that there is currently thinking taking place is false. However, in order to be *mistaken* about the proposition that there is currently thinking taking place it would need to both be true that I am thinking that there is currently thinking taking place and false that I am thinking. But that would be a contradiction.

Significantly, being certain that **P**—in the sense of being unable to conceive of oneself as mistaken about **P**—is not a requirement for knowing that **P**. For example, I take myself to know that all life on earth has a common ancestor. However, I can also imagine a scenario in which scientist discover a new species of marine life with an entirely different genetic lineage to all other creatures on earth. Hence, although the theory of common descent is something I know to be true, I am still able to conceive of my being mistaken about its truth. In sum, the theory of common descent is not something I have complete certainty about, as the expression is here being employed. The claim that the agent described in *OTHER MINDS* does not have complete certainty about the existence of other minds⁸ entails that she is able to conceive of herself as being mistaken about the existence of other minds. However, she engages in library research with the aim of coming to grasp the proposition that other minds exist in

⁸ Here and henceforth, I will be using the expression “the existence of other minds” as a shorthand for the claim that *other people have experienced mental states*.

such a way that it is no longer possible for her to conceive of herself as being mistaken about its truth.

As it so happens, there are some philosophers who think that Jeanie's goal of complete certainty about the existence of other minds is attainable. For example, some have argued that mental terms—like pain, anger and belief—could only achieve meaning in a socio-linguistic context in which other language users had such mental states. P. F. Strawson endorses a view along these lines when he writes:

It is a necessary condition of one's ascribing states of consciousness, experiences, to oneself, in the way that one does, that one should also ascribe them, or be prepared to ascribe them, to others who are not oneself. (1959: 99)

According to such views, the mere fact that we can meaningfully ask if other people have experienced mental states like pain entails the existence of other people with said mental states. Whether we find such arguments persuasive (I personally have my reservations) is unimportant as far as the efficacy of my present argument is concerned. We can still conceive of Jeanie having the justified belief that she could achieve complete certainty about the existence of other minds based on the testimony of her professor who has a track record of being reliable regarding such matters. Moreover, insofar as Jeanie justifiably believes it is possible to achieve complete certainty about the existence of other minds, I submit that it is rationally permissible for her to have this as the goal of her information gathering/analysis.

Once it is granted that it is rationally permissible for Jeanie to engage in information gathering/analysis with the aim of achieving complete certainty about the existence of other minds, the final step of my argument is to insist that said information gathering/analysis is a genuine case of inquiry. On this point, I believe our ordinary linguistic practice is unequivocal. As the term is ordinarily used, Jeanie's library research would naturally and unproblematically be described as inquiry. For example, we would not view Jeanie as simply going through the motions in the manner that criminal-Morse is going through the motions when he is interviewing witnesses and taking notes at the crime scene. Jeanie sincerely wishes to achieve a level of confidence—i.e., complete certainty—that surpasses what

is necessary for knowledge and her pursuit of this goal seems sufficient to make her information gathering/analysis an instance of inquiry. Since this is not something that the knowledge-aim view makes either metaphysical or normative room for, I conclude that the knowledge-aim view should be rejected.

Whitcomb anticipates something along the lines of the above objection during his discussion of the alarm clock example. He writes:

You might object that it is a desire for reassurance or certainty...that drives my alarm-checking. But...if you asked if I knew the alarm was set, I'd respond with a sheepish "yeah I'm neurotic", not a "yeah I know but I want certainty". (2010: 675)

While the preceding analysis is plausible given the characterisation of the agent in the alarm clock case, the same could not be plausibly said of the subject, Jeanie, in *OTHER MINDS*. The contention of *OTHER MINDS* is not that every agent who inquires into a question they already take themselves to know the answer to is seeking certainty and that all cases of inquiring past the point of knowledge is therefore appropriate. Hence, we need not take issue with Whitcomb's observation that something is going awry with the agent in the alarm clock example. The point of *OTHER MINDS* is that inquiring into a question to which one takes oneself to know the answer in order to achieve complete certainty is not only possible, but may also be rationally permissible.

