

# **The puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry**

Michele Palmira

Complutense University of Madrid

michelepalmira@gmail.com

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## *Abstract*

I present a puzzle about inquiry and discuss two potential solutions. The puzzle stems from two equally compelling sets of data suggesting that, on the one hand, there's something epistemically defective with inquiring into questions that don't have true answers. On the other hand, however, there can be scenarios in which we are epistemically permitted to inquire into questions that don't have true answers. How is it that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers can both be defective and permissible from an epistemic point of view?

The first solution I consider maintains that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers are always impermissible but can be excusable. The second solution maintains that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers are bad inquiries that can be conducted by inquirers we can legitimately trust. I argue against the former and in favor of the latter.

## **1 Introduction**

Which questions are we permitted to inquire into? Which ones are such that we ought not to put them on our research agenda? And what would happen if we ended up inquiring into a question which lacks a true answer?

This paper looks at these questions through the lens of a puzzle. The puzzle, in a nutshell, is this. On the one hand, there's something epistemically off with inquiring into questions that don't have true answers – call this verdict DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING. On the other hand, however, there are scenarios in which we can be epistemically permitted to inquire into questions that don't have true answers – call this verdict PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING. In the first part of the paper I present two equally compelling sets of data in favor of both verdicts. We thus face a puzzle: how is it that inquiries into questions which don't have true answers can both be defective and permissible from an epistemic point of view? This is what I call the *puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry*.

In the second part of the paper, I consider two potential solutions. The first hinges on the idea that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers are always impermissible but can be excusable. The second appeals to the idea that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers are bad inquiries that can be conducted by inquirers who can be legitimately trusted. I argue against the former and endorse the latter.

## **2 The puzzle**

### *2.1* DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING

Consider the following questions:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) Why did Paul McCartney write *Something* in C major?

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<sup>1</sup> Willard-Kyle (2023) deserves the credit for being the first author – to the best of my knowledge – who brought these kinds of questions to philosophical attention.

- (2) Was John Searle or Tim Williamson who first popularised the notion of a constitutive rule in analytic philosophy?
- (3) Why does  $17+24= 42$ ?
- (4) Is it the US or is it Canada that is the world's largest country?

Focus on (1): There certainly is something off with investigating why Paul McCartney wrote the song *Something* in C major: Paul did not write that song, George Harrison did. And, importantly, the appearance of defectiveness isn't tied to moral or prudential considerations. For one, there's no moral harm in investigating why Paul wrote that song. For another, if we assume that the inquirer has plenty of cognitive and non-cognitive resources available and no other more pressing matter to attend to, there seems to be nothing suspicious from a prudential point of view either. So, the best way to articulate the impression of defectiveness is by saying that there's something defective about (1) because (1) has no true answer. Thus, the defectiveness of inquiring into (1) appears to be distinctively epistemic.<sup>2</sup> The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for questions (2)-(4).

One might observe that, strictly speaking, these data don't support DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING. Rather, they reveal something about the speech act of asking. The thought here is that the speech act of asking carries a presupposition – a proposition assumed to be true when a given speech act is performed against the background of which the speech act is to be understood – to the effect that the question a speaker asks has a true answer. So, cases such as (1)-(4) would be cases of presupposition failure, that is, cases in which the proposition *that the question one is asking has a true answer* is false. To explain how presupposition failure could give rise to the distinctive epistemic suspiciousness of questions such as (1)-(4), one might try

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<sup>2</sup> Whitcomb and Millson (2023) Willard-Kyle (2024) capture this thought by saying that questions such as (1)-(4) are *unsound*, making the analogy between the truth-aptness of propositions and the soundness of questions.

a normative approach to presupposition. García-Carpintero (2020) offers such an approach. He regards presuppositions as ancillary speech acts which are governed by a constitutive common knowledge rule such that a speaker's presupposing that  $p$  relative to a group  $G$  is correct just in case it is common knowledge that  $p$  in  $G$ .<sup>3</sup> So, a question such as (1) would sound off precisely because it is not common knowledge that Paul McCartney wrote *Something*.

A normative speech-theoretic approach to presuppositions goes some way towards explaining the distinctively epistemic feeling of defectiveness triggered by cases such as (1)-(4). However, a moment of reflection shows that such suspiciousness goes well beyond conversational cases. Indeed, we can easily imagine someone – call them Robinson – who has spent most of his entire life on a remote tropical desert island without encountering anyone. Surely Robinson can inquire into questions that don't have true answers even if he has no conversational partners to whom he could be asking such a question. And if he did wonder about and inquire into such questions, he would surely be doing something defective from an epistemic viewpoint.

I have considered the suggestion that the data elicited by questions such as (1)-(4) concern conversational impropriety, as opposed to zetetic suspiciousness. Yet, as the Robinson example shows, there are plausible readings of (1)-(4) in which the inquirers are wondering about and inquiring into the target questions without performing any corresponding speech act of asking. This suggests that the data supporting DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING really are about inquiry, as opposed to – just? – conversations.

## 2.2 PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING

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<sup>3</sup> Willard-Kyle (2023: 634 ff.) also considers a knowledge norm of presupposition but argues that any such norm would derive from a more basic zetetic norm on questioning. More on Willard-Kyle's proposal below.

Onto the second leg of the puzzle. Consider the following case:

(Unlucky Luke)

Evelyn keeps a collection of Gibson Les Paul guitars in her room. Her friend Luke wonders why she keeps the guitars in the room and not in the basement, and so starts inquiring into that question. He starts by talking to Evelyn's parents, he then sees through a window that there's enough space in the room for the guitar cases. And he does see the guitar cases. So, Luke terminates his inquiry by forming the belief that Evelyn's room is the most spacious place where to store the guitars. Unbeknownst to Luke and Evelyn's parents, however, some thieves have entered Evelyn's room and stolen all the guitars.

