THE CONSTITUTIVE AIM OF INQUIRY

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Abstract.   In recent years, there has been a growing interest in epistemic agency among philosophers. This development is in part owing to a growing interest in mental agency and epistemic normativity, along with associated concepts such as epistemic responsibility and the relationship between epistemic rationality and practical rationality. Most authors have focused solely on our agency exercised in the process of acquiring or forming beliefs in response to reasons. But some have examined temporally extended procedural epistemic agency, in particular our agency exercised in the process of inquiry. In this article, I argue for an account of procedural epistemic normativity grounded in a conception of the constitutive aim of inquiry. In doing so I will examine how an account of the constitutive aim of inquiry may both differ from and be like accounts of the constitutive aim of belief and the constitutive aim of intentional action. I propose that the constitutive aim of inquiry is *understanding* and that the aim of understanding may provide us with the norms of inquiry.

Keywords: inquiry ● epistemic normativity ● epistemic agency ● constitutivism

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing body of work on epistemic agency among philosophers. While this development is in part owing to increased interest in mental agency in the philosophy of mind, most of the interest in epistemic agency seems connected to questions about epistemic normativity, including associated concepts such as epistemic responsibility. Most authors have focused solely on our agency exercised in the process of acquiring or forming beliefs in response to reasons. Some have also examined our more temporally extended epistemic agency associated with inquiry.[1] But such epistemic agency has not received the same amount of attention as agency more immediately connected to our coming to believe.

In this essay, I argue for an account of epistemic normativity grounded in a conception of the constitutive aim of inquiry. In doing so I will examine how an account of the constitutive aim of inquiry may both differ from and be similar to accounts of the constitutive aim of belief and the constitutive aim of intentional action.

In section two, I distinguish between and explore two types of epistemic agency: doxastic agency (exercised when we come to believe) and inquiry. In section three, I

move to consider constitutive aim accounts of doxastic agency and practical agency. I discuss how normative requirements that constrain and justify exercises of both types of agency can be derived from their aims. I then move in section four to examine how inquiry may also have a constitutive aim. I propose that the constitutive aim of inquiry is *understanding* and that the aim of understanding may provide us with the norms of inquiry.

2. Epistemic agency

I take it to be the case that by 'epistemic agency' epistemologists are referring to any epistemically relevant activity of an agent and the outcomes of that activity. This would include epistemically relevant activity, whether intentional or nonintentional,[2] that bears directly or indirectly on the doxastic attitude an agent forms and its epistemic status. Examples of such activity include doxastic deliberation, evidence-gathering, focusing on evidence, evaluating the quality of some evidence, evaluating the reliability of some mechanism whereby an agent has or will form a doxastic attitude, attending to perceptual inputs, etc. For my purpose in this essay the following rough schema for 'epistemic agency' should do.

(EA) *S* exercises epistemic agency in *A*-ing if and only if *S*'s *A*-ing bears directly or indirectly on some doxastic attitude *S* forms and the epistemic status of the attitude.

As it stands, 'epistemic agency' picks out a broad concept. It is too broad, in fact. I suggest making a further distinction between two fairly broad types of epistemic agency. The first is non-procedural epistemic agency or, more simply, *doxastic agency*. The second is procedural epistemic agency or, as I am calling it here, *inquiry*.

'Doxastic agency' as I am using that locution refers to epistemic agency that is immediately related to an agent's acquisition of belief. Doxastic agency has been the species of epistemic agency that has most preoccupied epistemologists and philosophers of mind in recent years. It is the most like the sort of practical agency we exercise when we are making up our minds about how to act and form an intention. In the epistemic case, it is the agency we exercise when we are making up our minds about what to believe at the present moment. In some instances, particularly when evidence does not compel belief, we come to believe *by* exercising this sort of agency. Consider three examples of this sort of agency: attending to perceptual inputs, doxastic deliberation, and judging. I will address these in order.[3]

In the case of attending, we attend to perceptual inputs in an effort to immediately settle the answer to a question we have and thereby acquire a belief. For instance, I may be hiking in the Chugach Mountains in Alaska and hear a noise behind me in

the woods and intentionally attend to where the noise came from. Having a rational fear of grizzlies and knowing that the Chugach Mountains have a large grizzly bear population, I am trying to determine whether the noise was made by a grizzly bear so I can figure out how to act. Focusing my attention provides me with the means whereby I can quickly acquire a doxastic attitude (belief, unbelief, suspension of belief) about the source of the noise (Was it a grizzly bear or not?).

