Reconciling the Epistemic and the Zetetic

Eliran Haziza

Abstract. In recent work, Jane Friedman has argued that commonly accepted epistemic norms conflict with a basic instrumental principle of inquiry, according to which one ought to take the necessary means to resolving one's inquiry. According to Friedman, we ought to reject the epistemic norms in question and accept instead that the only genuine epistemic norms are zetetic norms—norms that govern inquiry. I argue that there is a more attractive way out of the conflict, one which reconciles the epistemic and the zetetic.

1 Introduction

How are norms of inquiry related to epistemic norms? It is natural to think that they are closely related—in inquiring one aims at truth, knowledge, or some other epistemic state, and epistemic norms guide our acquisition of such states. However, in recent work, Jane Friedman has argued that commonly accepted epistemic norms—e.g., that it's permissible to believe p on the basis of excellent evidence for p—are inconsistent with a basic instrumental principle of inquiry, according to which one ought to take the necessary means toward resolving one's inquiry.[1] Friedman argues that the former ought to be rejected, and that zetetic norms—the norms of inquiry—exhaust epistemic normativity.[2] On the resulting picture of epistemic normativity, acquiring knowledge or forming beliefs on the basis of the available evidence can be *epistemic* mistakes, if these do not contribute to advancing one's inquiry. There is no place for a distinctive and inquiry-independent form of epistemic rationality on this view.[3]

My aim in this paper is to reconcile the epistemic and the zetetic. Friedman is right that some commonly accepted epistemic norms conflict with zetetic norms, but there are

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[1] Friedman (2020, forthcoming). See also Friedman (2018, 2019) for related arguments.

[2] I follow Friedman's usage of 'zetetic' to mean 'inquiry-related'.

[3] See Thorstad (2021) for a competing account of inquiry and the epistemic. See also Steglich-Petersen (forthcoming), which accepts and builds on Friedman's argument.

independently plausible epistemic norms nearby that do not. In what follows, I begin by reviewing Friedman's argument for the conflict. I then argue for two claims. First, the epistemic norms in question are best construed as conditional norms, which, I argue, do not conflict with the instrumental principle of inquiry. Second, even if zetetic norms conflict with the permissibility of acts of forming beliefs or coming to know, the conflict doesn't carry over to the resulting epistemic states. Overall, the arguments show that there is an attractive, non-revisionary account of the relation between the epistemic and the zetetic.

2 The Conflict

Consider the following epistemic norm:

> **EP** If one has excellent evidence for p at t, one is permitted to judge p at t.[4]

EP is a norm for forming beliefs, rather than for having belief states.[5] It is a highly plausible norm, and many epistemologists accept something like it. If epistemic norms are to play a role in the normativity of inquiry, surely EP will be one of those norms.

However, Friedman argues that EP conflicts with a fundamental instrumental principle of inquiry:

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

Here's the basic idea. In any inquiry one typically finds oneself surrounded by unrelated evidence—perceptual evidence, but also memories, and perhaps all our knowledge. To properly inquire, one will have to ignore at least some of that unrelated evidence. In fact, this is going to be a requirement of ZIP. But EP still permits one to form beliefs on the basis of that evidence, and thus it permits what ZIP forbids.[6]

Before going into more detail, let us consider a natural response to the problem. ZIP, the response goes, is a *practical* norm, while EP is an epistemic one. Thus, this clash of norms is no different from a clash between EP and, say, a norm that tells me that I ought to ignore some of my evidence because I ought to focus on making my flight in time. Such norms do not really conflict because they are part of different normative domains.

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[4]In what follows all talk of oughts, requirements, permissions, etc., will be about *epistemic* oughts, requirements, permissions, etc.

[5]I use 'judging', like Friedman, to mean the act or process of forming a belief.

[6]More carefully, this will depend on our conception of having evidence. For the purposes of this argument, I grant that one can have evidence even if one is not presently attending to it.

