

# *Navigating Inquiry*

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Abstract: According to Falbo (2021), inquiry aims not at specific epistemic improvement (such as only knowledge or only justified belief) but at epistemic improvement in general. Inquiring minds want to end up in a better epistemic position with respect to their question, having undergone their inquiry. In this paper we examine what consequences this epistemic improvement view of inquiry has for how we conduct inquiry; how we navigate choices in inquiry. Having briefly motivated the epistemic improvement view of inquiry, we turn to examining some implications of this view of inquiry. In particular, if inquiry aims at epistemic improvement, then how we should go about inquiring will differ depending upon both *which* epistemic improvement we are after as well as *whose* epistemic improvement we are after.

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Inquiry is a goal-directed activity, but at which goal is inquiry directed? This question is central to recent debates concerning inquiry. One promising proposal, advanced by Falbo (2021), is that inquiry aims at epistemic improvement. Inquiring minds want to end up in a better epistemic position with respect to their question, having undergone their inquiry. After briefly motivating this epistemic improvement view of inquiry, we turn to examining some implications that it has for how we make choices about how to conduct our inquiries. In particular, if inquiry is about epistemic improvement, then how we should go about inquiring will depend upon both *which* epistemic improvement we are after as well as *whose* epistemic improvement we are after. In brief, the epistemic improvement view has implications for how we navigate inquiry.

In section one we motivate the epistemic improvement view by noting some challenges faced by its primary rival, the knowledge norm, and showing how the epistemic improvement view avoids these challenges. In section two we examine how different epistemic ends are better achieved by either conducting one's own inquiry or in outsourcing inquiry. As a result, whether one should think for themselves or defer to another, will depend upon which epistemic improvement they are after. In section three we note that when it comes to group inquiry, the epistemic improvements for the group do not always coincide with epistemic improvements for the individuals that comprise the group. As a result, how an inquiry should be conducted will depend upon whether it is epistemic improvement for the group, or for the individual, that is motivating the inquiry. In section four we wrap-up and look to where to go from here.

### 1. Norms of Inquiry

“Inquiring minds want to know.” This slogan captures a prevalent view amongst epistemologists regarding the aim of inquiry. When you inquire, you set out to answer a question, and you answer a question by coming to know the answer. Put differently, rational inquiry into a question

aims at coming to know the answer to that question. Such a view has much to recommend it. First, it can explain the infelicity of statements like the following<sup>1</sup>:

I know that Felix lives in Jacksonville, but where does Felix live?  
I know what the capitol of Canada is, but I wonder what is it?  
I'm curious as to who won the hockey game last night, but I do know.

Something is amiss with utterances such as these, and the knowledge norm offers a plausible explanation. In each case the subject proclaims to have knowledge of some matter, yet seeks to inquire further into that very matter. If the goal of inquiry is to gain knowledge of the answer, further inquiry in such circumstances is fruitless and unnecessary if not irrational.

Second, the knowledge norm can explain what is problematic about obsessive re-checking. Something has gone wrong when someone checks to see if the stove is off for the fifth time in the last several minutes. A plausible diagnosis is that the subject's prior knowledge of the answer, from an earlier check, is what explains why such behavior is problematic.<sup>2</sup>

The knowledge norm is not without its detractors. Here we'll highlight just two challenges that have been levied against the knowledge norm. First, the knowledge norm can't explain why some double-checking is rational, even when the subject in question already has knowledge. Jessica Brown (2008) has taken on the knowledge norm of action by thinking about a surgeon who is about to perform an operation. While the surgeon knows that it is the left kidney that must be removed, it is not irrational for them to double-check one last time before performing the operation. In fact, we would rightly criticize a surgeon for not double-checking, even while acknowledging that they already possess this knowledge.

A second challenge for the knowledge norm comes from thinking about inquiry where one is aware that they will not come to know the answer to their question. According to the knowledge norm, such inquiry would be confused if not problematic, but there appear to be many cases where such inquiry seems perfectly appropriate.<sup>3</sup> Take philosophical inquiry. Inquiring into the nature of free will, the morality of eating meat, or what differentiates science from pseudo-science is appropriate and rational inquiry. These are great questions to investigate. They are great questions to investigate even if we know from the outset that our investigation will not end with us coming to know the answers to these questions. If we are aware of all of those who have already thought about these questions, and that the answers to them remain contentious, it is hard to see how we would come to get the correct answer, never mind come to *know* it. Given the extensive disagreement surrounding these questions, plausible views about the epistemic significance of disagreement imply that we definitely will not come to know the answers.