It may be objected that Jeanie is not actually inquiring into the question: "have other people experienced mental states?" but rather the related question "is it possible to be completely certain that other people have experienced mental states?" Fortunately, I believe there is a fairly straightforward test available for ascertaining what question Jeanie is inquiring into; namely, by asking what it would take for the desire driving Jeanie's inquiry to be satisfied. In *OTHER MINDS*, it is stated that Jeanie already believes that it is possible to be completely certain that other minds exist. And yet, this is not enough to satisfy the desire driving her inquiry; she still feels motivated to go to the library and check out books on the topic. This indicates that Jeanie is not inquiring into whether it is possible to be completely certain that other minds exist. Furthermore, we may stipulate that achieving complete certainty about the existence of other minds is

both necessary and sufficient for the desire driving Jeanie's inquiry to be satisfied. With this stipulation in place, the suggestion that Jeanie is aiming at something other than complete certainty about the existence of other minds seems unmotivated.

Moreover, the burden of proof rests on the shoulders of those who wish to deny that Jeanie has complete certainty as her aim to explain why this is a metaphysical or psychological impossibility. For good or for ill, human beings have displayed a capacity to have a wide range of aims, from the pedestrian to the improbable. Absent some positive account of why the achievement of complete certainty about something one took oneself to know is not among the set of possible aims a human being could have, I submit that it is entirely reasonable to take the description of Jeanie in *OTHER MINDS* at face value.

A second objection to (2) is that it is unable to accommodate the appropriateness of an agent inquiring about something she knows but that is temporarily inaccessible due to some kind of cognitive malfunction. Consider the following example:

TEST TAKER: Lisa is taking an open book history of science exam, but has thus far not needed to consult her textbook or notes. Just as she is about to answer a fill-in-the-blanks question asking what year Marie Curie was born (a question for which she both knows and takes herself to know the answer), the invigilator announces that there is only five minutes left. The panic sparked by the invigilator's announcement causes Lisa's mind to suddenly go blank. She knows that if she had enough time to calm her nerves, the answer would come back to her. But time is not a luxury she currently has. Instead of waiting for her eventual recollection, she judges that it would be best to inquire anew and spends the next five minutes frantically leafing through the textbook. Unfortunately, time runs out before she could find the answer. Predictably, as soon as Lisa exits the examination hall, with the feeling of panic now gone, she easily recalls that Marie Curie was born in 1867.

In the above example, Lisa is displaying a phenomenon that psychologists refer to as "choking". This is where the pressure caused by something like a high-stakes exam undermines the proper functioning of someone's working memory, rendering known information

temporarily inaccessible.⁹ I take the following claims to be true about TEST TAKER. First, Lisa's act of searching the textbook for the correct answer constitutes a genuine case of inquiry, as the term is ordinarily used. Lisa is not like criminal-Morse who is merely going through the motions. Second, insofar as Lisa was able to recall (without any additional prompting) that Marie Curie was born in 1867 upon exiting the examination hall, she knew all along when Marie Curie was born. After all, the date of birth of a historical figure is an external world fact, and one cannot gain new knowledge of an external world fact via reflection alone. Hence, if Lisa knew that Marie Curie was born in 1867 when she was standing outside the examination room, then this is not a piece of new knowledge. It follows that she already knew when Marie Curie was born. Lisa's problem is that she was unable to access the knowledge she already possessed. Third, Lisa takes herself to know when Marie Curie was born. However, she recognises that in her panic-stricken state, it would take some time for her to call the relevant information to mind. She decides to inquire anew, not because she thinks she would be unable to eventually recall the answer unaided, but because she thinks the process of doing so would take too long given the time constraint of the exam. The lesson of TEST TAKER is that inquiry may serve as a happy alternative to waiting around until we recall some known, but temporarily inaccessible, piece of information.¹⁰

To recap, I claim that the metaphysical knowledge-aim view should be rejected because it is unable to accommodate cases like MODEST ECONOMIST—instances in which an agent recognizes that knowledge is unavailable but engages in inquiry in order to arrive at an informed opinion. I have also argued that Whitcomb's normative knowledge-aim view should be rejected because it is unable to preserve the rational appropriateness of cases like OTHER MINDS—instances in which an agent engages in inquiry in order to achieve a level of confidence beyond what is strictly necessary for knowledge—and TEST TAKER—instances in which time is of the essence and inquiring anew would be potentially faster than waiting for some

⁹ For a discussion of “choking” and how to combat it, see: Ramirez and Beilock 2011.

¹⁰ See and cf. Archer 2018: 601ff.

known piece of information to come to mind unaided.