But, as Friedman argues, there are reasons to think that ZIP *is* epistemic, whether or not it is also practical. If so, its requirements are epistemic requirements, and the clash with EP results in a genuine contradiction. One can perhaps reject the premise that ZIP is epistemic, but I think it will be more fruitful to respond to the challenge in a way that allows for a more expansive conception of the epistemic, on which norms of inquiry such as ZIP issue genuinely epistemic advice. I will, therefore, accept Friedman's claim that ZIP is epistemic.[7]

Let us then look at the conflict in more detail. Suppose Beth is at a restaurant, calculating what she owes. Call the question of what she owes Q. At the same time, Beth has a lot of evidence from her surroundings, and EP permits her to form beliefs on the basis of that evidence. Suppose that Beth does so and doesn't make progress on Q. Since her inquiry is temporally urgent—she has to figure out Q soon—there comes a point t at which ZIP requires Beth to just focus on Q and not be distracted anymore. At t, however, EP still permits Beth to form beliefs unrelated to Q. The conflict turns into a contradiction once we assume with Friedman the following:

> **Joint Satisfiability** If one cannot both ϕ and ψ at t and one ought to ϕ at t, then one is not permitted to ψ at t.[8]

Given her ordinary cognitive limitations, Beth cannot both focus on Q and form some unrelated belief p, for which she has excellent evidence, at the same time. Given Joint Satisfiability, if Beth is required by ZIP to focus on Q at t, she is not permitted to judge p at t. But since Beth has excellent evidence for p at t, EP permits her to judge p at t. On the assumption that ZIP is epistemic and issues epistemic advice, we get the result that Beth is both epistemically permitted and epistemically not permitted to judge p at t. ZIP and EP are therefore downright inconsistent.

The following commonly accepted epistemic norm also comes into conflict with ZIP:

> **EO** If one has excellent evidence for p at t, one ought to judge p at t.[9]

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[7]The conflict, therefore, is not quite between the zetetic and the epistemic but between the zetetic and what is traditionally regarded as the epistemic, which includes norms like EP but not zetetic ones like ZIP.

[8]This assumption is explicit in Friedman (2020, p. 515). Like Friedman, I use 'ought' and 'required' interchangeably. As I note below, Joint Satisfiability entails an *ought implies can* thesis. Moreover, it entails that one has two obligations only if one can satisfy both at the same time, and so it rules out the possibility of epistemic dilemmas, which may be controversial. Without Joint Satisfiability, the conflict dissolves, since Beth's case is an epistemic dilemma: she ought to focus on her inquiry, and she is permitted to form beliefs that would distract her from her inquiry, even though she cannot do both.

[9]Requirements to believe what the evidence supports are defended, for instance, in Feldman (2000); Kelly (2007).

Call a norm that is inconsistent with ZIP *zetetically inconsistent*. On the assumption that requirements entail permissions, EO is zetetically inconsistent as well, since it entails EP.

The problem is not limited to evidential norms. Consider the following two knowledge-centered norms:

KP If one is in a position to know p at t, one is permitted to come to know p at t.

KO If one is in a position to know p at t, one ought to come to know p at t.

It should not be difficult to see that KP and KO are also zetetically inconsistent: one can be in a position to know many unrelated things while one is engaged in an inquiry, and the above norms permit or require one to come to know those things at the expense of one's inquiry.

A pattern seems to emerge. Friedman takes this pattern to suggest that there is a deep conflict between the zetetic and what we currently think of as the epistemic. The way forward, she argues, is to reject all non-zetetic epistemic norms and to accept that only zetetic norms, such as ZIP, are genuine epistemic norms. The result is a radical revision of normative epistemology.

3   Reconciliation

Suppose we accept that the epistemic norms EP, EO, KP, and KO are inconsistent with ZIP. Should we conclude that there are no plausible epistemic norms that are compatible with it? Since even fairly weak norms such as EP and KP are zetetically inconsistent, one may be tempted to reach this conclusion, as Friedman does.

Nevertheless, such a norm can be found. To see how, let us begin with two related problems. Consider again EO:

EO If one has excellent evidence for p at t, one ought to judge p at t.