Luke is inadvertently inquiring into a question that has no true answer. And, clearly, he doesn't know that the question of why Evelyn keeps her Gibson Les Paul guitars in her room has no true answer. And yet, it doesn't seem that Luke deserves to be criticised. Surely Luke did everything one ought to do if one wants to figure out the target question. So, it seems that Luke is conducting an epistemically permissible inquiry into a question that doesn't have a true answer. This suggests that there can be epistemically permissible *unlucky inquiries* – cases like (Unlucky Luke) where one inquires into a question which, on account of bad luck, doesn't have a true answer.<sup>4</sup>

Consider now the following scenario:

(Envatted Lucy)

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<sup>4</sup> The careful reader would have remarked that unlucky inquiry cases are constructed in analogy with cases of allegedly justified false beliefs or assertions.

Lucy, who has recently been envatted, wonders whether there's a tree in front of her house. She decides to gather evidence by opening the window, she has a perceptual experience as of a tree and, thinking that she has no reason to distrust her sight, terminates her inquiry by forming the belief that there's a tree in front of her house. Unbeknownst to Lucy, however, she has been fed deceptive experiences as of being in a normal physical environment.

Lucy can't form any true belief about her environment. Despite this, it seems that she engages in a bona fide activity of inquiry: after all, she's been recently envatted and she pretty much did what she used to do when pursuing inquiries in a normal physical environment. And, what's more important, Lucy behaves the way an inquirer ought to behave from an epistemic viewpoint: upon wondering whether there's a tree in front of her house, she gathered evidence through her vision and she terminated her inquiry by forming a belief on the grounds of the gathered evidence. This suggests that there can be epistemically permissible *envatted inquiries* – cases like (Envatted Lucy) where one inquires into a question which, on account of being in a radical sceptical scenario, doesn't have a true answer.

Consider now the following questions:

(5) Will there be a sea battle tomorrow?

(6) Is this shade of colour red?

Several philosophers have argued that future contingent statements,<sup>5</sup> and vague statements,<sup>6</sup> lack a determinate truth-value. In light of these views, we have that questions such as (5)-(6) could not receive true answers. And yet, it's easy to think of scenarios in which one can

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<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Thomason (1970).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Keefe (2000), Fine (1975).

permissibly ask and inquire into them. For example, suppose that Jaimie wonders about (5). She starts investigating the matter by gathering evidence from both fields, e.g. by talking to generals, spies, and soldiers; she studies historical precedents about the enemies; she assesses the battlefield, taking into account weather conditions; she then gives the appropriate weight to each piece of evidence so gathered by auditing it via virtuous reasoning methods. Surely Jaimie's inquiry counts as impeccable, in that she behaves the way an inquirer ought to behave.

Two further remarks about indeterminate inquiry cases are in order. One might observe that we're not compelled to endorse the view that questions such as (5)-(6) can only receive indeterminate answers, for there indeed are views of vagueness and future contingents on which it is compatible to say that those questions do admit of determinate answers. Note however that it's one thing to say that (5)-(6) are not the right examples of indeterminate inquiries and quite another to maintain that there cannot be cases of indeterminate inquiry. To my mind, the very possibility of epistemically permissible indeterminate inquiries already lends support to PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING. One might acknowledge this much but also ask if indeterminate inquiries are cases in which inquirers are investigating hedged questions. Take Jaimie: one might say that she is in fact inquiring into a question that would be expressed by a hedged interrogative sentence such as "According to our current evidence, will there be a sea battle tomorrow?". Hedged questions about future contingents or vagueness admit of determinate answers, so one might say that these cases aren't problematic. But it's unclear what would motivate the prediction that all cases of prima facie indeterminate inquiry are inquiries into hedged questions. After all, just like we can plainly assert future contingents, we can plainly ask questions about the indeterminate futures, and the same seems to be true of the questions we can inquire into.

The foregoing shows that there can be cases of unlucky/evaded/indeterminate inquiry which support PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING. Since DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING is also motivated,

we face a puzzle: how is it that inquiring into questions which don't have true answers can both be (epistemically) defective and (epistemically) permissible? This is the *puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry*. We now have to solve it.

### **3 First solution: Factive Impermissibility and Excusable Inquiry**

I expect to see one kind of response to puzzle, which hinges on the following train of thought: inquiring into questions that don't have true answers amounts to inquiring into something one ought not to inquire into. This is what explains DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING. However, there are scenarios in which we blamelessly or excusably inquire into questions that we ought not to inquire into. This is what explains PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING. I call this the *Factive impermissibility and Excusable Inquiry* solution. My aim in this section is to show that this solution falters.

There may be different ways of articulating such a solution. However, I will rely here on two recent strands of thought which converge toward assigning knowledge a pivotal role in our epistemological theorizing. The first strand of thought has it that knowledge constrains proper inquiry in two ways: on the one hand, insofar as inquirers who investigate questions to which they already know the answers appear to be doing something epistemically pointless, proper inquiry requires ignorance of the answer to the question one is inquiring into (Friedman 2017, van Elswyk and Sapir 2021, Whitcomb 2017). On the other hand, however, cases such as (1)-(4) suggest that inquirers who investigate questions that they don't know have answers seem to be doing something epistemically pointless. For this reason, Willard-Kyle (2023) has argued that proper inquiry requires knowledge that the question under investigation has a true answer. Carefully stated, Willard-Kyle defends:

KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY: One ought to: inquire into (an unconditional question)  $Q$  at  $t$  only if one knows at  $t$  that  $Q$  has a true (complete, and direct) answer.<sup>7</sup>

Willard-Kyle explicitly maintains that one of the reasons in favor of KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY is its ability to explain the suspiciousness of questions like (1)-(4). The thought here is that inquiries into questions that have no true answers are epistemically defective because, modulo KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY and the factivity of knowledge, they are inquiries we ought not to engage into. So, KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY would explain DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING.<sup>8</sup>

The second strand of thought I want to rely on appeals to the distinction, recently made popular in the context of knowledge-first accounts of the norms of belief and assertion, between permissibility and excusability (or blamelessness). Consider, for instance, a standard sceptical scenario wherein an agent believes false propositions in a seemingly justified or rational way. Knowledge-first views make sense of it by saying that the envatted agents believe what they ought not to believe since they don't know the target propositions, but they do so excusably or blamelessly. Now, while there's no agreement on what the correct definition of epistemic excuses is, most parties to these debates seem to agree that epistemic excusability (or blamelessness) involves a non-culpable ignorance on the agent's part that a norm has been

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<sup>7</sup> The "ought" takes wide scope over the conditional, which means that the norm says: don't both inquire into  $Q$  and fall short of knowing that  $Q$  has a true answer. I will henceforth ignore the "unconditional", "complete", and "direct" qualifications, as they won't play any pivotal role in what's to come. See Willard-Kyle (2023: §2.2) for clarification on these qualifications and why they're needed.