Ariana Falbo (2021) uses these challenges to the knowledge norm to motivate a competitor view of the aim of inquiry. According to Falbo, inquiry aims not merely at knowledge but at epistemic improvement more generally; inquiring minds want to improve. Epistemic improvement can

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<sup>1</sup> See Whitcomb (2010),

<sup>2</sup> See Whitcomb (2010) for more on this point. For additional motivation for the knowledge norm based on cases, see Kelp (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Falbo (2022).

takes many forms. We can become more certain of the answer, gain justification for believing the answer, gain knowledge of the answer, come to understand the answer, and so forth. For instance, if you have no belief about what the 17<sup>th</sup> prime number is, then coming to have a true belief about that would be an improvement. If you have a true belief about it, but lack good reasons for your belief (perhaps it was just a lucky guess), then gaining rational grounds for your belief would be an epistemic improvement. If you are the victim of a Gettier-style case and have a justified, true belief, then coming to have knowledge of the answer to your question would be yet another kind of epistemic improvement. If you know the answer, but fail to understand it, coming to understand the answer would be an epistemic improvement. In each of these cases, your epistemic standing toward the answer to your question improves; you attain a more epistemically valuable state as a result of your inquiry. So, inquiry can aim at any such changes, and what unites them as instances of inquiry is that they are all pursuits of kinds of intellectual improvements.

While all inquiries are pursuits of epistemic improvements, not just any epistemic improvement can count as successful inquiry. According to Falbo, “all inquiries aim at, and hence are successful upon achieving, some epistemic improvement. But, crucially, not all epistemic improvements rationally close inquiry and not all epistemic improvements function to rationalize inquiry in the first place.” (12) Not any epistemic improvement will do, since the gained improvement may still fall short of the intended improvement, and since epistemic gains could be outweighed by moral or prudential costs.

The epistemic improvement view can capture much of the motivation for the knowledge norm, since coming to know will typically be an epistemic improvement. In addition, the epistemic improvement view can explain why double-checking can be rational. Sometimes an epistemic state superior to knowledge is required, particularly when the stakes are quite high. The epistemic improvement view can also explain why we can rationally inquire into questions when we are aware that we will not come to know the answers. Even if knowledge of the answer isn't on the table, there are still (potentially significant) epistemic improvements to be made, and these improvements can ground the rationality of such inquiry.

The epistemic improvement view is quite plausible. It also has some ramifications for how we conduct inquiry. In what follows we will explore several of these implications.

## 2. Epistemic Improvements and the Routes to Them

When setting out to answer a question, there are two broad ways in which you may do so. You can inquire yourself, or you can outsource inquiry. When you outsource your inquiry, you defer to someone else; you rely on someone else to acquire and evaluate the relevant evidence. By deferring, your belief in the answer is based on someone else's say so. More carefully, your belief is based on their say-so and your reasons to believe that they are a reliable informant. When you outsource your inquiry, what you lack is the reasons upon which your informant bases their belief. You are taking them at their word. When you outsource inquiry, you rely on an epistemic surrogate<sup>4</sup> – someone who carries out the inquiry directly or indirectly on your behalf, delivering the results to you. In contrast to outsourcing inquiry is inquiring yourself. Recently much has

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<sup>4</sup> See Matheson 2023 and Dogramaci (2012).

been made of ‘doing your own research’ and ‘thinking for yourself’, but we are understanding conducting your own inquiry in a particular way. When you inquire for yourself, you acquire and evaluate the relevant first-order evidence for yourself. The first-order evidence regarding a proposition is the evidence that directly pertains to the truth of that proposition. So, when you inquire for yourself, you are getting the relevant pieces of evidence for yourself, and you are making the evaluations about what they support, and to what degree.<sup>5</sup>

Let’s look at an example to better distinguish these paths in inquiry. Suppose Sam starts feeling soreness in their muscles, develops a fever, and has a splitting headache. Sam wants to know what is going on, and how to stop it. There are two paths of inquiry that Sam might take: inquiring on their own, or outsourcing their inquiry. Suppose Sam chose to go to see their doctor. The doctor runs some tests and has Sam’s bloodwork done. On the basis of these test results, the doctor tells Sam that they have COVID. Since the doctor is an expert on these matters, and Sam has great reasons to trust her, Sam can come to know that this is the answer to their question on the basis of the doctor’s say-so. If Sam is outsourcing their inquiry, Sam is not looking at the test results for themselves, or making their own determination of what the bloodwork indicates. Sam’s reasons for believing that they have COVID are all indirect; they are reasons to trust the determination of their doctor.

There was another route in inquiry that Sam could have taken instead. Sam could have chosen to think about it for themselves instead. Doing so would require Sam to run to the drug store and pick up their own test kit, acquire the test results, and evaluate the results for themselves.

In practice, inquiry is often mixed. We often rely on the judgments of others while also acquiring and evaluating some of the relevant information ourselves as well. For instance, doctors will often share at least some of the test result information with their patients. For our purposes here, we can ignore the mixed cases.