5 The Belief-Aim View

In the preceding section, I argued that the knowledge-aim view, in both its metaphysical and normative formulations, is too restrictive. It may be thought that the problem with the knowledge-aim view is that it sets the bar for the aim of inquiry too high. If the present diagnosis of what is going wrong with the knowledge-aim view is correct, then perhaps we can avoid its shortcomings by equating the aim of inquiry with a (justified) belief. Call this *the belief-aim view*.¹¹

Like the knowledge-aim view, the belief-aim view may take on metaphysical or normative guises. In its metaphysical guise, the belief-aim view offers a criterion for distinguishing between ersatz and genuine cases of inquiry. On this suggestion, ordinary-Morse qualifies as genuinely inquiring into Q because he has the aim of arriving at a (justified) belief in the answer to Q , while criminal-Morse does not qualify as genuinely inquiring because he lacks this aim. In sum, according to the metaphysical belief-aim view, a piece of information gathering or analysis qualifies as an instance of inquiry only if the putative inquirer has the aim of arriving at a (justified) belief that P^Q , were P^Q a complete answer to Q .

Unfortunately, the metaphysical belief-aim view also turns out to be too restrictive. Specifically, it is unable to accommodate cases of inquiry in which the agent already has a justified belief that P^Q . Consider the following case:

EXTRATERRESTRIAL ENTHUSIAST: Myles believes that there is extraterrestrial life based on the following considerations: the five elements necessary for life also happen to be the most common in the universe, the vastness of the universe offers numerous opportunities for life to evolve, and earth is unexceptional when compared to the billions of other earth-like planets. However, while Myles takes these considerations to be enough to make his belief justified, he does not take it to be enough to ground knowledge. In order to have knowledge that there is extraterrestrial

¹¹ For a discussion of this sort of view, see Peirce 1877 and Lynch 2009.

life, Myles believes he would either need to see direct evidence of extraterrestrial life (like fossils or actual life forms) or receive reliable testimony from someone who has observed such direct evidence. Since Myles has not received any reliable testimony on this point, when he is offered the opportunity to join a scientific expedition in search of direct evidence of extraterrestrial life, he jumps at the opportunity to acquire the kind of evidence that would elevate his (justified) belief to the status of knowledge.

While Myles believes he has ample reason to believe there is extraterrestrial life, he does not think the reasons he currently possesses is sufficient to secure him with knowledge. Most of us, at some point in our lives, have found ourselves saddled with a belief that we recognise falls short of knowledge. For example, we can imagine someone who is unable to shake the belief that they are adopted, despite their parents' denials. This may be due to factors like their striking lack of resemblance to their parents, the testimony of a long-time and trusted family friend who claims to have met the person's birth parents, and the repeated refusal of their parents to show them their birth certificate. We can imagine the individual acknowledging, when pressed, that they do not know for sure that they're adopted, absent a DNA test or some similar confirmation. In sum, while they take the considerations on which their belief is based to be enough to justify their belief, they don't think they are sufficient to secure them with knowledge. It seems perfectly intelligible that someone in this position may wish to elevate their belief to the status of knowledge and may seek out the evidence they take to be necessary for doing so. Similarly, Myles may not be satisfied with merely believing that extraterrestrial life exists, even if he thinks said belief is justified based on the considerations adumbrated in the example. He may want to achieve the epistemically superior status of knowledge that there is extraterrestrial life and this desire may motivate him to seek out the kind of direct evidence he deems necessary for said knowledge. Hence, contra the metaphysical belief-aim view, it seems *possible* for an agent to inquire into Q even if they already (justifiably) believe P^Q .

Even if one rejected the metaphysical belief-aim view, one may still endorse the normative claim that one *should* not inquire into Q if one already believes P^Q . This normative thesis has been defended by

Friedman, who endorse the following principle:

Don't Believe and Inquire (DBI). One ought not inquire into/have an interrogative attitude towards Q at t and believe \mathbf{P}^Q at t .¹²

One implication of DBI is that it would be impermissible to engage in inquiry in order to ratchet up one's (justified) belief to the status of knowledge. For example, if I had the (justified) belief that there is extraterrestrial life, but did not take myself to have knowledge since I lacked what I took to be the requisite empirical evidence, then it would not be permissible for me to inquire further for the purpose of securing said knowledge. I take this to be an unacceptable and needless restriction on when it is permissible to engage in inquiry.

To sum up, I maintain that the metaphysical belief-aim view should be rejected on the grounds that it cannot accommodate cases of inquiry in which the inquirer aims to ratchet up their justified belief to the status of knowledge. I take EXTRATERRESTRIAL ENTHUSIAST to illustrate that it is *possible* to inquire into Q even if one already (justifiably) believes \mathbf{P}^Q . Moreover, I maintain that normative thesis embodied in Friedman's DBI principle should be rejected because it fails to accommodate the *permissibility* of inquiring in order to ratchet up one's (justified) belief to the status of knowledge. I conclude that both the metaphysical belief-aim view and Friedman's normative DBI principle should be abandoned.