<sup>8</sup> Whitcomb and Millson (2023) defend a similar norm saying that it's irrational to: wonder  $Q$  when your knowledge doesn't evoke  $Q$ , where your knowledge evokes  $Q$  only if it ensures that  $Q$  is sound, i.e. has a true answer.

violated, where such ignorance doesn't impinge on the agent's general capacity to comply with the target norm (see Kelp and Simion 2017, Littlejohn *fc*, Vollet 2023, Williamson *fc*). Equipped with this distinction, we can now see that inquirers may violate KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY excusably or blamelessly. The cases in which this happens are such that the inquirers are in the dark as to whether they don't know that the questions they're inquiring into have true answers. So, the appeal to epistemic excuses would explain PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING.

What to make of this way out of the puzzle? In section 4.2 I will question KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY. However, for the time being, I grant that DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING can be explained in terms of a violation of KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY and focus instead on the explanation of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING in terms of excusability.

A quick look at the current literature reveals that appealing to epistemic excuses to vindicate the existence of knowledge norms of belief and assertion is a controversial manoeuvre,<sup>9</sup> and it seems fair to expect, at least provisionally, that those worries will carry over to the case of question-selection. But the point I want to press here is another one: while the appeal to impermissible but excusable inquiry might make sense in unlucky and envatted inquiry cases, it's much less clear that it can do the required explanatory work in cases of apparently permissible indeterminate inquiry. Let me explain by focusing on Lucy's and Jaimie's inquiries.

While both Jaimie and Lucy engage in apparently permissible inquiry, there's a crucial asymmetry between their epistemic predicaments: Lucy is in no position to appreciate her ignorance regarding the existence of a true answer to the question she's investigating, whereas Jaimie is in a position to know that the question she's inquiring into has no true answer. In fact,

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<sup>9</sup> See Brown (2018), Madison (2018), Marsili (2018), Schechter (2017).

Jaimie is in a position to say things such as “I wonder whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow but I don’t know if I can find out that there will be”, or “I wonder whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow but I don’t know whether there’s a fact of the matter to be known either way”. Since there’s no apparent irrationality or incoherence in wondering about a question Q while being in a position to appreciate that one doesn’t know or is uncertain that Q has a true answer, such assertions do not impinge on the permissibility of Jaime’s inquiry. By contrast, Lucy is completely in the dark with respect to her ignorance: no amount of a priori reflection or empirical investigation would help her to improve her epistemic position vis-à-vis the fact that she doesn’t know that the question of whether there’s a tree in front of her house has a true answer.

Jaimie’s and Lucy’s different epistemic predicaments vis-à-vis their ignorance of the existence of true answers to the respective questions they’re investigating matter normatively. Lucy’s (non-culpable) second-order ignorance, i.e. her ignorance that she doesn’t know that the question she wonders about doesn’t have a true answer, is what excuses her for inquiring into the question of whether there’s a tree in front of her. However, Jaimie is not (non-culpably) in the dark as to whether she doesn’t know that the question of whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow can receive a true answer, for she is in a position to reflect on the indeterminacy of the situation and acquire reasons to be uncertain that the question she’s investigating has a true answer. This suggests that an account of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING in terms of excusability would not cover cases of permissible indeterminate inquiry, for in those cases the inquirer might lack the excuse-granting non-culpable ignorance exhibited by inquirers in envatted inquiry cases.

The point can be sharpened by looking at a prominent account of excuses offered by Tim Williamson (fc). Williamson offers a dispositional account of excuses which says, in a nutshell, that one violates a norm N excusably just in case one  $\phi$ -es,  $\phi$ -ing is forbidden by N and, in  $\phi$ -

ing, one does what someone with a general disposition to comply with N would do in the situation at issue. Consider now Jaimie: she's clearly violating KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY, in that she inquires into a question which doesn't have a true answer. We can also imagine that she does while being uncertain that the question of whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow has a true answer. Is she doing what someone with a general disposition to comply with KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY would do? This question should be answered in the negative: if you're uncertain that by inquiring into Q you would comply with KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY and you're disposed to comply with such a norm, then you would rather refrain from inquiring into Q rather than taking the chance of botching things epistemically (Bear in mind that KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY is a wide-scope norm that can be complied with by not inquiring into the target question). So, on Williamson's dispositional account, Jaimie would not be excusable for inquiring into the question of whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow. And yet, her inquiry appears to be epistemically permissible.<sup>10</sup>

Williamson's account of excuses hinges on a distinction between *primary* and *derivative* norms. So, one may wonder whether other ways of tracing this distinction can deliver the result that although Jaimie's inquiry is primarily improper, on account of her violation of

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<sup>10</sup> Although Willard-Kyle (2023: 625) assumes bivalence, he briefly mentions (*ibid.*: fn. 45) the possibility of amending KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY as follows:

KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY\*: One ought to: inquire into (an unconditional question) *Q* at *t* only if one knows at *t* that *Q* has a not-false (complete, and direct) answer.

On KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY\*, questions such as (5) and (6) can be known to have not-false answers on various ways of thinking about future contingents and vagueness. This amendment strikes me as unprincipled though: the data supporting DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING are compelling because, as inquirers, we wonder about questions in order to obtain true answers, and not just to avoid false ones. I'll briefly come back to this below.

KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY, it is derivatively proper on account of her compliance with a certain derivative norm. I have doubts that this move will carry the day though. For instance, DeRose (2002: 180, 2009: 93) argues that for any primary norm N, there is a derivative norm that forbids one from performing actions that one reasonably thinks violate N. Alternatively, Benton (2013) offers a strengthened derivative norm to the effect that for any primary norm N there is a derivative norm forbidding you from performing actions if you do not know that those actions comply with N. However, Jaimie violates the corresponding derivative norms for question selection while, at the same time, inquiring (apparently) permissibly into the question of whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow. So, appealing to the more general distinction between primary and secondary norms won't help solve the puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry.

Interestingly, cases other than indeterminate inquiry speak against this idea. Consider the following questions:

- (7) Is there an infinite set of real numbers that could not be put into one-to-one correspondence with either the integers or the real numbers?
- (8) What's the meaning of life?
- (9) Are we free?

Take a professional set theorist, call her Penny, who wonders about (7), thereby inquiring into Cantor's Continuum Hypothesis. Surely there's nothing epistemically impermissible in devoting one's research efforts to one of the best-known unsolved problems in set theory. And Penny could do their best to approach Cantor's Continuum Hypothesis and behave impeccably from a zetetic viewpoint. Moreover, the various failed attempts at proving Cantor's Continuum

Hypothesis constitute inductive evidence that makes it rational for Penny to be uncertain that the question has a true answer.

As for questions (8) and (9), these are classic examples of questions philosophers have been wondering and inquiring into for a long time. A great many philosophers have inquired into the question of the meaning of life and the free will problem and, no doubt, many of them have done so permissibly from an epistemic viewpoint. And yet, when we wonder about and inquire into these questions, we're not only uncertain about what their respective true answers are, but we're also uncertain that such questions can in the end be resolved. The widespread and long-lasting disagreements amongst philosophers on these issues constitute inductive evidence that questions such as (8)-(9) don't have true answers.

Inquirers who wonder about and inquire into questions such as (7)-(8)-(9) engage in *uncertain inquiries*, namely inquiries into questions which we can be rationally uncertain have true answers. As the examples just discussed suggest, at least some cases of uncertain inquiry appear to be epistemically permissible even though the inquirers are not in the dark as to whether or not those questions don't have true answers – in fact, the inquirers have evidence that makes it rational for them to be uncertain that those questions have true answers. So, the supporter of KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY wouldn't be able to account for the apparent permissibility of some cases of uncertain inquiry by saying that these are instances of impermissible yet excusable inquiry.

Summing up. The *Factive Impermissibility and Excusable Inquiry* solution accounts for DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING in terms of impermissible inquiry and for PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING in terms of excusable inquiry. However, while we can make sense of apparently permissible unlucky and envatted inquiries in terms of excusable inquiry, an appeal to epistemic excuses won't explain at least some cases of apparently permissible indeterminate and uncertain inquiry. As already said, my case against the *Factive Impermissibility and Excusable Inquiry*

solution is not complete, for I will give a direct argument against factive prescriptive norms such as KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY below. However, the discussion pursued so far already gives us reason to look for an alternative solution to the puzzle.

#### **4 Second solution: Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust**

The second solution I consider and endorse rests on the distinction between the norms that set the standard of goodness of activities of inquiry qua activities of inquiry – which we'll call *evaluative* norms of inquiry – and the norms that describe the conditions of obligatory, forbidden, and permissible inquiry – which we'll call *prescriptive* norms of inquiry.<sup>11</sup> Relying on this distinction, I develop a solution to the puzzle – which I call the *Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust* solution – in three steps. First, I argue there's an evaluative norm of inquiry saying that there's something good (bad) about activities of inquiry that can (cannot) deliver knowledgeable – and *a fortiori* true – answers to the questions under investigation. This factive evaluative norm explains DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING. Secondly, I offer a test for detecting the absence of prescriptive norms of inquiry to show that the cases supporting PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING indicate that there's no factive prescriptive norm constraining our take on whether the questions we select for inquiry have true answers. Finally, I explain PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING in terms of the idea that it is legitimate to trust the inquirers who engage in the target inquiries.

##### *4.1 Evaluative vs. prescriptive norms of inquiry*

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<sup>11</sup> In recent literature, the distinction between evaluative and prescriptive norms has been first systematised by McHugh (2012) and further developed by Simion, Kelp and Ghijsen (2016).

I begin by introducing the distinction between *evaluative* and *prescriptive* norms at a general level. I will largely follow McHugh (2012)'s and Simion, Kelp and Ghijsen (2016)'s systematization of the distinction. Evaluative norms specify what it is for a certain token of  $\phi$ -ing to be good qua  $\phi$ -ing, thereby telling us what it takes for a token of a given type to be good or bad with respect to its type. A robbery, for example, is good qua robbery just in case the robbers get the loot without being caught. This suggests that evaluative norms specify the goodness of a certain  $\phi$ -ing attributively (see Geach 1956). Evaluative norms license ought-judgements, in the following sense: robberies ought to be such that the robbers get the loot without being caught, just like knives ought to be sharp and diamonds ought to be shiny. However, evaluative norms do not prescribe, prohibit, or permit patterns of conduct and behaviour: from the fact that a good robbery is such that the robbers get the loot without being caught, it doesn't follow that there's a norm prohibiting apprehending robbers. So, evaluative norms license *ought-to-be* judgements without necessarily licensing *ought-to-do* judgements.

In contrast to evaluative norms, prescriptive norms specify the conditions for obligatory, forbidden, and permissible  $\phi$ -ing. Norms such as "Fulfil your promise", "Don't lie", and "You may reach the highway speed limit" are examples of prescriptive norms. These examples show that prescriptive norms license *ought-to-do* judgements. A token  $\phi$ -ing can be obligatory or permitted without *ipso facto* being good: if my child and their little friend are drowning and I can save only one of them, it seems morally permitted – if not even obligatory – that I save my child, but it is morally bad to let the other child die. So, prescriptive norms don't necessarily entail evaluative norms.