When evidence does not compel belief, when we are plagued by doubts about what we presently believe, and when other means of making up our minds about what to believe stall out (such as attending), we sometimes perform the mental action of deliberating about what to believe about p. We engage in doxastic deliberation when the question about the truth of p returns and, again, we are not compelled to believe in one way or another, given our evidence. In doxastic deliberation directed at settling what attitude to take towards p we consider what evidence we have for and against p and weigh its relevance. Deliberation of this sort is a temporally extended mental action. In some instances, deliberation clears things up for us and we acquire a doxastic attitude immediately upon terminating deliberation.

In some cases, deliberation stalls out. Sometimes we happily suspend belief as a consequence. In other instances, an agent must get settled on whether or not to believe that it is the case that p. A good example of this is Carl Ginet's (2001) case of an agent driving to the airport and trying to recall whether or not she locked the door. While I disagree with Ginet's conclusion about the case (see Buckareff 2004), it is still a nice example. In this case, the agent may find that while most of the evidence she considers supports the proposition that she locked the door, the evidence does not compel coming to believe that she locked the door. The evidence for the negation of the relevant proposition is enough to keep the agent from simply coming to believe on the basis of her deliberation. In this sort of case, owing to the practical pressure of making her flight, the agent makes an extra mental effort to judge or accept that she must have locked the door and comes to believe that she locked the door. Her belief may be weak, but as she continues on her way and her fears of being wrong subside, she settles into having a stronger belief. In this case, the agent does not come to believe on the basis of practical reasons, even if practical considerations partially motivated the agent's judging or accepting that p. The agent comes to believe on the basis of her body of evidence that supports p over the negation of p but is only able to come to believe by performing the mental action of judging or accepting that p.

Importantly, coming to have a doxastic attitude when we exercise doxastic agency is not a basic action. Notice that if we exercise doxastic agency as I am describing it in all three of these cases, we come to believe *by* performing some basic mental action. Coming to believe is the intentional outcome of a mental action. Thus, that we may exercise any form of doxastic agency as I am describing it does not entail the truth of direct doxastic voluntarism (the thesis that coming to believe can be a basic

action type). For reasons I have explored elsewhere, I think there are good reasons to think that exercising basic or direct intentional and voluntary control over coming to believe is not only psychologically impossible but is also conceptually impossible (see Buckareff 2014). Why this might be the case will perhaps be a bit clearer in light of what I say later about the constitutive aim of all doxastic agency.

Procedural epistemic agency or, more simply, *inquiry* is very different from doxastic agency. I take inquiry to be any epistemic agency that is diachronic and more remotely related to the production of belief in an agent than doxastic agency is. While doxastic agency only involves mental actions, inquiry can involve only overt actions or only mental actions or a mix of both overt and mental actions. Examples of such agency would include evidence-gathering, designing experiments, evaluating the quality of some evidence, and other types of activities that involve a more sustained effort on the part of an agent aimed at an epistemic goal. While doxastic agency terminates with the acquisition of a doxastic attitude, inquiry may terminate without the acquisition of a doxastic attitude that settles some question. And while the agent who engages in a successful token act of inquiry will satisfy the goal of her activities, there may still be a great deal of cognitive distance to traverse before the agent succeeds in satisfying the goal that motivated their inquiry to begin with.

Consider, for instance, a historian doing archival research. Suppose the historian is doing work on the Haymarket Affair. In this case, the historian is trying to determine the extent to which Rudolf Schnaubelt was or was not responsible for the bomb that exploded in Haymarket Square in Chicago on May 4, 1886. In doing archival research on one of the days, the historian may be looking for documents that provide some evidence for the location of the police on that day vis-à-vis protestors. The historian's inquiry on that day is successful if they find substantial documentation that can help give them a clearer picture of the events that took place on May 4, 1886. Note that in answering the question about the location of the police, the historian has not answered the larger question that provides the broader motivation for their research on that day. But they successfully execute their intention to find evidence that will help them determine the position of the police in the square on that day. Moreover, they are closer to answering the broader question that motivated their inquiry on that day.