There are independent reasons to reject EO, at least given some of the premises we are assuming here with Friedman. One is the following. Just as one can have a lot of evidence from one's surroundings while inquiring, one can have evidence for one proposition while also having evidence for a different proposition. And just as one cannot inquire while forming an unrelated belief, one cannot form one belief while forming another. If so, in cases where one has excellent evidence for p at t and excellent evidence for q at t, EO gives contradictory advice: one is required to judge that p at t and required to judge that

q at *t*, even though one cannot do both. Given Joint Satisfiability, this is a contradiction. Call this 'the demandingness problem'.[10]

An additional problem for EO is that many propositions seem too trivial to bother forming beliefs about, e.g., all of the disjunctions that follow from the propositions I know. If $p \vee q$ is such a trivial proposition, and I have excellent evidence for it, then, according to EO, I ought to come to believe it. This holds for every trivial proposition for which excellent evidence is available to me, even if I have no interest in considering these propositions. Indeed, EO may well require me to spend all of my waking hours thinking about and believing trivialities. Call this 'the clutter problem'.[11]

How should a proponent of EO reply to these problems? One option is to go permissive and adopt EP instead:

EP If one has excellent evidence for *p* at *t*, one is permitted to judge *p* at *t*.

Such an approach is suggested by Nelson (2010) in response to the demandingness problem sketched above.[12] EP does not suffer from either the demandingness or the clutter problems. As already mentioned, however, since EP is also zetetically inconsistent, this move isn't going to be of much help with the problem of zetetic conflict. But there are independent reasons not to go down this road. Backing off to EP is the wrong response to the demandingness and clutter problems. Sometimes we are still required to believe things, at least according to the evidentialist who is attracted to something like EO. And even those who think that evidence can be permissive agree that it is not *always* permissive.[13] So how can we constrain EO in a way that both avoids the demandingness and clutter problems and preserves the idea that we ought to (not just permitted to) form our beliefs according to the evidence? I propose that we follow authors such as Feldman (2000) and Wedgwood (2002) in conditionalizing epistemic norms on taking an attitude to a proposition. In particular, EO should be replaced by the following:

EO* If one has excellent evidence for *p* at *t*, then: if one takes a doxastic attitude to *p* at *t*, one ought to judge *p* at *t*.[14]

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[10]Similarly, when one has evidence for *p* one thereby has evidence for every logical consequence of *p*, and thus one will be required to form many beliefs simultaneously. See Nelson (2010) for such an objection to a norm like EO. As I discuss below, such worries are already noted in Feldman (2000).

[11]The idea that one should not clutter one's mind with trivialities is familiar from Harman (1986). See also Friedman (2018) for a recent discussion. Friedman argues that clutter avoidance principles are inconsistent with traditional epistemic norms such as EO, and concludes on this basis that "it looks as though there will be no purely epistemic requirements, permissions, justifications (etc.) to believe" (p. 576). This conclusion is avoided once epistemic norms are formulated in the way I suggest below.

[12]Nelson, who describes his view as 'permissive', is not explicit about what alternative to EO he has in mind, and he may intend to endorse not EP but something like EO* below.

[13]See e.g. Kelly (2013); Schoenfield (2014).

[14]See Feldman (2000, p. 679) for a similar conditional norm, which he proposes in response to the problem

Two points of clarification. First, like EO, this is a norm for acts and not states. Thus it is conditional on the act (or process) of taking a doxastic attitude toward a proposition, and not on the state of having such an attitude. Second, I intend the 'ought' in EO* to take wide scope over the latter conditional. That is because, at least in principle, the agent always has both the option of not taking a doxastic attitude and the option of forming a belief, even when the process of forming an attitude has already started.[15]

By adopting EO* instead of EO, we separate the question "What should I believe?" from the question "What should I take a stance on?".[16] EO conflates the two by requiring that you take a stance on everything for which you have excellent evidence. Perhaps that is plausible on some conceptions of having evidence, but not on the one presently assumed, according to which one can have evidence for many different propositions at the same time. (EP is guilty of a similar conflation, although with less obvious problematic consequences: it permits taking a stance on everything for which one has excellent evidence.) Separating the two questions allows us to respond to the demandingness and clutter problems in a way that does justice to the idea that there are sometimes requirements to believe: of all the propositions for which I have excellent evidence, I am only required to believe those toward which I am going to take some doxastic attitude. This resolves the problem of demandingness, because I am no longer required to form too many different beliefs at once. The clutter problem is also resolved, because I am not required to believe propositions that I have no wish to consider.