6 The epistemic-improvement view

My diagnosis of why both knowledge and (justified) believing are unsatisfactory candidates for the constitutive aim of inquiry is that they both reduce inquiry's aim to a single attitude or state. This imposes a significant restriction on what sorts of investigative activities may count as inquiry that departs from our everyday intuitions about when an agent is inquiring. If we hold that knowledge is the constitutive aim of inquiry (*a la* the metaphysical knowledge-aim view), we will be unable to accommodate the possibility of an agent inquiring in order to arrive at an informed opinion. If we hold that a belief

¹² Friedman 2019: 303.

is the constitutive aim of inquiry (*a la* the metaphysical belief-aim view), we will be unable to accommodate the possibility of an agent inquiring in order to ratchet up their belief to the status of knowledge.

We may avoid the aforementioned unattractive consequences by dispensing with the assumption that inquiry aims solely at knowledge or belief and instead conceive of inquiry as having the aim of improving an agent's epistemic standing with respect to some question. Specifically, I endorse the following necessary and sufficient condition for a piece of information gathering/analysis to qualify as inquiring into some question, *Q*:

The Epistemic-Improvement View. One is inquiring into some question, *Q*, only if one is gathering/analysing information that one (tentatively) takes to be relevant to answering *Q* with the aim of improving one's epistemic standing with respect to *Q*.

I hold that one has improved one's epistemic standing with respect to some question, *Q*, just in case one has transitioned from an inferior to a superior grasp of the answer to *Q*. This includes the transition from having no opinion about what the answer to *Q* is to justifiably believing a certain answer to *Q*, the transition from justifiably believing some answer to *Q* to knowing the answer to *Q*, and the transition from knowing the answer to *Q* to being completely certain about the answer to *Q*. I do not claim that the preceding list of transitions is exhaustive vis-à-vis examples of epistemic improvement. However, I believe the list, while incomplete, is suggestive enough to provide the reader with a fair idea of the sorts of transitions I have in mind.¹³ I maintain that information gathering/analysis that is undertaken in order to facilitate any of the preceding transitions qualifies as an instance of inquiry. According to the present proposal, having the aim of improving one's epistemic standing means that one has the

¹³ The present framework generates a number of interesting questions: what is the upper limit to potential goals of inquiry? Should understanding be included as a goal of inquiry, distinct from knowledge? Or, alternatively, is understanding best conceived of as knowledge of the connections between various known items and therefore reducible to knowledge? While these questions fall outside the scope of the present investigation, I think they represent one of many strands of further investigation to which the present account lends itself.

aim of improving one's grasp of the answer to *Q* in at least one of a variety of ways.

The epistemic-improvement view shares some similarities with the "naïve account of inquiry" defended by Nicholas Smith (2020), who claims that I inquire "in order to figure out the answer to my question" (p. 183). Both Smith's naïve account and the epistemic-improvement view are flexible in terms of which mental states may potentially serve as the endpoint of inquiry. Smith puts the point as follows:

What constitutes the inquirer's having an answer to their question? An inquirer has answered their question when they have the appropriate mental state, directed in the appropriate way, at the answer to their question. Plausible candidates include belief, knowledge, or understanding. In other words, an inquirer has answered their question when they believe/know/understand the answer to their question. I won't take a stand here on which mental state is the required one, because it seems to me that different questions may require different things of the inquirer with respect to the mental state that constitutes a successful termination of inquiry. (2020: 183)

Smith's expressed rationale for remaining open to different mental states being the termination-point of inquiry is that which mental state qualifies as answering a question may vary from question to question. However, what all cases of inquiry have in common, according to Smith, is that the inquirer aims to "figure out" the answer to a question. By contrast, the epistemic-improvement view holds that the aim of inquiry is to improve one's grasp of the answer to a question, which includes but is not limited to figuring out the answer to a question. The key difference between the two views is that the epistemic-improvement view allows for the possibility of inquiring into *Q* even if one takes oneself to have already "figured out" the answer to *Q*. For example, in both *OTHER MINDS* and *EXTRATERRESTRIAL ENTHUSIAST*, the agents take themselves to already have the answer to the questions they are inquiring into. Jeanie takes herself to know that other minds exist and inquires with the aim of achieving complete certainty. Myles believes that extraterrestrial life exists and inquires with the aim of transitioning from mere justified belief to knowledge. Given that neither Jeanie nor Myles are trying to "figure

out” the answer to a question, they would not qualify as genuinely inquiring on Smith’s account. In sum, I hold that Smith’s naïve account differs from and is inferior to the epistemic-improvement view because it is unable to accommodate the possibility of someone inquiring in order to ratchet up their belief to the status of knowledge or ratchet up their knowledge to the status of complete certainty.

