

Inquiry and Epistemic Rationality

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It is an orthodox in epistemology that only those things that affect the truth conduciveness of a belief are relevant to the epistemic rationality of the belief. I criticize this orthodox. In this paper, I claim that the epistemic worth of a subject affects the epistemic rationality of inquiries and resulting beliefs. More specifically, I argue that it is epistemically irrational to conduct an inquiry when it is about something unworthy of knowing, and that the epistemic irrationality of an inquiry in this sense makes the resulting beliefs epistemically irrational. After presenting my argument, I defend it from various possible criticisms. Then I explicate the implications of my argument that opposes the core assumptions of contemporary epistemology.

Keywords : Inquiry, Rationality, Epistemic Value, Truth

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A belief is often formed as a result of an inquiry. An agent gets interested in a certain topic, chooses a question (or questions) to ask, investigates a question by collecting evidence, and forms a belief accordingly. An epistemic issue could arise concerning each stage of an inquiry. However, when epistemologists discuss epistemic rationality, they usually focus on the last stage; they ask how to update beliefs (or the degree of beliefs) according to the evidence. The questions concerning previous stages of an inquiry—whether a given topic is worth investigating, what motivates an agent to be interested in the topic, how much time the inquiry takes, and how adequately the inquirer collects evidence—are regarded irrelevant to epistemic rationality.¹⁾

Underlying this inhospitable treatment of inquiries in an investigation of epistemic rationality are two widely shared conceptions of epistemic rationality. First is the truth-related conception of the standard for epistemic rationality, according to which *only* those things that affect the truth conduciveness of a belief are relevant to the epistemic rationality of the belief. The truth-related view is so widely shared that it can be called orthodoxy in epistemology. Second is the synchronic conception of epistemic rationality, which regards a belief's epistemic rationality as a function of how things are now, for example, how well the belief is supported by the current evidence. These two conceptions together narrow the scope of epistemic rationality quite considerably. As a result, most considerations concerning an inquiry are regarded irrelevant to the epistemic rationality of beliefs.

I believe that this myopic view about epistemic rationality must be corrected. In this paper, I argue that there is a robust sense of epistemic rationality that applies to inquiries, and that, when an inquiry is epistemically irrational in this sense, that irrationality transmits itself to any resulting beliefs. More specifically, I will argue that it is epistemically irrational to conduct an inquiry when it is about something unworthy of knowing, and that the epistemic irrationality of an inquiry in this sense makes the

1) This is not to say that epistemologists have not been interested in these questions. For example, Harman has been interested in diverse issues concerning inquiries. However, he does not connect these issues with the epistemic rationality of beliefs. Cf.: Harman (1986).

resulting beliefs epistemically irrational. Here is how I will proceed. In section I, I present my argument. In sections II and III, I address objections and reply to them. In section IV, I summarize the significance and implications of my argument.

Here is my argument:

Premise 1: Different pieces of knowledge can have different degrees of epistemic worth.

What I mean by this is that some pieces of knowledge are more worthy of having than others. For example, under normal circumstances, knowledge about the origin of the universe is worthier of having than knowledge about the number of molecules that constitute the computer I am working on. These two pieces of knowledge may not have any practical advantage whatsoever, and would thus be identical in their practical worth. Still, we cannot deny that one receives higher esteem than the other and such differential evaluations are based on an *epistemic* point of view. One interesting issue surrounding the epistemic worth of knowledge is whether it is intrinsically epistemic or it is derivative from non-epistemic values such as practical values and moral values. Whichever position one may take on this issue, one cannot deny that different pieces of knowledge have different degrees of epistemic worth. This is all that is needed for my argument, and thus I will remain neutral in a potential controversy over the origin of epistemic worth of knowledge.

Premise 2: An inquiry I is epistemically rational for S just in case there is no alternative inquiry I' such that I' is available to S under given circumstances, and I' is about a subject more worthy of knowing than I, (and I' requires no more time and energy to arrive at knowledge than I).²⁾

Premise 2 is derived when the structure of practical rationality is incorporated into an epistemic realm. Consider the structure of practical rationality. The most influential theory of practical rationality has been the expected utility theory.³⁾ According to this theory, an action is rational from a practical point of view just in case the action satisfies desires better (thus has more utilities) than alternative actions available under given circumstances. To put it differently, an action is rational from a practical point of view just in case the action has higher (expected) practical utilities than alternative actions available under given circumstances. The flip side of the coin is that an action is not practically rational just in case there is an alternative action available under given circumstances that has higher (expected) practical utilities. This entails that an action is not practically rational if there is an alternative action available under given circumstances that has higher (expected) practical utilities.

Now put 'inquiry' in place of 'action' and 'epistemic' in place of 'practical'. We have the following: An inquiry is rational from an epistemic point of view just in case the inquiry has higher epistemic utilities than alternative inquiries available under given circumstances. Mirroring the position from the previous paragraph, it follows that an inquiry is not rational from an epistemic point of view if there is an alternative inquiry available under given circumstances that has higher epistemic utilities. If one is put off by the use of the word 'utilities' in the epistemic domain, one can use 'worth' instead. The result is premise 2.

Premise 3: When S's belief that p is a result of an inquiry I, the belief that p is epistemically rational for S only if the inquiry I is epistemically rational for S.

2) I added the condition concerning the cost of an inquiry for those who think that even though an alternative inquiry I' is available, undertaking I could still be epistemically rational if the cost of undertaking I' is much higher than that of undertaking I. However, I put the condition in parentheses because connecting epistemic rationality with such a pragmatic consideration is controversial.