The epistemic-zetetic conflict is similarly resolved. By focusing on one's inquiry, and not taking any doxastic attitudes to inquiry-external propositions, one satisfies both the requirements of ZIP and the requirements of EO*. Even when one does take a doxastic attitude toward an inquiry-external proposition, there is no conflict between what ZIP requires and what EO* requires. Suppose one can stop the process of forming a doxastic attitude while in progress. Then, since EO* issues wide-scope requirements, one can satisfy both EO* and ZIP by terminating the process. But suppose one can't stop the process. In that case, ZIP does *not* require that one do so and not form a belief, given Joint

of demandingness. See Wedgwood (2002, p. 273) for the idea that the truth norm of belief is conditional on considering a proposition, which he proposes in response to the clutter problem. See White (2005, fn. 2) for a similar idea in the context of the clutter problem. I'm grateful to an anonymous editor for pointing out some of these connections.

[15]Suppose the process of forming a belief takes a few moments. If such a process has begun, EO* does not require that the process end in belief; there is still the option of terminating it. In case terminating it in not possible (perhaps psychologically), then the requirement to form a belief plausibly detaches. But then no harm is done in formulating the norm with a wide-scope 'ought'.

[16]See Wedgwood (2002, p. 273) for an argument that norms of belief do not tell us which propositions to consider, but only which doxastic attitude to take for those propositions that we do consider.

Satisfiability, which entails an *ought implies can* thesis.[17] Either way, then, the conditional epistemic norm EO* is zetetically consistent.

What about EP? Those who prefer such permissive norms can similarly replace it with a conditional version:

EP* If one has excellent evidence for *p* at *t*, then: if one takes a doxastic attitude to *p* at *t*, one is permitted to judge *p* at *t*.

EP* is compatible with ZIP: while ZIP may require, in a given case, not to form any beliefs, EP* does not issue a contrary permission, but only a permission to form a belief given that one takes a doxastic attitude, and it says nothing about whether taking a doxastic attitude itself is permitted. There are, again, independent reasons to prefer such a norm over its unconditional counterpart. Which doxastic attitude to take toward a proposition and whether to take a such an attitude at all are different questions. The latter question may depend on a range of non-epistemic considerations, and EP presupposes that the answer to this question is always yes. This presupposition is unmotivated, and so EP* is preferable.

One might worry that the conflict resurfaces at the level of belief revision. Suppose Beth has formed the belief that *q* against her evidence, and she ought to focus on her inquiry. Then, it might be worried, Beth will be required to revise her belief. But just as she had better things to do than form beliefs about her surroundings, she has better things to do now than fix this belief. If so, we have a new conflict: the requirement to revise her belief is inconsistent with Beth's requirement to stick to her inquiry.

But I don't think the present account has this consequence. The conditional norm EO* does not entail that in such a case Beth is required to revise her belief that *q*, because EO* is conditional on Beth's *taking*, rather than simply having, a doxastic attitude. The requirement was in force—and was violated—when she formed the belief, at *t*, but at *t+1* she is no longer taking a doxastic attitude toward *q*, thus no longer violating the norm at this point. The objector might accept this but insist that an appropriate evidential belief revision norm would still conflict with ZIP because, for the evidentialist (or anyone who is inclined to accept traditional epistemic norms), Beth's belief that *q* is not permissible, and if it is not permissible then it ought to be revised. Such is the result of accepting something like the following plausible norm:

Evidential Revision Norm If one believes *p* at *t* without the appropriate evidential support, then one ought to revise one's belief that *p* at *t*.

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[17]Since Joint Satisfiability is equivalent to the claim that one ought to ϕ at *t* and is permitted to ψ at *t* only if one can both ϕ and ψ at *t*, it entails that one ought to ϕ at *t* only if one can ϕ at *t*.

I concede that Evidential Revision Norm would clash with ZIP, but it should be rejected on independent grounds. Suppose at t Beth has two different against-the-evidence beliefs, q and r. The norm entails that Beth ought to revise q at t and that she ought to revise r at t. But just as she can't revise q and focus on her inquiry at the same time, she can't revise q and revise r at the same time. Since we are assuming Joint Satisfiability, we cannot consistently accept Evidential Revision Norm. To solve this problem, we can again turn to a conditional version:

> **Conditional Evidential Revision Norm** If one believes p at t without the appropriate evidential support, then: if one reconsiders p at t, one ought to revise one's belief that p at t.