3. Constitutivism about doxastic agency and practical agency

Assuming that successful inquiry is rational inquiry, where do the requirements of rational inquiry come from? In this section I will turn to recent work on doxastic agency and practical agency to help get an answer to that question. Specifically, I

will turn to recent work on doxastic agency and practical agency that takes there to be a constitutive aim of each type of agency. According to constitutivist theories, the normative requirements that constrain agency come from the constitutive aim of agency. On such approaches, conforming our agency to the requirements provided by normative reasons will contribute to fulfilling the aim of that type of agency. Behavior not guided by such requirements fails to count as agency, whether doxastic or practical.

I will begin by discussing constitutivism about doxastic agency since the account of constitutivism about practical agency builds in many ways on how the constitutive aim of doxastic agency serves as a constraint.

3.1. The constitutive aim of doxastic agency

I assume there is a meaningful sense in which correct belief is a type of acceptance that aims at truth or conformity to truth (Velleman 2000c, 2009; Williams 1973). So a belief is correct if and only if it is true. Believing falsely involves a failure to believe as one ought. Because of this, the normative constraints on doxastic agency derive from this constitutive aim of belief.

Regarding the truth-directedness of belief, a propositional attitude is a belief if its content is represented as true in a way that other propositional attitudes do not. This may be due in part to the so-called *direction of fit* of belief. Belief has a *mind-to-world* direction of fit, the mind conforming itself to the world as it is presented to the agent; conative states, like desire and intention, have a *world-to-mind* direction of fit, the functional role of such attitudes would include the conformity of the world to the mind.[4]

None of this is to say that when we are trying to make up our minds about whether or not to believe that *p* we are explicitly asking whether *p* is true. Rather, our concern as represented in our conscious experience is over whether or not, for instance, the door was left unlocked. But in answering that the door was not left unlocked, we are in a position to answer that it is true that the door was not left unlocked.

In virtue of the truth-directedness of belief, doxastic agency is constrained by the kinds of reasons *for which* an agent may come to believe. Reasons *for* believing that *p* are truth-indicative considerations — i.e., broadly, considerations that seem to favor the truth of *p*. Such epistemic reasons differ from broadly practical reasons insofar as epistemic reasons bear directly on the truth of *p* and count in favor of the truth of *p*. Practical reasons do not bear directly on the truth of *p* and do not count in favor of the truth of *p*, but they may count in favor of treating *p* as true (see Shah 2006). While epistemic reasons are reasons *for* believing that *p*, practical reasons may be among the reasons that explain *why* an agent believes that *p*.

That reasons for believing that p should be truth-indicative considerations is

perhaps most evident when we consider the transparency of belief and doxastic-deliberation. First, with respect to actual beliefs an agent possesses, from the first-person perspective, the question, "Do I believe that p" may be indistinguishable from the question "Is it true that p?" (see Edgely 1969; cf. Shah 2003). If an agent answers that it is not true that p, then they are not in a good position to answer honestly that they believe that p. If this claim about the transparency of belief is correct, then we have a toehold for the following further claim. If an agent believes that p, then they are disposed to believe there is some evidence they possess that counts in favor of the truth of p. This is not to say that the transparency thesis *entails* that to believe that p is to believe there is some evidence for p. And I am not claiming that an agent who believes that p actually *has* adequate evidence for p or based their belief on some evidence that favors p. I am only claiming that an agent who believes that p would be disposed to take it to be the case that there are considerations that appear to count in favor of the truth of p. Of course, human agents are so constituted that non-epistemic reasons or other influences may actually play a role in explaining *why* an agent believes as she does. This is the case if the agent's assessment of her evidence is biased or rendered more salient by her motivational states (which are non-epistemic reasons) at the time she evaluates her reasons for belief (as in textbook cases of "straight" self-deception).[5]