### *Outsourcing Inquiry*

So, we have two broad paths to inquiry. Now recall that according to the epistemic improvement view, inquiry aims at improving our epistemic position with respect to the answer to our question. What we argue here is that which epistemic improvement we are after has ramifications for which path of inquiry we ought to embark upon. Whether you should inquire for yourself, or outsource your inquiry, will heavily depend upon which epistemic improvement you are after in your inquiry. We say ‘heavily’ since sometimes your hand is forced. Sometimes the improvement you are after needs to be immediate, and sometimes you may not have the opportunity to outsource your inquiry, so any successful inquiry must come by way of you thinking for yourself. Other times you may be under the effects of anesthesia, or have had way too much to drink, and successful inquiry will need to come at the hands of someone else. That said, many times both broad paths of inquiry are live options, and you could choose to set out to answer your question in either way. In such cases, how might the epistemic improvement you are after shape your choice?

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<sup>5</sup> There are also mixed cases of inquiry that involve some inquiring for oneself and some deference. For simplicity sake, we will set those aside for now.

Let's start by thinking about what epistemic goods you can gain by way of deference, by believing the answer to your question on the say-so of someone else.

a. Truth

The truth can be gained through deference. If *p* is true, and you believe that *p* on the basis of someone else telling you that *p*, you now have a true belief that *p*. Truth transfers through testimony. So, if the epistemic improvement you are after is a true belief in the answer, deference can provide that. When Sam believes the doctor that they have COVID, Sam can come to have a true belief.

b. Justified Belief

You can also gain a justified belief through deference. Of course, the skeptic might complain that we lack any legitimate reasons for our beliefs, but setting such skeptical worries aside, first-order evidence is not the only kind of evidence that can justify a belief. Just as perception and memory can be sources of a justified belief, so too can testimony. When you believe something on the basis of testimony, you don't need the reasons why the testifier believes what they do for your belief to be justified. While there are debates about whether you need to have reasons to trust the testifier, no account of testimony requires that the testifier also gives you their reasons for their belief. The only reasons you may need to justify your belief based on testimony are reasons to trust the speaker. When you have good reasons to believe that a speaker is a reliable informant on the matter at hand, these reasons indirectly justify you in believing what they say – they justify your belief without you needing to acquire the testifier's reasons yourself. When Sam has good reasons to trust their doctor, and believes that they have COVID on the basis of their doctor's say-so, Sam can come to have a justified belief.

c. Knowledge

Just as one can gain a justified belief through deference, one can also gain knowledge. Most of the things we know, we know on the basis of testimony. However precisely we unpack the conditions on knowledge, only the radical skeptic will deny that we can gain knowledge through testimony. In the paradigm case, when the speaker knows *p*, and the hearer has great reasons to trust the speaker, then the hearer can come to know *p* on the basis of the speaker's testimony. Here too, the hearer needn't be given the speaker's own reasons for their belief to gain knowledge. So, when Sam has good reasons to trust their doctor, and believes that they have COVID on the basis of their doctor's say-so, Sam can also come to have knowledge.

d. Greater Certainty

Greater certainty can be achieved through deference. Greater certainty can be achieved when one still fails to have knowledge, or it can be achieved when one has already obtained knowledge. You can gain greater certainty that the home team will win tonight's game while still lacking knowledge, and the surgeon can gain greater certainty that it is the left kidney that is to be removed, even if they already had knowledge. Greater certainty comes by way of improving one's reasons and increasing one's justification for believing the answer. Since justification can be gained through deference, *greater* justification can as well. For instance, you might know that

Germany has a greater GDP than Canada, but hearing a panel of expert economists who also testify to this, can increase your certainty in this claim.

So, we've seen that truth, justified belief, knowledge, and greater certainty can all be gained through deference – by outsourcing one's inquiry. A second step is to notice that each of these epistemic goods is also *more likely* to be achieved through deference than by inquiring for yourself, at least with respect to most questions.

For nearly any question you may want to answer, there will be someone else who is better positioned to answer that question than you are. What factors are relevant to one's epistemic position? While there are different views here, these factors are those that increase one's likelihood to answer the question correctly. Plausible candidates include the quantity and quality of one's evidence, one's intelligence, one's intellectual virtue, as well as circumstantial factors like being rested, being sober, and so forth. Rarely, are we as well-positioned as everyone else to answer our questions. That is, we can typically identify someone else who is more likely than we are to answer our question correctly. There is an analogy here with house projects.<sup>6</sup> For almost any house project one may think about tackling, there is someone else who is more likely to complete it well. Whether it is a matter of plumbing, electrical wiring, or drywall patching, there are many others who are more capable of successfully completing the task. Sure, when it comes to changing an easy to reach lightbulb, we might be as good as anyone else at doing it, but very few home improvement projects are like that. The same is true of our intellectual projects. Whether we have a question about history, physics, or economics, there are many others who are far better equipped to answer those questions than we are. Some questions, like those about our immediate environment and recent history, we are probably about as well positioned as anyone else is, but here too, this is not a representative sample of the kinds of questions that we have. Usually, the more promising path to accomplishing our intellectual projects is to rely on others to do them for us.