Importantly, one does not only count as having inquired if one has achieved the aforementioned aim. Unsuccessful inquiry is still inquiry. This means that one’s information gathering/analysis need not actually improve one’s grasp of the answer to *Q* in some way. For example, it may turn out that what one takes to be the answer to *Q*, upon the completion of one’s information gathering/analysis, is far from correct. Even so, if one can be accurately described as having the aim of improving one’s grasp of the answer to *Q*, then (according to the account presently on offer) this is enough for one’s information gathering/analysis to qualify as an instance of inquiring into *Q*.

It is crucial that the information being gathered/analysed be such that, from one’s perspective, it may be potentially relevant to answering *Q*. This qualification is meant to exclude cases in which an agent is gathering/analysing information with the ultimate aim of improving her epistemic standing with respect to *Q*, but does not take the information being gathered/analysed to be relevant to answering *Q*. For example, we can imagine a researcher, Usha, who arrives at her laboratory early in the morning to continue her investigation into *Q*. However, without the improved concentration that caffeine provides, she thinks she has little hope of making progress in her investigation. She walks over to the coffee machine and begins reading the instructions on how to make herself a cup of coffee. Usha can plausibly be described as reading the instructions with the ultimate aim of improving her epistemic standing with respect to *Q*. However, her reading the instructions on the coffee machine cannot be plausibly described as an instance of inquiring into *Q*.¹⁴ One diagnosis of why this is so is that Usha does not view the instructions on the coffee machine as potentially relevant to answering *Q*. If she did—e.g., if *Q* had to do with how coffee machines function—then

¹⁴ I would like to thank an anonymous journal referee of an earlier version of this paper for drawing my attention to the present sort of case.

her reading the instructions with the aim of improving her epistemic standing with respect to Q would in fact be an instance of inquiring into Q . Hence, the stipulation that the putative inquirer view the information being gathered/analysed as potentially relevant to answering Q is meant to exclude cases like that of Usha; one's in which an agent engages in information gathering/analysis with the ultimate aim of answering Q , but in which the agent does not take the information being gathered/analysed to be potentially relevant to answering Q .¹⁵

It is worth noting that the preceding characterisation of the epistemic-improvement view only requires that the agent view the information being gathered/analysed as *potentially* relevant to answering Q . This is important because there will be occasions on which an agent's grasp of Q is so precursory that she cannot be sure whether or not the information being gathered/analysed is in fact relevant to answering Q . For example, suppose that an epidemiologist, Chris, is tasked with finding a potential treatment for a heretofore unencountered strain of coronavirus. Chris may be described as attempting to answer the following question:

(Q2): "what is a successful treatment for the novel coronavirus?"

Chris begins his attempt to answer (Q2) by gathering information relating to the successful treatment of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) which he hopes, but is not sure, may be relevant to uncovering a successful treatment for the novel coronavirus. The fact that Chris is unsure that the information he is gathering is in fact

¹⁵ It is important to distinguish between the claim that a piece of information is relevant to inquiry only if the inquirer views it as potentially relevant to answering Q and the claim that all inquiry aims at figuring out the answer to Q . I hold that the only information that can feature in my attempt to ratchet up my justified belief to the status of knowledge or my knowledge to status of complete certainty is information that is relevant to answering Q . Hence, even if an agent takes themselves to have already figured out the answer to Q , the attempt to improve their epistemic standing with respect to Q will demand that they limit themselves to information that they take to be potentially relevant to answering Q . Hence, there is no conflict between my rejection of Smith's claim that all inquiry aims to figure out the answer to a question and my claim that only information that an inquirer takes to be potentially relevant to answering Q can feature in inquiry into Q .

relevant to answering (Q2) should not disqualify his information-gathering from constituting genuine inquiry into (Q2). This is an important allowance to make since there will be many instances in which at the very outset of inquiry into a question, we may not know enough to know whether or not the information being gathered/analysed is in fact relevant to answering the question. However, we would still need such initial steps in the inquiring process to qualify as genuine inquiry. If this is right, then inquiry into *Q* should not require that one be sure that the information being gathered/analysed is in fact relevant to answering *Q*. Merely holding that it *might be* should be enough.