The normative constraints on belief that follow from the constitutive aim of belief generalize to our doxastic agency. For instance, from the standpoint of conscious first-person doxastic deliberation, deliberating about whether to believe that p includes considering whether p is true and reasons for the truth of p. Nishi Shah contends that from the first-person doxastic deliberative standpoint "the question whether to believe that p seems to collapse into the question whether p is true" (2003, p.447; see also Shah 2006). He writes that, "A corollary to this hypothesis is that reasons for an affirmative answer to the question whether to believe that p must be considerations that are taken as relevant of the truth of p" (2003, p.449). Shah argues that it is not merely a psychological fact about human agents that there is a "seamless shift in focus from belief to truth". He asserts that it is "something demanded by the nature of first-personal doxastic deliberation" (2003, p.447). Given this feature of doxastic deliberation from the first-person standpoint, if an agent is considering whether to believe that p, then they are considering whether p is true. Thus, if an agent is able to answer affirmatively to either the question whether to believe that p or whether p is true, then they must take themself to have some evidence for the truth of p and they must regard their belief that p as based on their relevant putative evidence. Again, if the agent's acceptance that p is not based on truth-indicative considerations, then the attitude does not satisfy the criterion of correctness for belief and is not doxastic acceptance — i.e., it is not belief.

Admittedly, one may engage in practical deliberation about *bringing it about* that

one comes to believe that p, considering non-epistemic reasons that favor believing that p. But such practical reasoning aimed at bringing it about that one comes to believe that p is different from what one is doing when engaging in doxastic deliberation. Moreover, any success in such an endeavor consciously undertaken must ultimately involve the consideration of some epistemic reasons.

3.2. The constitutive aim of intentional action

Constitutivism is most often associated with work on practical agency (i.e., intentional behavior that does not have an epistemic goal — including both actions and omissions) and practical reasoning. Accounts vary in their details. Here I focus on the work of J. David Velleman in part because Velleman has explicitly suggested that there are significant similarities between the constitutive aim of belief and the constitutive aim of practical agency.[6]

On Velleman's version of constitutivism, understanding normativity is accounted for on the basis of understanding psychological explanation. In some places, Velleman (2000b, 2009) compares practical agency to belief. Again, since the aim of belief is conformity to truth, a reason for believing that p will be an indicator of the truth of p. Thus, an attitude that is about p that is formed without regard for whether or not it is supported by reasons for p may be another way of accepting that p, but it is not a belief that p (Velleman 2000c).

Things are similar with respect to practical agency. In our practical reasoning we are trying to make sense of ourselves as agents (Velleman 2009, p.18). Intentional action, according to Velleman, "constitutively aims at making sense" 2009, p.146). He variously refers to this aim using locutions such as "making sense", "rendering intelligible", and "self-understanding". Some behavior is an intentional action if it admits of an explanation that makes it intelligible, thereby providing us with self-understanding in exercising practical agency. Regarding the justification of the making sense aim, Velleman notes that it eludes practical justification without circularity. But he contends that its status as setting the criterion of correctness can be supported by noncircular theoretical arguments that show it "is constitutive of agency and hence inescapable for us as creatures to whom reasons for acting apply" (Velleman 2009, p.146).

The considerations that render our practical agency intelligible are what justify our intentional actions. In light of the criterion for the correctness of our intentional actions, behavior is presented as "fit for (en)action" (Velleman 2000b, p.198). An action's being rendered intelligible provides us with the justification for the action. The action makes sense in the light of its justifying explanation. And the "considerations in light of which an action makes sense amount to reasons for taking it" (Velleman 2009, p.146). It is in the light of considerations that render our actions intelligible

that we understand ourselves as expressed in our intentional agency. The desire for intelligibility gives us the motive to explain and, hence, justify our actions by considerations that render our behavior intelligible. Velleman takes those considerations to be the reasons we have for our intentional actions.

That Velleman's account echoes many aspects of Donald Davidson's account of reasons and their justificatory and explanatory role with respect to our intentional actions may not be lost on some. Davidson understood justifying our actions as closely connected to if not identical with our explanations of action (1963, p.691). While constitutivism is not presented as a version of causalism, Velleman accepts Davidson's causalism about reason-explanations of action. But, while this is important, perhaps what is most relevant is that constitutivism emphasizes Davidson's often overlooked emphasis on the normative aspect of such explanations. For instance, Davidson affirmed that, "when we explain an action, by giving the reason, we…redescribe the action; redescribing the action gives the action a place in a pattern, and in this way the action is explained" (1963, p.692).