Let's put these two pieces together: 1) We can gain truth, justified belief, knowledge, and greater certainty through deference, and 2) deference typically offers us a more promising route to these epistemic goods than inquiring ourselves. What this shows is that if truth, justified belief, knowledge, or greater certainty is the epistemic improvement that we are after in inquiry, outsourcing our inquiry is likely the way to go.<sup>7</sup> All else being equal, it is better to take the more promising alternative, and for these epistemic goals, deference offers the better option.

One might think that outsourcing inquiry is not so easily done. After all, outsourcing your inquiry to someone who is in a better epistemic position requires identifying an informant. One lesson that has been made vivid in the past few years is that people can often struggle to identify who the relevant experts are. This is known as the novice/expert problem. Novices don't seem to possess the relevant tools to identify experts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this analogy, see Matheson (2023).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, if the epistemic improvement you are after is not *merely* truth, for example, but truth *gained directly by myself without outsourcing*, then deference won't enable you to achieve this improvement. But that's just a different kind of epistemic improvement than gaining flat out truth. So, it poses no problem for this argument.

<sup>8</sup> For seminal discussions, see Goldman (2001) and Anderson (2011).

There are two things to say in response to this challenge. The first is that we needn't solve the novice/expert problem to avoid the challenge to our proposal. Whereas the novice/expert problem concerns identifying someone who is an expert in a domain, outsourcing inquiry as outlined above merely requires identifying someone who is *better than you* at answering the question at hand. While there are issues about how to define 'expertise', and where to draw the line between experts and non-experts, those issues are avoided here since the target is more modest. So long as you can identify someone who is in a better epistemic position with respect to answering your question, you have reason to outsource your inquiry to them (at least so long as you are after one of the previously mentioned epistemic improvements). It is a much less daunting task to identify someone who has more evidence than you regarding the issue at hand, has thought about this issue longer than you have, is more intelligent or intellectually virtuous than you, and so forth. For instance, while it might be difficult to identify a civil war expert, identifying someone who is more informed about the civil war is a much easier task. So, while it's not the case that everyone's epistemic standing is entirely transparent, the issue confronted here does not present the same obstacle as the novice/expert problem.

The second thing to say in response is that while identifying someone who is in a better epistemic position than you with respect to the question at hand might be difficult, answering *that* question is often much easier than answering your original question. Put differently, when confronted with a question, one can either set out to answer that question for themselves, or they could set out to answer the question of who is more likely to answer that question correctly. While answering either question can come with some challenges, answering the higher-order question is often much easier.<sup>9</sup> For instance, if you need to determine the chemical composition of caffeine, or determine who is better than you are at answering that question, unless you are yourself a chemist, you are much more likely to be successful at the later. So, even if there are challenges in identifying reliable informants, so long as those challenges are comparatively easier than the challenges in answering the target question, they will not tell against our outsourcing inquiry.

Before turning to examine the reasons why one should opt for inquiring for themselves, it is worth briefly pausing to note another consequence of the knowledge norm. If inquiry just aims at knowledge, then absent the factors that preclude the opportunities for deference (urgency, communication blocks), outsourcing inquiry is usually the better way to achieve that aim. So, if we endorse the knowledge norm of inquiry, we usually have *no reason* to think for ourselves. While we should be careful not to overemphasize the importance of thinking for yourself, given the knowledge norm, this option is almost always sub-optimal and represents an inferior way to conduct inquiry.

### *Inquiring Yourself*

While truth, justified belief, knowledge, and greater certainty can all be gained through deference, not all epistemic improvements are like that. Some epistemic improvements require that one acquire and evaluate the relevant evidence for oneself. So, when one is aiming for one of these epistemic improvements in inquiry, outsourcing inquiry would be fruitless and significantly confused.

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<sup>9</sup> See Huemer (2005) for more on this point.