With all of this in mind, let us turn to evaluative and prescriptive norms of inquiry. To identify the evaluative norms of inquiry, I appeal to the eminently plausible thought that inquiry into questions, like other activities and practices such as playing competitive games,

building houses, and reasoning, is an aim-directed activity,<sup>12</sup> where the aim of inquiry is *constitutive* of the kind of activity inquiry is.<sup>13</sup> The claim that inquiry has a constitutive aim entails the following two theses: (i.) If a certain token activity doesn't aim at what inquiry aims at, then that activity should not be type-individuated as an activity of inquiry; (ii.) Under the widely held assumption that the standard of goodness for a certain  $\phi$ -ing depends on what it is to  $\phi$ ,<sup>14</sup> the constitutive aim of inquiry fixes the standard of goodness for a token activity of inquiry *qua* activity of inquiry. This is tantamount to saying that the constitutive aim of inquiry fixes the evaluative norm of inquiry.

It's widely agreed that inquiry has an epistemic aim, but there's debate about what this involves. Several philosophers have converged towards the idea knowledge is the unique aim of inquiry.<sup>15</sup> Call this view *knowledge-based monism*. Knowledge-based monism is the view to beat, but it's not met with universal consensus. There are two alternative options: first, on an alternative monist view of the aim of inquiry, inquiry has a unique non-factive aim, say *justification*.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, on a pluralist view of the aim of inquiry, there can be genuine cases of inquiry in which the inquirer already knows the answer to the question they are inquiring into.<sup>17</sup> Taken at face value, these cases suggest that knowledge is only one among the many aims of inquiry. Besides knowledge, the pluralist thought goes, inquiry can aim to achieve

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<sup>12</sup> Although see Friedman (2024) for scepticism. I cannot address Friedman's points in the space of this paper, as I will rather operate under the widely shared assumption that inquiry is indeed an aim-directed activity.

<sup>13</sup> See also Kelp (2021: Chapter 1).

<sup>14</sup> See Kelp (2021), McHugh and Way (2018), and Thomson (2008).

<sup>15</sup> See Kelp (2021: Ch. 1 and Ch. 2), van Elswyk and Sapir (2021: 1920), Whitcomb (2010: 674).

<sup>16</sup> This view has been championed by Davidson (2005), Feldman (2002), and Rorty (1995).

<sup>17</sup> See Archer (2018), Falbo (2021), Woodard (2021).

either a true answer or an objectively certain answer or higher-order knowledge that one knows the answer to the target question, and so on.

Note the following: part of my argument in favor of the *Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust* solution consists in inferring the existence of a factive evaluative norm of inquiry – a norm saying that there’s something bad about activities of inquiry that cannot deliver knowledgeable and a *fortiori* true answers to the questions under investigation from –from the idea that inquiry has a factive aim. To make this inference, we don’t need to adjudicate between the knowledge-based monist view and the pluralist view. For the point that is of import here is that both advocates and pluralist detractors of the monist knowledge account of the aim of inquiry agree that inquiry has a factive aim: inquiry – exclusively or not, depending on whether one endorses monism or pluralism about the aim of inquiry – does aim at attaining the true answer to the question one is inquiring into. This suggests that the *Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust* solution can be neutral on the debate between the knowledge-based monist view and the pluralist view of the aim of inquiry. Still, the solution I want to defend is incompatible with non-factivism about the aim of inquiry. In my view, though, this is a cost that we should be ready to pay, for there are independent reasons for rejecting the idea that inquiry has a unique non-factive aim (see Kelp 2021: Chapter 1). With all this in mind, and for ease of expression, I’ll henceforth talk of “the” aim of inquiry.

Let us turn now to prescriptive norms of inquiry. Since we’re interested in establishing whether question-selection is subject to prescriptive *epistemic* norms like Willard-Kyle’s KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY, I will avail myself of the idea, recently defended by Boulton (2021) and Kauppinen (2018), that reducing trust in a certain subject indicates that we’re blaming and holding them accountable from a distinctively epistemic point of view. Such epistemic blame and accountability are appropriate if trust reduction (in a given scenario and

relative to a certain topic) is legitimate.<sup>18</sup> Assuming the widely held view that the presence of a legitimate practice of accountability and blame suggests that there is a certain norm that one is violating,<sup>19</sup> we can state the following heuristic to determine whether question selection in inquiry is subject to prescriptive epistemic norms:

HEURISTIC: For any question  $Q$ , for any inquirer  $I$  with a research agenda  $R$  such that  $I$  selects  $Q$  for  $R$ , and for any prescriptive norm  $N$ : if  $I$  violates  $N$  and it is illegitimate to reduce our trust in  $I$  for selecting  $Q$  for  $R$ , then  $I$ 's putting  $Q$  for  $R$  is not governed by  $N$ .

Three clarifications about HEURISTIC are in order. First, I use the metaphorical talk of “research agenda”, which I borrow from Olsson and Westlund (2006),<sup>20</sup> to refer to the record of the set of questions that the inquirer wishes to resolve. This comprises both the questions that the inquirer has before their mind occurrently and the questions which the inquirer is disposed to inquire into and resolve.

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<sup>18</sup> This is not to deny that, sometimes, failing to attain one’s goals gives rise to criticism (see Marsili 2018). When the Italian striker Roberto Baggio missed the vital penalty in the 1994 Soccer World Cup final against Brazil, many Italians said things such as: “He should have scored that penalty”, “That was a really bad penalty kick”, “Why did he try to score by aiming at the top right corner?”. Note, however, that criticism of a *token activity of*  $\phi$ -ing (i.e. the concrete act of kicking penalty performed by Baggio on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1994) doesn’t entail criticism of the *agent* who  $\phi$ -es by reducing trust in them. In fact, the reason why Italians criticised Baggio’s penalty kick is precisely that they trusted him as a penalty kicker, given his track-record of success and high level of skills. This brings out the distinction between *act*-criticism and *agent*-criticism, where the latter (but not the former) is linked to trust reduction.