There are no doubt further refinements and precisifications that can be made to the analysis of the aim of inquiry offered in this paper. However, I hope to have convinced the reader that the epistemic-improvement view is a more promising account than the knowledge-aim and belief-aim views, and therefore worthy of further exploration. If I have succeeded on this score, then I would deem the above argumentation a success.

7 Conclusion

The account of inquiry offered in this paper eschews the identification of its constitutive aim with some single attitude or cognitive state and instead identifies inquiry's aim with facilitating the transition from one (epistemically inferior) state to another (epistemically superior) state. I take this to be the central insight of the epistemic-improvement view. This shift in focus vis-à-vis the constitutive aim of inquiry generates a shift in our conception of inquiry's normative profile away from that suggested by Whitcomb and Friedman. Instead of seeing the appropriateness of inquiry as tied to the achievement and/or possession of a specific attitude or state—i.e., knowledge or (justified) belief—the question of whether inquiry is appropriate gets framed in terms of whether it is fitting to seek a particular form of epistemic improvement in a given context.

The present account also has implications for our conception of the success-conditions of inquiry. The question of when inquiry is successful is distinct from the question of when it is appropriate. For example, suppose that I set out to answer the question: what is an

effective treatment for the novel coronavirus? Suppose further that my investigation is yet to yield an answer to this question. It may both be true that my inquiry is unsuccessful and that it is nevertheless appropriate for me to undertake the inquiry in question. Indeed, even if my inquiry ultimately fails to yield an answer to the question at hand (and therefore ultimately prove unsuccessful), it may still have been appropriate for me to undertake said inquiry. Appropriateness has to do with whether I should embark upon or continue a piece of inquiry. Success has to do with whether my inquiry has achieved its goal.

Both Whitcomb and Friedman appear to be primarily concerned with when inquiry is appropriate or goes awry. However, my discussion of their views may also have potential implications for the question of when a given inquiry is successful. For example, it may be held that inquiry is successful only if the inquirer achieves knowledge. On this view, the inquiry of the agent described in *MODEST ECONOMIST* would be deemed unsuccessful. However, there is an alternative conclusion available. Instead of holding that there is a single goal that determines whether or not an instance of inquiry is successful, one may hold that the success-conditions of a piece of inquiry will depend on the context, motivations, and/or goals of the inquiring agent. This is a conception of inquiry's success-conditions that the epistemic-improvement view makes room for. On the present proposal, given that the inquiry of the modest economist was undertaken in a context in which knowledge was known or justifiably believed to be unlikely or unattainable, and given that the economist only has the goal of arriving at an informed opinion, her inquiry may be seen as a success when an informed opinion is achieved. Likewise, given that the inquiry of the agent described in *OTHER MINDS*, Jeanie, was undertaken in a context in which it was believed that complete certainty was attainable, and given that Jeanie has the goal of achieving complete certainty, the mere fact that she already has knowledge that other people have minds is not enough for her inquiry to count as successful. In sum, whether or not the inquiry of a particular agent qualifies as successful will depend, *inter alia*, on the motivations and goals of the inquirer.

One diagnosis of why we may be attracted to the claim that there is a single state—like knowledge or (justified) belief—that

constitutes the success-condition of inquiry is that we are inclined to view inquiry's success-conditions as analogous to the correctness-conditions of an attitude. For example, it is widely held that a belief is correct just in case the proposition believed is true. This remains the case irrespective of the context in which the belief was formed or the believer's motivations or goals for adopting the belief in question. However, since inquiry is an activity rather than an attitude, conceiving of the success-conditions of inquiry as being analogous to the correctness-conditions of belief may be too hasty. In the case of many activities, whether or not they are deemed successful will depend on the goals of the actor and how, when, and/or why the activity is undertaken. What a combined analysis of the *MODEST ECONOMIST* and *OTHER MINDS* cases suggest is that inquiry may be one such activity.

The immediately preceding points are meant to be suggestive rather than decisive. An in-depth analysis of the success-conditions of inquiry falls outside the scope of the present investigation. My aim in sketching the above competing conceptions of the success-conditions of inquiry is to highlight just one potential area of further exploration that serious consideration of the epistemic-improvement view may illuminate. Hence, while the epistemic-improvement view has been offered as a metaphysical thesis about which instances of information gathering/analysis qualify as genuine inquiry, it may also deepen our understanding of when inquiry is both appropriate and successful.¹⁶

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