Importantly, on Velleman's account, the aims of our token actions are what they would seem to be — health, friendship, creating works of art, etc. Self-understanding, he notes, is not "an aim ulterior to these aims" (2009, p.27). He takes it to be "an aim with respect to our manner of pursuing these and other aims" (Velleman 2009, p.27). So, for instance, an agent may want a pint of ale. If, because of their want, they head to the pub where they believe fine ales can be had, their action is intelligible both to them and others and will admit of a justifying explanation in terms of reasons. But if, being motivated by their desire for a pint, they knowingly walk to a café that serves only coffee and tea and not to the pub, their behavior would be unintelligible in the light of their psychology at that time. What they would be doing, while it is behavior, would not be an intentional action. Given their goal of acquiring a pint of ale, there is no description under which what they do seems intelligible and capable of being justified by reasons. Their agency is diminished as a consequence.

Thus, following Velleman, I assume that the constitutive aim of practical agency is intelligibility. The normative constraints on rational practical agency are fixed by this constitutive aim. Insofar as our practical agency conforms to the norms determined by its constitutive aim, we gain better self-understanding than if we fail to act in accordance with them.

4. Extending constitutivism to inquiry

Less has been written on procedural epistemic agency or, simply, inquiry, than on either of the other two types of agency I have discussed. Even less attention has been devoted to the relationship between the constitutive aim of inquiry and the normative

requirements of inquiry.

Regarding the aim of inquiry, it has been suggested by some that the goal of inquiry is truth (e.g., Hookway 2007, Lynch 2005). Others have argued that inquiry is directed at knowledge (Kelp 2014, 2015, 2021a, 2021b; Millar 2011). More recently, a more modest aim of inquiry has been suggested, viz., that inquiry aims at simply improving one's epistemic standing with respect to a particular question (Archer 2021).

I assume that the constitutive aim of inquiry is the acquisition of understanding (Kvanvig 2009, 2011). In this respect, inquiry is very similar to practical agency as characterized in the previous section. Contra Catherine Elgin (1996, 2017), I assume that understanding is factive.[7] Hence, if someone understands a given phenomenon that entails that they are in possession of knowledge about that phenomenon. Why is it reasonable to assume that understanding rather than merely knowledge or truth is the constitutive aim of inquiry? Before answering this question, we must have a preliminary account of what is involved in understanding in hand.

An agent in possession of understanding can grasp the connections between discrete pieces of information (Kvanvig 2009, pp.2–3). Jonathan Kvanvig explains:

> It involves seeing explanatory connections, being aware of the probabilistic interrelationships, and apprehending the logical implications of the information in question. There is, of course, an element of factivity to the notion of understanding, just as there is with the notion of knowledge. But when we move past the alethic aspect of both notions, our attention turns to diverse paths...When the question is whether one has understanding, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about the extent of our grasp of the structural relationships ...between the central items of information regarding which the question of understanding arises. (Kvanvig 2009, p.3)

Understanding is more of an accomplishment than just acquiring a true belief or piece of knowledge. That I understand what happened on May 4, 1886 in Haymarket Square involves a depth of familiarity with the various pieces of information that explain what occurred that goes well beyond what someone may possess who just has knowledge or true beliefs about some of the various bits of information.

While understanding is a more ambitious goal than knowledge and true belief, this alone is not enough of a reason to take it as the constitutive aim of inquiry. That understanding is the constitutive aim of inquiry makes sense when we consider that our taking up some inquiry is typically motivated by a desire to gain familiarity with a subject matter, solve a problem, or acquire an adequate explanation of some phenomenon. In some cases, our epistemic agency involves a sustained effort of inquiry directed at answering a broad question that involves getting answers to various subsidiary questions that must be answered to get the complete picture we are after. If you would like, we are trying to make something intelligible. In the case of a process

or phenomenon, this involves not just knowledge but grasping the connections between the constitutive elements involved. In the case of explaining historical events, this requires grasping how various characters, institutions, and other elements interacted to cause the event and its consequences. I could go on. What should be evident is that the agent who succeeds in acquiring understanding "gets it" in a way that the agent who merely has some pieces of knowledge or merely true beliefs does not.

Why doesn't knowledge or true belief afford us what we are after in engaging in inquiry? As I noted, a person may have knowledge or a true belief about something without apprehending how what they know or merely truly believe is connected with other information. For instance, in the case of having a true belief, a history student may guess that the Haymarket Affair had something to do with a labor demonstration. He is right! But his success, if we can call it that, is a shallow victory. He guessed correctly. The student cannot offer any reasons for why his guess is right. He does not grasp anything about what happened on that day. He just got lucky.