<sup>19</sup> See Flores and Woodard (2023), Kiesewetter (2017: chapter 2), Sher (2006: 118), Wallace (1994: 134).

<sup>20</sup> See also Friedman (2017).

Secondly, it's important to clarify the notion of trust in inquiry – or zetetic trust. The initial thought is this: there are many questions on our research agendas, but our cognitive and non-cognitive bounds prevent us from inquiring into all of them individually. So, we must divide zetetic labour within our epistemic community and let other inquirers take up and inquire into questions that are on our research agendas. So, we can say that, minimally, we trust someone in inquiry when we outsource to them inquiries into questions that are on our research agendas. This makes zetetic trust analogous to the more traditional phenomenon of epistemic trust: just like we need to rely on others to form beliefs about what the world is like, need to rely on others to inquire into what the world is like. There are several substantive questions about the traditional notion of epistemic trust that will carry over to zetetic trust, such as: whether zetetic trust essentially involves a doxastic or a conative attitudinal component,<sup>21</sup> or else whether it is a kind of performance;<sup>22</sup> what the relation between trust and trustworthiness is (whether we'd better understand the former in terms of the latter, or vice versa, and what the normative relations between such notions are).<sup>23</sup> For present purposes, we can remain on all such important questions and stick to the very minimal idea that zetetic trust is a three-place predicate – “X trusts Y with inquiring into Q” – whose instances involve the trustor's doing something, i.e. trusting Y with inquiring into a certain question Q.

On an admittedly simplified yet informative version of the traditional notion of epistemic trust, I epistemically trust a certain agent with respect to the question whether *p* when I form the belief that *p* on the grounds of their testifying that *p*. This view invites thinking of trust reduction as involving assigning less credence to the target individual's judgements

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<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Hieronymi (2008) for a doxastic account of trust and Holton (1994) for a conative account.

<sup>22</sup> See Carter (2022) for a performative account of trust.

<sup>23</sup> See Carter and Simion (2020) and Carter (2023) for more on the normative relations between trust and trustworthiness.

and assertions about the question whether  $p$  (and about related questions), thereby giving less credibility to their testimony about that (and related) question(s) (see again Boulton 2021 and Kauppinen 2018). So, it seems fair to say that at the heart of epistemic trust there's the practice of testimony and information sharing more generally. This is exactly where the analogy between the traditional notion of epistemic trust and zetetic trust breaks down.

Thinking of zetetic trust in terms of testimony and information sharing gives rise to an incomplete picture of zetetic trust though. The reason is this: Inquiry is an activity that unfolds over time by having initiation, evolution, resource allocation, and termination conditions. So, there are different ways to initiate, evolve, allocate resources to, and terminate inquiry, where such ways are best understood in terms of dispositions – what we may call “zetetic dispositions”.<sup>24</sup> So, when we trust someone in inquiry we do not trust them just because we follow them in terminating the inquiry the way they do, e.g. by terminating the inquiry into the question whether  $p$  by forming the belief that  $p$ . That is to say, zetetic trust doesn't reduce to trusting someone in light of how they terminate the inquiry, but it also involves trusting someone given: (i.) how they initiate their inquiry into Q, by looking at the way the trustee gathers evidence; (ii.) how they develop their inquiries, by looking at the way the trustee audits the gathered evidence; (iii.) how they assign resources to their inquiry into Q, by looking the way the trustee manages cognitive and non-cognitive resources to the zetetic enterprise under examination; (iv) and, finally, how they terminate their inquiry into Q, by looking the way the trustee forms a belief in an answer to Q. This suggests that zetetic trust not only has to do with the way the trustee forms their beliefs at the end of their inquiry, but it also involves trusting them with how they initiate, develop, and assign resources to the target inquiry.

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<sup>24</sup> I borrow the expression “zetetic dispositions” from Palmira (2023).

Finally, HEURISTIC appeals to the *illegitimacy* of reducing trust. A(n) (il)legitimate epistemic practice is a practice that bears a (weak) strong connection to the epistemic values pursued by that practice,<sup>25</sup> where such a connection can be understood in terms of (un)reliability.<sup>26</sup> This applies straightforwardly to zetetic dispositions. Zetetic dispositions can be *reliable* or *unreliable*, depending on their conduciveness to the aim of inquiry – for present purposes, knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Suppose, for instance, that one initiates one’s inquiry into a scientific question by gathering evidence via running an experiment: one’s disposition to initiate an inquiry by gathering evidence by running an experiment is reliable if, were one to properly audit that evidence with the right amount of cognitive and non-cognitive resources and were one to terminate one’s inquiry by forming a belief on the grounds of the gathered and audited evidence, one would come to form a knowledgeable belief in a sufficiently high number of cases. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for proceeding with one’s inquiry by assessing the evidence, and terminating one’s inquiry by forming a belief in a certain answer to the question under investigation.

There are three main questions about zetetic dispositions: What’s the type of circumstance relative to which we attribute reliability to zetetic dispositions? How to individuate the type of zetetic disposition to which we attribute reliability? What percentage of cases count as “sufficiently high number of cases”?

As for the first question, I will follow authors, such as Lasonen-Aarnio (2021) and Sosa (2007) about belief-forming dispositions and Palmira (2023) about zetetic dispositions, who focus on what would happen in most normal possible worlds, where normal zetetic conditions are such that they do not *call for explanation* given what’s feasible for us to do in inquiry in

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<sup>25</sup> See Flores and Woodard (2023).

<sup>26</sup> See Goldberg (2018: 170).

<sup>27</sup> Reliability comes in degrees, but I’ll ignore this complication in what’s to come.

the light of our computational, attentional, recollective, temporal, spatial, and even financial limits. As for the second question – which amounts to a version of the generality problem for reliable zetetic dispositions – I invite the reader to extend their preferred solution to the generality problem for reliabilism to the type-individuation of zetetic dispositions. As for the third question, I will rely on an intuitive take on how many cases will be relevant for reliability without giving any precise measure or percentage.