## a. Understanding

The nature of understanding is itself an unsettled philosophical issue. Nevertheless, some components are common across accounts. Understanding involves seeing how things fit together, it involves grasping the relevant relations between things. For instance, Jäger (2016) claims that understanding consists of “grasping systematic connections among elements of a complex whole, or gaining insight into certain relations between items within a larger body of information.” (180) Similarly, Kvanvig (2003) claims, “What is distinctive about understanding ... is the internal seeing or appreciating of explanatory and other coherence inducing relationships in a body of information that is crucial for understanding.” (198)

When you understand, you have a better cognitive reflection of reality, and understanding has thus been viewed as something that is more epistemically valuable than knowledge.<sup>10</sup> So, one kind of epistemic improvement one could be after in inquiry is moving from knowledge to understanding.<sup>11</sup>

While truth, justified belief, knowledge, and greater certainty can all be gained through deference, understanding cannot. Understanding requires that you engage in the inquiry yourself.<sup>12</sup> For instance, here is Hills (2009) on the nature of moral understanding:

If you understand why X is morally right or wrong, you must have some appreciation of the reasons why it is wrong. Appreciating the reasons why it is wrong is not the same as simply believing that they are the reasons why it is wrong, or even knowing that they are the reasons why it is wrong. Moral understanding involves a grasp of the relation between a moral proposition and the reasons why it is true. (101)

So, to understand why something is morally right or wrong, you must have and appreciate the relevant reasons for yourself. It is not enough that those reasons merely exist or that someone else has them. In order to understand, you need to evaluate those reasons yourself – you must engage in the inquiry.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to understanding more generally, Zagzebski (2008) also makes this connection claiming:

understanding cannot be given to another person at all except in the indirect sense that a good teacher can sometimes recreate the conditions that produce understanding in hopes that the student will acquire it also. (146)

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<sup>10</sup> See de Regt (2009), Elgin (2017), Gardiner (2012), Grimm (2006; 2010), Kvanvig (2003), and Pritchard (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, one could also aim to move to understanding from a less valuable beginning state than knowledge as well (e.g. ignorance to understanding, true belief to understanding, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> For more on the connection between understanding and thinking for yourself see Nickel (2001), Zagzebski (2007, 2012), Hills (2009, 2013), Roberts and Wood (2010), Hazlett (2016), and Nguyen (2018).

<sup>13</sup> We are assuming, plausibly we think, that the sort of possession and appreciation of reasons understanding requires cannot be gained through deference.

It is one thing to know what the answer is, but sometimes it is even better if you can see it for yourself, if you can grasp its truth and understand the answer. However, such an epistemic improvement can only come by way of inquiring for yourself.<sup>14</sup> So, if one aims to inquire in order to gain understanding, outsourcing inquiry would be futile. Deference simply cannot provide these epistemic goods.

#### b. Evidential Adaptability

Individuals who conduct their own inquiry are also better able to adapt to new evidence.<sup>15</sup> When you outsource your inquiry and defer to someone else, you don't possess the reasons upon which they base their belief – you lack the relevant first-order evidence. While lacking such evidence does not prevent you from having a true belief, a justified belief, knowledge, or greater certainty, it does render you less capable of managing your belief as you encounter new evidence on the matter. Without possessing the relevant first-order reasons, you are unaware of what considerations your deferred belief has already taken into account (indirectly) and how new reasons might interact with those reasons. You are also unaware of what most potential defeaters for your belief could look like, particularly undercutting defeaters. If you are unaware of what first-order evidence your belief is (indirectly) based on, you cannot gauge whether new information is relevant to the epistemic merits of those reasons.

To better see this, consider the following example. Hannah believes that interest rates are going to rise on the basis of testimony from a reliable source. She outsourced her inquiry on the matter, but has nevertheless come to a justified belief. Since she outsourced her inquiry, Hannah does not know what considerations her belief has indirectly been based on. So, when Hannah later hears that inflation is only increasing, she does not know whether she should become more confident that interest rates will rise, since she doesn't know if this consideration was already taken into account by her source. Further, if she hears that reports about continuing inflation were mistaken, she does not know how to accommodate this new information either since she does not know to what extent, if any, her belief had been supported by those reports. Without having the relevant first-order reasons, one is typically unable to update the beliefs and levels of confidence with new first-order information.<sup>16</sup>

That being said, deferring subjects are often in a position to respond to some *higher-order* defeaters. For example, if you believe something on the basis of scientific expert consensus and then you find out that this consensus has changed, you can know how to update your beliefs without ever encountering the first-order evidence. Or, similarly, if you believe something on the basis of someone's testimony and you later find out they were cognitively impaired in a way that distorted their judgment, you can know how to take this sort of defeater into account. The point is that deferring solely on the basis of higher-order reasons makes it difficult to manage one's beliefs in response to first-order evidence.

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<sup>14</sup> Notice that inquiring for yourself does not require inquiring by yourself. Your own inquiry can go best when others are involved in it. What is important here is that you are acquiring and appreciating the relevant reasons.

<sup>15</sup> See Nickel (2001), Fricker (2006), Nguyen (2020), Matheson (2022), Goldberg (2021), and DiPaolo (2022) for more on this point.