Things are not much different with knowledge. For instance, suppose that Maria is a graduate student in American history interested in examining whether or not the trial of the accused in the Haymarket Affair involved a miscarriage of justice. In particular, she is interested in one of the accused, Albert Parsons. Suppose her intention for the day is to learn about the background and upbringing of Parsons. While on the train on her way to do research in her university's library, she is approached by a man who introduces himself as Paul Avrich.[8] Maria recognizes him. Averich notices that Maria is thumbing through a book he wrote (Avrich 1984) on the Haymarket Affair. In the time before she gets off at her stop Avrich tells her that Parsons was the descendent of a prominent 18th-Century Congregationalist clergyman in New England, the Reverend Jonathan Parsons. She had never learned this previously. What Avrich tells Maria is true. Given his reliability as a source of testimonial evidence, I think we can safely say that she has knowledge she did not previously have. But this knowledge on its own does little to get her toward even partially satisfying her primary intention *qua* researcher on that day. If knowledge were the constitutive aim of inquiry, then Maria's time of the subway would appear to be a success. We can say this was a success of sorts. But that information of which she now has knowledge, while interesting, is only one atom of information in a larger collection of bits of information. It will only aid in the execution of her intention if synthesized with other pieces of information so that she can recognize how they are connected and, hence, explain what kind of person Albert Parsons was.

It may be argued that not all inquiry is directed at understanding as I have characterized it here. In fact, I may be accused of endorsing a rather elitist and parochial view of inquiry on which the only people who engage in inquiry are those engaged in research projects of the sort I have described with agents like Maria. It may be argued that a more useful distinction would be to separate inquiry directed at settling the

answer to a question and inquiry directed at understanding a specific phenomenon (Kelp 2021b). We could then distinguish between the constitutive aim of inquiry directed at settling a question and distinguish that from the constitutive aim of inquiry directed at understanding a phenomenon.

I assume with Kelp that both inquiry directed at settling a question and inquiry directed at understanding a specific phenonmenon will be factive. And understanding both will aid us in the task of determining the epistemic norms that will guide our agency with respect to either. But I maintain that while we may engage in inquiry directed at answering a question and this can be conceptually pried apart from inquiry directed at understanding a phenomenon, the constitutive aim of all inquiry is ultimately understanding.

Consider the following example, Shusaku may want to call an acquaintance whose phone number he has lost. He acquires an intention to get their phone number and looks up their phone number by using a search engine, ultimately succeeding in getting their phone number. My interlocutor may contend that, in such a case, Shusaku's inquiry is only directed at settling a question, and, hence, is ultimately just directed at knowledge or a true belief, not understanding. But, in response, even in this case, Shusaku's acquiring the relevant knowledge is of a piece with background knowledge Shusaku has that affords him the understanding he needs to be able to successfully contact his acquaintance. So even in this sort of case, the plan represented in Shusaku's intention to acquire his acquaintance's phone number is of a piece with a more general intention he has to understand how to reach them. Understanding is the final goal which Shusaku's inquiry is directed at as represented in a broader intention. Acquiring knowledge of his acquaintance's phone number was an instrumental and subsidiary goal that is a means to the end of the final goal of understanding how to reach them. Settling the question of what his acquaintance's phone number happens to be was required for Shusaku to understand how to best contact them. I think this will generalize to other cases of inquiry directed at settling questions. In brief, what I am suggesting is that settling a question is not the ultimate goal of inquiry aimed at settling a question. We intend to settle questions as a means to an end. It is a subsidiary goal. I am maintaining that the end in question is, ultimately, always some form of understanding. And this will generalize to acquiring an answer to something as trivial as when a pop singer was born. In such a case, the inquiring agent is ultimately trying to understand something about the pop singer.