Much more could be said about reliable zetetic dispositions, but I trust that the foregoing suffices to unpack HEURISTIC. We now have all the pieces we need to articulate the *Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust* solution.

#### 4.2 DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING *as bad inquiry*

It's easy to see that inquiry is subject to an evaluative norm saying that inquiries that fail to achieve a true answer to the question under investigation are bad inquiries. Start with the thought that the constitutive aim of  $\phi$ -ing fixes the evaluative norm of  $\phi$ -ing. Enter now the widely held thesis that the constitutive aim of inquiry is (or entails) truth. This immediately generates an evaluative norm saying that inquiries that fall short of attaining the true answer to the question under investigation are bad inquiries. This puts us in a position to account for DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING in terms of a violation of the factive evaluative norm of inquiry. Consider again:

(1) Why did Paul McCartney write *Something* in C major?

There's something epistemically off with inquiring into this question because this is a bad inquiry: inquiring into why Paul wrote *Something* in C major is bound to fail to meet the aim

of inquiry, for it's not the case that Paul wrote that song. So, inquiring into why Paul wrote *Something* in C major violates the factive evaluative norm governing inquiry. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other examples that motivate DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING we examined in §2.1. So, DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING is explained in terms of a violation of the factive evaluative norm of inquiry. Thus, once we assume that knowledge is the aim of inquiry, KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY could at most be interpreted as an evaluative norm of inquiry saying that inquiries into questions that don't have knowledgeable answers are bad inquiries.<sup>28</sup>

At this stage, though, one might reason as follows. Even granting that evaluative norms don't entail prescriptive norms (and vice versa), it's undeniable that there is often a relationship between evaluative and prescriptive norms.<sup>29</sup> And it might well be that, in specific cases, the evaluative and the prescriptive norms coincide. So, one might conjecture that the factive evaluative norm of inquiry gives rise to a corresponding factive prescriptive norm of inquiry.

Fortunately, we can assess this train of thought by applying HEURISTIC – which gives us a test for detecting the absence of prescriptive norms of inquiry – to cases of apparently permissible inquiry into questions that don't have true answers. Let us, for instance, focus again on (Unlucky Luke) and ask: would it be illegitimate to reduce our zetetic trust in Luke because he is inquiring into a question that doesn't have a true answer?

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<sup>28</sup> Insofar as inquiry aims at attaining true answers to the questions under investigation, it's unclear why there would be something good about attaining a not-false answer to the question one is inquiring into. This suggests that the constitutive aim of inquiry doesn't immediately generate evaluative norms saying that there's something good about having not-false answers to the question one is inquiring into. In light of this, I think that there's no straightforward argument in favor of an evaluative reading of the amended KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY\* we briefly considered above.

<sup>29</sup> For more on this, see Simion, Kelp and Ghijsen (2016).

This question should be answered in the affirmative. Luke behaved the way an inquirer ought to behave by gathering and auditing evidence, as well as assigning cognitive and non-cognitive resources to the inquiry reliably. Take for instance the way in which Luke gathers evidence: in most cases in which there's a certain object *O* occupying a certain location *L* and one gathers evidence about the presence of that object the way Luke does, such evidence-gathering is relevant to the question of whether *O* is in *L* and puts one in a position to know the answer to the question of whether *O* is in *L*. This suggests Luke's evidence-gathering in (Unlucky Luke) is reliable. Similar considerations hold for the ways in which Luke, first, proceeds with his inquiry by assessing the gathered evidence and, secondly, terminates his inquiry by forming a belief that's grounded on the gathered and assessed evidence. So, although Luke has been unlucky on this specific occasion, it is illegitimate to reduce our trust in him – in fact, given that he behaved the way he ought to zetetically, we have reason to trust him more than we did before. Thus, applying HEURISTIC to (Unlucky Luke) reveals that inquirers who engage in unlucky inquiries are not subject to a factive prescriptive norm. An application of HEURISTIC to cases of envatted and indeterminate inquiry would return the same verdict. So, HEURISTIC gives us reason to think that there's no norm prescribing to inquire into questions only if they have true answers.

Summing up. I have argued that DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING can be explained in terms of a factive evaluative norm of inquiry saying that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers are bad inquiries. This suggests that an appeal to KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY is explanatorily dispensable. I have then harnessed a test to detect the absence of factive prescriptive norms of inquiry and showed that it returns the verdict that inquiry isn't subject to a factive prescriptive norm. This gives a direct argument against KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY and suggests that the explanation of DEFECTIVE QUESTIONING in terms of evaluative

norms is superior to an explanation in terms of factive prescriptive norms such as KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY. We can now turn to PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING.

#### 4.3 PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING *as legitimate zetetic trust*

I want to begin with a somewhat natural proposal about PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING and show why it fails. The failure is instructive though, for it allows us to pave the way for what I take to be a better approach to PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING.

A somewhat natural account of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING might be this: what explains PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING is the existence of some non-factive, prescriptive epistemic norm such as:

RATIONALITY/JUSTIFICATION NORM FOR INQUIRY: One ought to: inquire into (an unconditional question)  $Q$  at  $t$  only if one rationally/justifiedly believes at  $t$  that  $Q$  has a true (complete, and direct) answer.<sup>30</sup>

RATIONALITY/JUSTIFICATION NORM FOR INQUIRY would explain why cases of unlucky and envatted inquiry are epistemically permissible. For it's not hard to imagine that, in (Unlucky Luke), Luke's overall epistemic position makes it rational for him to believe that the question of why Evelyn keeps the guitars in the room and not in the basement has a true answer. The same can be said about (Envatted Lucy). However, bear in mind that the case of Jaimie, wonders and starts inquiring into whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow. Jaimie, unlike Luke and Lucy, might have reasons to be uncertain that this question doesn't have a true answer. Jaimie, as has already emerged previously, could say things like "I wonder whether

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<sup>30</sup> The reader should feel free to feed into RATIONALITY/JUSTIFICATION NORM FOR INQUIRY their preferred internalist or externalist (non-factive) account of epistemic rationality.

there will be a sea battle tomorrow but I don't know if I can find out that there will be" without any apparent irrationality or incoherence. This suggests that Jaimie can still inquire permissibly into this question even though she's rationally uncertain that it has a true answer, contra what RATIONALITY/JUSTIFICATION NORM FOR INQUIRY would predict. The same can be said about cases of uncertain inquiry.