<sup>16</sup> We hedge with 'typically' to account for extreme cases, for example cases where new evidence is *clearly* decisive one way or another and the person who had previously deferred is in a position to appreciate this decisiveness.

This illustrates another kind of epistemic improvement one could be after in inquiry, and one that can only be achieved through inquiring for yourself. Let's call a body of evidence that can adapt to and incorporate new first-order information 'adaptable evidence'. You cannot have an adaptable evidential basis through deference. Further, having an adaptable evidential base is epistemically valuable. It is epistemically valuable since it allows you to manage your beliefs on your own in response to new information. So, moving from a body of evidence that cannot adapt, to one that can, is a kind of epistemic improvement.<sup>17</sup> Such a change puts one in a better epistemic position with respect to the answer to their question. It is the kind of improvement one may be after in inquiry, and if so, it can only be achieved through inquiring for yourself.

### c. Cultivating Intellectual Virtue

Intellectual virtues are epistemically valuable character traits. They help us in our intellectual endeavors. However, many intellectual virtues require for their cultivation that the relevant subject engages in inquiry for themselves. For instance, consider the virtue of intellectual perseverance. According to Heather Battaly (2017), the character trait of intellectual perseverance is "a disposition to overcome obstacles, so as to continue performing intellectual actions, in pursuit of one's intellectual goals." (670) When it is an intellectual virtue, this trait is grounded in the subject's love of intellectual goods, so agents who have this virtue do not give up too easily in inquiry, nor do they persist too long.<sup>18</sup>

Without engaging in inquiry for oneself, the cultivation of intellectual perseverance would seemingly be impossible. Like training for a marathon, training for intellectual perseverance requires active involvement in the process, not simple deference. Intellectual perseverance is also not the only intellectual virtue like this. Others that similarly seem to require active inquiry include intellectual courage, open-mindedness, and intellectual carefulness.

Here, there is a bit of a shift regarding the epistemic improvement on offer. The goals of understanding and an adaptable evidential basis, were still targeted at the answer to one's question. The goal of understanding was the goal of understanding the answer. The goal of gaining an adaptable evidential basis, concerned an evidential basis relevant to the answer to the question at hand. Intellectual virtues, however, are general character traits, they are not targeted to any particular question or any particular answer. Intellectual virtues are best seen as complex dispositions that carry over a wide variety of circumstances and concern a wide variety of propositions, beliefs, and other attitudes. Think back to intellectual perseverance. To cultivate intellectual perseverance there is no particular inquiry that you need to engage in, no particular question you need to answer. One also can't have intellectual perseverance with respect to just one question or answer. The virtue needs to be general. But, in order to cultivate intellectual perseverance, you do need to be in the business of inquiring for yourself. If you aren't engaged in inquiry regarding some questions, then you will not be afforded the opportunity to encounter and overcome obstacles in inquiry. Put differently, if you always choose to navigate inquiry by

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<sup>17</sup> Thought of in this way, inquiring for yourself can set you up to be a better manager of your intellectual affairs. This can be seen as helping you cultivate the intellectual virtue of epistemic autonomy, which leads to the third type of epistemic improvement that requires inquiring for yourself. See Matheson (2021).

<sup>18</sup> See also King (2014).

outsourcing it to a more capable other, then you have no chance of developing intellectual perseverance. Similar considerations hold for other intellectual virtues.

What this shows is that the epistemic improvement sought after in inquiry needn't be primarily about the answer to the particular question at hand. You might engage in some inquiry with the primary purpose of a more general epistemic improvement – cultivating your intellectual character. We can label this 'instrumental inquiry'; it is inquiry pursued not primarily for the sake of answering a particular question but as a means to some other epistemic end. While you may also epistemically improve with regard to the answer to the particular question at hand, that particular epistemic improvement needn't be primary in your intellectual pursuits. Let's return to the marathon running analogy. Suppose you are training for a marathon. On a given day you might have the goal of getting from point A to point B, but this isn't your primary goal. If it was, there would be far better ways to make the trip than running. You could drive, get an Uber, ride a bike, and so forth. What matters for training is the way in which you get from point A to point B. Those more efficient ways to make the journey will not help you prepare for the marathon, and in training, it is the preparation that you are most concerned with.

Similarly, there can be intellectual pursuits where what concerns you the most is a kind of intellectual training, a kind of training where more efficient routes to the answer would not accomplish the relevant epistemic improvement. Here too, we can have reason to inquire for ourselves because of the desired epistemic improvement, and what that kind of improvement requires.

To sum up, the epistemic improvement model of inquiry has implications for how one navigates inquiry. Whether one is better served by outsourcing their inquiry or by inquiring for themselves will depend (at least in part) on which epistemic improvements they are after. Some epistemic improvements are better achieved by one path than the other, and other epistemic improvements can only be achieved by a particular path of inquiry.