3) For the pioneering views of the expected utility theory, see Neumann and Morgenstern 1944 and Savage 1954.

Contraposed, this premise is equivalent to

Premise 3': When S's belief that p is a result of an inquiry I, if the inquiry I is epistemically irrational for S, then beliefs resulting from the inquiry are epistemically irrational for S.

An inquiry is a process of raising a question about a certain subject and arriving at a belief as an answer to the question. Therefore, that an inquiry is epistemically rational means that it is epistemically rational to raise a question on the given subject and try to answer the question. In the same sense, an inquiry's being irrational means that it is irrational to raise a question about a certain subject and to try to answer the question. This means in turn that it is epistemically irrational for S to reach a conclusion on the given question one way or another. That is, if S arrives at the belief as a result of an epistemically irrational inquiry, the belief that p is epistemically irrational.

We can understand the intuitive appeal of the above premise in terms of an epistemic duty concerning the continuation or discontinuation of an inquiry. Here an inquiry is being regarded as epistemically irrational because there is an alternative inquiry available to an agent that produces a better epistemic result. Notice that an inquiry is a time-consuming process. Therefore, saying that an inquiry is epistemically irrational in this sense amounts to saying that you ought not to get involved in such a time-consuming process because there is an alternative and potentially more productive inquiry. This entails that *ceteris paribus* you ought to discontinue the inquiry and switch to the alternative inquiry with higher expected epistemic worth. This in turn entails that it is epistemically irrational to continue such an inquiry. Now it goes without saying that it is epistemically irrational to pursue the inquiry to the point of forming a doxastic attitude consequently.

Also notice that the property of being worthy of knowing, argued by premise 2 to be a critical feature for the epistemic rationality of an inquiry, transmits itself from an

inquiry to its resulting beliefs. By following the path of an inquiry about a subject less worthy of knowing you end up having a belief with less epistemic worth, where you should have followed another path of inquiry about another subject more worthy of knowing and thus formed a different belief with more epistemic worth. In other words, there is a sense of epistemic duty which is based on the comparative evaluations of the epistemic worth of subjects and it transmits itself from an inquiry to its resulting beliefs. Moreover, as the argument for Premise 2 shows, this sense of epistemic duty corresponds to epistemic rationality in the case of inquiries. There is no reason to claim anything different about beliefs. It seems just inconsistent to say of an inquiry, but not of a belief, that it is epistemically irrational because it concerns a subject less worthy of knowing. Premise 3 and 3' are thus unavoidable.

Conclusion: (Where belief p is a result of an inquiry I),

If there is an alternative inquiry I' such that I' is available to S under given circumstances and I' is about a subject more worthy of knowing than the subject of I (and I' requires no more time and energy to arrive at knowledge than I), then the belief that p is not epistemically rational for S.

Let us consider an example that illuminates how my argument works. This will help understand my view better and help make subsequent discussions more focused by giving us something to draw on. Here is an example.

Michael is a prominent cosmologist and he has been doing research on the formation of the universe. He constructed a hypothesis that would be ground-breaking if confirmed. Knowing that he can confirm his hypothesis decisively by observing a planet's activity that will soon happen, he sets up all the equipments in an

appropriate way. Realizing that the expected occurrence of the event is a few hours away, he decides to take a fifteen minute walk on the beach. In the middle of the walk, he finds a cup filled with sand and becomes curious about how many grains of sand are in the cup. He starts counting the grains. Unfortunately, he becomes obsessed with counting. He counts arduously and meticulously for 5 hours and as a result he comes to believe that the cup contains 126,357 grains. However, by the time he finishes counting, the predicted cosmological event has already occurred and Michael has missed a precious opportunity to discover a ground-breaking truth concerning the formation of the universe.

There is a piece of knowledge about the formation of the universe that would have been acquired if Michael had stayed in his laboratory. Evaluating *from an epistemic point of view*, the knowledge about the cosmological formation is worthier of having, and thus has a higher epistemic worth than knowledge about the number of sand grains. This is what Premise 1 says. When asked in this case which knowledge is to be pursued if attaining it requires the same amount of time, energy, and other associated costs, we don't hesitate to say that it is the knowledge about the formation of the universe. In other words, Michael conducted an inquiry when another inquiry was available to him which would have resulted in knowledge of higher epistemic worth. There is a clear sense of epistemic 'ought' such that Michael ought to conduct an inquiry with higher expected epistemic worth. Premise 2 acknowledges that this is the sense of epistemic rationality which mirrors the logical structure of practical rationality. Thus, by premise 2, Michael's inquiry on the number of sand grains is epistemically irrational because there was an alternative inquiry with higher expected epistemic worth which he ought to have conducted. Now premise 3 transmits the epistemic irrationality of an inquiry to the beliefs that result from it. The point of premise 3 is that if an inquiry is epistemically irrational because it is about a subject less worthy of knowing, then a belief that results from such an inquiry is epistemically irrational for the same reason. Then, it follows that Michael's belief about the number of sand

grains is epistemically irrational because it results from an epistemically irrational inquiry.

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(Abstract)

탐구와 인식적 합리성

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인식적 합리성은 전적으로 진리 연관성의 문제라는 것이 인식론의 정설이다. 이 글은 이런 정설을 비판하여, 주제의 인식적 가치가 탐구 및 믿음의 인식적 합리성에 영향을 미친다고 주장한다. 구체적으로, 이 글은 한 탐구가 알 가치가 없는 주제와 관련될 때 인식적으로 불합리하다고 주장하며, 그 탐구의 결과로 나타나는 믿음도 인식적으로 불합리하다고 주장한다.

주제어 : 탐구, 합리성, 인식적 가치, 진리