

Settling Questions Without Assurance

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Zetetic epistemology is the study of inquiry—how questions are raised, pursued, and eventually settled. Recent work in epistemology has turned from norms of belief to norms that govern the activity of asking and investigating. This paper targets a specific but under-theorized subdomain: answer-recognition norms, i.e., principles that regulate the relation between an inquiry and the answers that can close it. I argue that two proposals—the Knowledge Norm of Inquiry (KNI), which holds that inquiry should only be inquired into at t only if one knows at t that Q has a true answer, and Epistemic Improvement (EI), which holds that inquiry is permissible only if it's not rational to be sure at t that by inquiring one won't improve epistemically upon Q —are best understood as answer-recognition norms, but they are misapplied when treated as norms of appropriateness (i.e., standards for when it is proper to inquire). On that reading they become assurance-demanding: KNI requires assurance that a true, complete, direct answer exists; EI requires assurance that the process will not be epistemically wasted. Both demands are unmet by legitimate inquirers in science and ordinary life.

The paper has two main claims. First, answer-recognition norms should not be tied to the appropriateness of inquiry. Treating them that way mishandles paradigm cases: historical inquiries conducted under false but coherent background theories; long-horizon research pursued through doubt and wavering credence; and everyday investigations where agents proceed without guarantees of progress. Second, answer-recognition norms belong to the settlement side of inquiry: they should tell us when an agent is entitled to treat a question as closed.

On this basis, I propose a new norm—the Recognizable Sufficiency Settlement Norm. This norm does not require knowledge or belief that a true, complete, direct answer exists, nor any guarantee of epistemic improvement. Instead, it licenses settlement when sufficiency is recognizable by a rule-governed method relative to the inquirer's current information.

This account explains (i) why local settlements under false background theories could still be rational; (ii) why some inquiries, though never closed within a lifetime, are nonetheless appropriate; and (iii) how everyday agents rationally close questions

in the absence of full assurance. Finally, I show why recasting KNI or EI as settlement norms fails to capture their intended function.

By relocating answer-recognition norms to the settlement stage and proposing a norm suited to that role, this talk offers a framework for better understanding the dynamics of inquiry and its closure.

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