### 3. Epistemic Tradeoff and Group Inquiry

We have been arguing that whether agents should outsource their inquiry or inquire for themselves depends on what *kind* of epistemic improvement they seek for themselves. Now we want to expand our gaze beyond the individual inquirer. We do not only seek epistemic improvements for ourselves, and even when we do, we do not do this in isolation. Often, we are engaged in group inquiry: we collaborate with others to answer a question, and others depend on us for information as they seek answers to their own questions. The epistemic improvement view also has implications for how we should think about these kinds of epistemic dependence and group inquiry.

We will draw out some of these implications by considering two kinds of "mismatch" between epistemic improvement at the individual level and epistemic improvement at the group level. We will focus on the following two kinds of mismatch:

1. When an individual makes themselves worse off epistemically for the sake of promoting epistemic improvement for their group.

2. When an individual makes their group worse off epistemically in order to promote their own epistemic improvement.<sup>19</sup>

The general point we want to make is that often there are trade-offs in epistemic improvement across individual and group levels. In general, what is better for the individual is sometimes worse for the group, and vice versa. The same is true of our epistemic lives. As social epistemic agents, we do well to recognize that the choices we make when navigating inquiry affect the extent to which others epistemically improve or decline.

For the sake of illustration, start with a toy example: a simple case of disagreement in the midst of joint inquiry. Suppose that two individuals are epistemic peers who disagree about something while sharing all of the relevant evidence. Suppose further that a simple version of conciliationism about disagreement is true, so each of them would be unjustified in remaining steadfast in their belief. However, suppose that their inquiry would be more likely to lead them to the right answer if they each remained steadfast in their positions. Without at least one of them ardently defending their initial position, they are more likely to collectively end up with the wrong answer, say. After all, findings in social psychology suggest that groups are more likely to reach accurate conclusions when there is dissent and disagreement within the group, and when those dissenting members genuinely disagree.<sup>20</sup> Now imagine that one of these disagreeing inquirers has read their social psychology, and realizing this fact about disagreement, manages to remain steadfast in their belief for this reason.<sup>21</sup> In such a case, they are opting to forgo their own epistemic improvement – they are choosing an unjustified belief over justified suspension of judgment – for the sake of their group’s epistemic improvement – improving the group’s chances of acquiring the right answer to their question. In such a case, the group’s epistemic improvement comes at the cost of an individual’s epistemic sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

These kinds of sacrifices need not be wholly altruistic. After all, in this example, you stand to gain from your sacrifice; if everything pans out, you will end up with the right answer to your question too. Not every epistemic sacrifice that makes the group better off works like this, though. Imagine a scientist who fully commits her professional life to proving some theory only for it ultimately to turn out to be a dead end.<sup>23</sup> By many measures, this work will have made the scientist epistemically worse off while it may prove incredibly valuable to the scientific community as a whole, even if she doesn’t live long enough to experience these improvements herself. Either way,

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<sup>19</sup> These two types of mismatch are not exhaustive. For example, things can be better off for the group and neutral for the individual. We focus on these more extreme cases for illustrative purposes.

<sup>20</sup> See Moshman & Geil (1998), Mercier (2012), and Sunstein (2002) for the empirical backing. For more on the tension this raises for responses to disagreement, see Matheson (2015a).

<sup>21</sup> Remember, this is a toy example. We will ignore issues surrounding doxastic voluntarism for simplicity.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Mercier & Sperber’s (2017) view on the function of reasoning. On their picture, we all tend to be lazy and biased in our thinking; we tend to adopt the first hypothesis that fits our evidence, we tend to discount and heavily scrutinize contrary evidence, and while uncritically accepting confirming evidence. The reason we (evolved to) do this is that it benefits the group; get a bunch of opinionated, lazy and biased people talking together and this will lead to an overall improvement in the group’s epistemic position. If something like their picture is correct, then we can see how *refusing* to become less lazy and less biased and by holding fast in one’s opinions could work like the example in the text. Remaining lazy and biased may lead to individual irrationality for the sake of epistemic improvements at the group level.

<sup>23</sup> Thanks to Gabrielle Contessa for recommending this sort of example.

individual inquirers may sometimes forgo epistemic improvements for themselves, in order to intentionally or unintentionally epistemically improve the group.