The Conditional Evidential Revision Norm does not have the problematic result of the previous norm; it does not entail that Beth ought to revise q at t and that she ought to revise r at t. And since it's plausible that one cannot reconsider more propositions than one can revise at a time, the conditional revision norm does not have problematic consequences of this kind.[18] In a similar fashion, one can see that it does not conflict with ZIP.

One might nevertheless worry that a conflict between the zetetic and what is traditionally regarded as the epistemic still remains. Suppose that Beth is required to focus on her inquiry and not to come to believe anything unrelated. She has excellent evidence for a zetetically-irrelevant proposition p. The epistemic norms I have argued for neither require nor give her permission to come to believe p, and are compatible with ZIP in this regard. But suppose that Beth nonetheless comes to believe p. What should we say about her resulting state of belief? Since she wasn't permitted to come to believe p, it may seem plausible to say that her resulting state of belief that p is also impermissible, even if the belief is conclusively supported by the evidence—indeed, even if it constitutes knowledge.[19] But if so, this suggests that the epistemic and the zetetic still conflict in some deep sense. It's hard to see how knowledge or belief based on conclusive evidence can ever fail to be epistemically permissible on current conceptions of epistemic normativity.[20]

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[18]Plausibly, revising a belief requires something like reconsidering (or attending to) the relevant proposition.

[19]Friedman takes this to be one of the troubling consequences of the conflict she argues for. See Friedman (2020, p. 530). See also Friedman (2019, p. 689) for a related idea.

[20]Consider accounts according to which belief aims at or is governed by a norm of knowledge. (See e.g. Williamson (2000).) Such accounts cannot allow that a belief that constitutes knowledge can be epistemically impermissible. Similarly, evidentialists such as Feldman (2000) and Kelly (2007) cannot make sense of the idea that an evidentially well-supported belief is epistemically impermissible.

However, even if Beth's forming the belief was impermissible, we should resist the conclusion that her resulting state of belief is also impermissible. The argument for this conclusion rests on the following thesis:

> **Act-State Transmission** If one believes p as a result of judging p, then one is permitted to believe p only if one was permitted to judge p.[21]

But we should be careful about how the permissibility of an act translates to the permissibility of its resulting state. It is not generally true that an impermissible act must result in an impermissible state. Suppose it is not permissible for students to use a phone for any purpose during an exam, and suppose one student uses his phone to take a picture of himself. A result of the student's act is that he now has this picture on his phone. But even though the act of taking the picture was impermissible, it doesn't follow that having the picture is impermissible. Taking the picture violated a rule, but having it does not.

Nevertheless, one might think that even if the general principle does not hold, its belief instance does. After all, how a belief was formed may be crucial to the normative status of the resulting belief: beliefs formed by reliable perception, sound reasoning, etc., are normally justified, while beliefs formed by wishful thinking, poor reasoning, etc., are not.[22] But this can be explained by a thesis about the transmission of justification: One is justified in believing p only if one was justified in forming the belief that p. Act-State Transmission, by contrast, is a principle about permissibility. And since forming a belief may be impermissible simply because the process of formation would take up time that should be spent elsewhere, it is a lot less clear that this impermissibility transmits to the resulting belief. Indeed, belief formations that are impermissible for such reasons seem more like the student case than a case of forming a belief by fallacious reasoning: forming the belief in such cases is impermissible for reasons that have nothing to do with the content of the belief or the evidence that supports it.

To see this more clearly, consider what would follow if Beth's justified belief that p, which was formed impermissibly during her inquiry, was impermissible. Plausibly, if one holds an impermissible belief, then one ought to revise that belief, at least if one reconsiders the believed proposition. But it is implausible that Beth should revise her belief just because she formed it when she should have been paying attention to her ongoing inquiry. If she does reconsider p once she has no inquiry to attend to, and has the same available evidence, then she should still believe that p, because that is what her evidence

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[21]See Friedman (2019, p. 689): "if some [act of] judgment is impermissible then the resulting belief state is as well."

[22]I'm grateful to an anonymous reviewer for urging me to consider this point.

supports—it is implausible that she should disbelieve or suspend judgment on p. If so, she ought to maintain her belief, and thus her belief is, after all, permissible.[23]

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