The failure of both KNOWLEDGE NORM FOR INQUIRY and RATIONALITY/JUSTIFICATION NORM FOR INQUIRY is instructive. Although the former is a factive norm and the latter is a non-factive norm, they share a common feature: both norms try to explain our judgements of erotetic permissibility by imposing positive epistemic constraints on the answer to the question one is inquiring into. I suggest departing from this very idea and explore the thought that there isn't anything more to erotetic permissibility than our legitimate practice of trusting someone in inquiry.

This thought hinges on a very simple observation: all cases supporting PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING are cases in which the inquirers can be legitimately trusted in the division of zetetic labour in virtue of the fact that they are disposed to initiate, proceed with, and terminate their inquiries in reliable ways. I have already argued for this claim in some detail by looking at (Unlucky Luke). Instead of belaboring that point though I want to address what I take to be an interesting worry about the explanation of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING in terms of legitimate zetetic trust.

Given the details of cases such as (Unlucky Luke), (Envatted Lucy), and Jaimie's inquiry into whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow, it's easy to see that all these agents are disposed to gather evidence, assess the target evidence, and terminate their inquiry in reliable ways. However, one might worry that given that, Luke, Lucy, and Jaimie put on their research agendas questions that cannot be known, they are not reliable question selectors, for no way of

inquiring into them would allow them to attain the aim of their respective inquiries. So, one may ask: Why would it be legitimate to trust such poor question selectors?

The objection grants that Luke, Lucy, and Jaimie are reliable evidence-collectors/assessors, and reliable inquiry closers but presses the point that the very fact of choosing questions that cannot receive knowledgeable answers should prevent us from trusting them in inquiry. I will make two points in reply. The first is that we can tell plausible stories which make these agents reliable question selectors. The second is that reliable question selection and legitimate zetetic trust aren't so tied to each other as the objection seems to presuppose.

Begin with (Unlucky Luke). To determine whether Luke's question selection is reliable we should focus on his disposition to select questions and whether that disposition is conducive to knowledgeable answers in most cases. Nothing prevents us from saying that Luke has the disposition to select why-questions about the location of objects only when those objects are indeed located in the relevant space. Perhaps Luke plays it safe, so to speak, or else he's incredibly good at tracking which why-questions have true answers. Either way, such a question-selection disposition is reliable, for in most cases Luke inquires into a why-question about the location of objects which admits of a knowledgeable answer, even though on occasion Luke selects a question which cannot receive a knowledgeable answer and engages in a bad inquiry.

Turn now to (Envatted Lucy) Since Lucy has been recently envatted, the reliability of her question selection should be assessed with respect to possible worlds in which there is a normal physical environment populated by all sorts of medium-sized concrete objects. In such normal circumstances, it's easy to imagine that she has the disposition to inquire into questions about the presence of medium-sized physical objects in her environment questions when those about such objects do have knowledgeable answers, so in most cases Lucy inquires into a

question which admits of a knowledgeable answer. This, again, ensures that Lucy's question selection is reliable, although on occasion Lucy engages in a bad inquiry.

Similar stories can be told about cases of indeterminate inquiry. Take, for instance, Jaimie, who inquires into the question of whether there will be a sea battle tomorrow. We can imagine that although this is a contingent question that doesn't admit of a determinate true answer, Jaimie has the disposition to select questions about the determinate future, that is, in most cases in which she inquires into a question about the future she takes up questions that have determinate answers, e.g. questions involving deterministic processes or laws of nature. On occasion, however, she slips into inquiring into a question about the indeterminate future.

The foregoing shows that if we grant that legitimate zetetic trust (partly) depends on the trustee's reliability in question selection, we can still vindicate the proposed explanation of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING, for we can make sense of the idea that one can count as a reliable question selector even though on occasion one selects questions for inquiry that don't admit of a knowledgeable answer. However, I doubt that we should even grant that reliable question-selection is key to determining whether we should trust someone for their question selection.

The phenomenon of zetetic trust arises because, given our cognitive and non-cognitive bounds, we cannot possibly inquire into the questions that are on our research agendas. Suppose now that X has the disposition to select trivial questions that are easily answerable, and Y has the disposition to select interesting, morally significant, and practically urgent questions. Surely, if we had to outsource the selection of the questions which will have to be resolved – possibly collectively, given the division of zetetic labour – we'd better outsource this task to Y, as opposed to X. This suggests the following: when we assess whether we are legitimate to trust someone with selecting the questions that will go on our research agendas, we won't be paying much attention to whether the candidate trustee will select questions that can be easily

answered. Rather, we will be paying attention to the interest, practical relevance, and moral significance of those questions.

Summing up. I have argued that all there is to an explanation of PERMISSIBLE QUESTIONING is a legitimate practice of trusting the target agents with inquiring into the corresponding questions. Importantly, I have argued that one can be legitimately trusted in inquiry even if one selects a question that cannot receive a knowledgeable answer. I thus conclude that the *Factive Evaluations and Legitimate Zetetic Trust* solution does offer a good way out of the puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry.

## **5 Conclusions**

The puzzle of defective and permissible inquiry brings out a tension within the epistemic assessment of our zetetic enterprises. The tension, I have argued, can be eased once we make room for the idea that inquiries into questions that don't have true answers can be bad – because they are bound to fail to meet the constitutive aim of inquiry – but still permissible – because we can legitimately trust inquirers who investigate them. My solution is altogether silent on the interaction between a distinctively epistemic type of permissibility and defectiveness examined in the paper and other types – moral or more generally practical – of assessment. The correct understanding of such interaction will deliver an answer to the central and yet largely overlooked issue of which questions we should inquire into.

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