So how do the norms of inquiry follow from its constitutive aim? If understanding is the constitutive aim of inquiry, then we derive the norms of inquiry from the goal of understanding. In light of what I have said about doxastic agency and practical agency, this should not be a surprise. Return to Maria. She may or may not represent what she intends to do in the archives on a given day as *trying to understand*, say, how and why Albert Parsons transitioned from being a supporter of the Confed-

eracy to becoming an anarcho-socialist who married a woman of African-American descent. Regardless of how she represents what she is doing in the plan that provides the content of her intention, her activity can be truthfully described as aiming at understanding. Maria is trying to make something intelligible, make sense of it, and explain it. She is motivated to make sense of why Parsons changed and, further, what the importance of this may be for the events that happened in Haymarket Square. And her efforts are justified to the extent that she succeeds with respect to what she intends to do, thereby satisfying the aim of her inquiry.

It is perhaps not an accident that inquiry is a kind of agency that is similar to practical agency (which, I have asserted, in agreement with Velleman, is directed at self-understanding). While we do not aim at making our inquiry intelligible, it is intelligible insofar as it can be described as aiming at understanding. If our behavior does not provide us with the truthmakers for describing it as inquiry, then it may be something else, but it is not inquiry. Genuine inquiry reflects the motive of pursuing understanding. And when we fail to take the best means to acquire understanding in our inquiry, we are justifiably criticized. We should have done differently. Insofar as we fail outright to take any means to secure understanding when we are allegedly engaging in inquiry (for instance, suppose Maria walks to the pub instead of to the archives or spends her entire time in the archives on her mobile phone texting friends), then there is an outright failure on the part of the agent to engage in inquiry. Thus, the norms or requirements of proper inquiry reflect the understanding aim.

Before I conclude this section, I should remark briefly on the relationship between the three types of agency I have distinguished in this essay. It should be no surprise that they each reflect the other. That is to say, there is an aim constitutive of any of these three types of agency. The aim both explains and justifies our agency. And failure to behave in a way that conforms to the norms that we get from the aim of a type of agency results in a failure to make it true that one is exercising the relevant type of agency.

5. Conclusion

My primary goal in this paper has been to discuss inquiry or procedural epistemic agency and how it relates to both practical and doxastic agency. In particular, my goal has been to argue for an account of the constitutive aim of inquiry and how that constitutive aim plays a role similar to the constitutive aims of both doxastic agency and practical agency. More work remains. But I hope that I have at least made a *prima facie* case for accepting an account of inquiry and its constitutive aim that can help us make progress in making sense of the nature of inquiry and its justification.

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Notes

[1] See, e.g., Archer 2021; Elgin 1996 and 2017; Hookway 2007 and 2012; Kelp 2014, 2021a, 2021b; Pritchard 2021.

[2] By 'nonintentional activity' I mean any activity that is not intentional but that an agent may want to perform and knowingly perform. See Mele and Moser 1994, p.45.

[3] I have discussed doxastic agency in a number of places. See Buckareff 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2022.

[4] See Anscombe 2000, Searle 1983, and Velleman 2000c for more on direction of fit.

[5] There is psychological evidence that non-epistemic reasons often make evidence for the proposition an agent comes to believe more salient, causing the agent to acquire a belief in response to her putative epistemic reasons. For recent accessible treatments of the nature of both motivated and unmotivated belief, including how heuristics affect beliefs in ways that suggest that even beliefs acquired in the face of contrary evidence nonetheless seem to be shaped by evidence (because of motivated or cold biasing), see Mele 2001, chapter 2; and Nisbett and Ross 1980. Such shaping of belief by evidence, along with belief's being truth — directed is even evident in cases of persons who suffer from conditions such as Capgras delusion — the chief symptom of which is that sufferers believe that one or more close relatives have been replaced by an impostor. For a fascinating discussion of delusional beliefs that suggests that such beliefs, even when they fail to cohere with an agent's related beliefs, aim at truth and are shaped by evidence, see Stone and Young 1997, pp.327–64.

[6] Velleman says nothing about omissions. I assume that they are just as important as actions since they involve intentional practical agency. Velleman simply writes about "actions" which are distinguished from mere behavior. The latter do not admit of explanations that render them intelligible. I am using the locution 'intentional actions' to refer to his 'actions' since I assume, following Donald Davidson, that all actions are intentional under a description and also to clarify that it is under their intentional description that actions can best be rendered intelligible.

[7] See Pritchard 2021 for a critique of Elgin in which a defense of understanding as factive is presented.

[8] Paul Avrich retired in 1999 and died in 2006. Suppose that Maria is doing her research in the mid-1990s.

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