Now consider the opposite kind of case: when an individual makes their group worse off epistemically in order to promote their own epistemic improvement. Imagine a researcher recruited to work on an interdisciplinary project by bringing their significant but narrow expertise to bear on an aspect of the project's main question. Suppose that it is neither essential nor beneficial to the success of the research project for this researcher to understand the relevant technical details outside of their expertise. In fact, if they spent their time attempting to understand these details, it would derail the project by absorbing too many resources (e.g., time, funding, their colleagues' efforts and mental power, etc.). But our researcher wants to understand these details before making their own contributions, so they try their best to understand them. In this case, we have an individual inquirer making their group worse off by attempting to gain an epistemic improvement for themselves. Just as in the previous cases we need not assume wholly altruistic motives, here we need not assume wholly selfish motives. Perhaps this researcher sincerely but mistakenly believes that the team would be better off if they were to understand these details. Either way, the epistemic improvement that the researcher prioritizes leaves their group inquiry worse off epistemically. What these cases show is that individual epistemic improvements and group epistemic improvements do not always coincide. Sometimes improvements for one come by way of making things worse for the other.

All of the examples discussed in this section so far involve agents thinking for themselves. Similar mismatches between individual and group improvement can occur when agents outsource their inquiry. For instance, lay community members often rely on expert consensus to form their beliefs about certain matters. As we have argued, conducting inquiry by outsourcing in this way is an appropriate way to gain truth, justification, and knowledge. However, things break down if the experts themselves reach their conclusions simply by outsourcing to each other. Outsourcing to other experts in your field can lead you to knowledge. But failing to engage in sufficiently independent inquiry in this way indirectly diminishes the reliability of the expert consensus position. In turn, this could prevent the consensus from providing a reliable enough basis to produce knowledge or justification for lay community members.<sup>24</sup> So in this case, the experts' thinking for themselves can help provide an epistemic benefit for the broader group even if they receive no improvement themselves, since all of the relevant epistemic goods could have been had by deference to other experts.<sup>25</sup>

For instance, an impressive case of scientific consensus concerns climate change. Upwards of 90% of climate scientists agree that climate change is occurring. This is a powerful intellectual resource that is provided to the community. If it turned out that the majority of climate scientists only believed that the climate was changing on the basis of one climate scientist's say-so, the scientific consensus would be far less powerful of a reason. While expert climate scientists could have a true belief, a justified belief, or knowledge regarding the matter through such deference, their individual inquiry helps provide a greater resource for the community.

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<sup>24</sup> See Dellsen (2022) for discussion.

<sup>25</sup> Another such case involves an expert who spends significant time combating misinformation online. While their beliefs on the issue are secure and they aren't improving their own epistemic position with respect to them, they are aiding the broader public by responding publicly to misinformation.

In some ways, this case isn't as clean as the others because it isn't restricted to showing how the zetetic choices of one sole individual prevent the epistemic improvement of the group. Rather, here the *accumulation* of individual zetetic choices that each on its own leads to epistemic improvement for those individuals renders other community members worse off epistemically. But this only bolsters our point that when navigating inquiry, we need to remember that we are often not inquiring in isolation. How we inquire – the kind of inquiry we choose to conduct – impacts the epistemic lives of others. Further, the particular epistemic improvements that we are after, whether they are for ourselves or for others, has ramifications for how we should proceed in inquiry.

In the previous sections we showed that whether you should think for yourself or outsource your inquiry depends on the type of epistemic improvement you seek. In this section, we have shown that the epistemic dependencies that structure group inquiry and epistemic communities require us to add to this: whether you should think for yourself or outsource your inquiry depends on the type of epistemic improvement you seek *and for whom*. What improves your epistemic position may make others worse off epistemically, and what improves others' epistemic position may make you worse off epistemically. Perhaps in ideal cases, all relevant epistemic improvements would align. But since such alignment is likely exceptional, when you are deciding how to conduct your inquiry – whether to think for yourself or defer to others – the responsible thing to do is to consider how your choice will affect the epistemic lives of others.

#### 4. Conclusion

Epistemic improvement is a plausible aim of inquiry. We inquire so that we can epistemically improve, ourselves and others. The possibilities for epistemic improvement are a plenty. There is a vast pluralism about what one may set out to do in inquiry, though unified under the idea of epistemic improvement. Once we take the epistemic improvement view on board, there are consequences for how we navigate inquiry. Some epistemic improvements are best brought about by outsourcing our inquiry and deferring to more capable individuals. Truth, justified belief, knowledge, and a greater level of confidence are all like that, at least when we are focusing on epistemic improvements for individuals. However, other epistemic improvements can only come by way of engaging in inquiry for yourself. Understanding, having an adaptable evidential basis, and cultivating intellectual virtue all require engaging in the endeavor of inquiry for oneself. What follows is that how you go about navigating inquiry, whether you should think for yourself or outsource your inquiry, depends upon which epistemic improvement you are after for yourself and for others. Further, inquiry isn't simply a solo project. Many of our inquiries are undertaken for the good of others. The epistemic improvements we are after in inquiry could be for ourselves or they could be for others. Different goals will call for different ways of conducting inquiry. While the goals of the individual and the group may align, they need not.

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