Philosophers theorize about a variety of matters they describe using the expression ‘epistemic’ (and its cognates). For example, a central issue in epistemology concerns what it is for a belief to be epistemically justified. What do these theorists mean by ‘epistemic’? This question is worth asking because ‘epistemic’ is a technical term. If you ask competent, even sophisticated, English speakers who are not philosophers whether a belief is epistemically justified, they will have no idea what they are being asked. This contrasts with non-technical expressions like ‘moral’. If you ask sophisticated English speakers whether an action is morally justified, they will know what they are being asked. This is not to say they will necessarily know the answer, only that they will understand the question.

We cannot rely on our competence as English speakers to understand what theories concerning matters characterized as epistemic are about. We need to know how the technical expression ‘epistemic’ is being used. I maintain there is considerable confusion regarding central issues in epistemology owing to the fact that ‘epistemic’ functions as an undefined, or inadequately defined, technical term. I do not deny that in certain contexts, it is fairly clear what a particular philosopher means by ‘epistemic’. Rather I will argue that for certain theoretical disputes, its meaning is not clear enough to make sense of these disputes.

I Epistemically Justified Belief

Consider the debate about the nature of justified belief. Since epistemologists largely gave up on trying to solve the Gettier problem, this has been perhaps the most widely discussed issue in epistemology. There are various competing theories--evidentialism, reliabilism, proper function theories, virtue theories, etc.

What are these theories about? Typically, in setting up the discussion, justification theorists will claim that beliefs can be justified in different ways--they can be prudentially justified, e.g. as in Pascal’s Wager, and perhaps even morally justified. Justification theorists tell us they are not talking about these kinds of justification. They are talking about epistemic justification. However, they cannot explain what they are talking about simply by introducing an undefined technical term. We need to know what they mean by ‘epistemic' in this context. Moreover, in order to make sense of the debate between competing theories of epistemically justified belief, they must define ‘epistemic' in a theory-neutral way. Ruling out certain views simply by description of the subject matter will not make sense of the dispute.

It is important to understand the nature of this neutrality requirement. Alston argues there is no theory-neutral specification of the meaning of ‘epistemic justification’. He concludes there is no unique property of epistemic justification and so we should abandon attempts to decide which of the proposed theories of justification is correct.¹ But why does he see the need for a theory-neutral specification? We cannot require that for any theoretical dispute concerning the nature of T, there be a theory neutral way to describe T, independent of ‘T’ itself. Such a requirement would rule out theoretical disputes about knowledge, causation, morality, etc. In each of these cases, the only theoretically neutral characterization is that the dispute concerns knowledge, causation, morality, etc. So why can’t the justification theorist simply say that the dispute is about epistemic justification? This is the hole in Alston’s argument. The point Alston misses is that unlike ‘knowledge’, ‘causation’ or ‘morality’, ‘epistemic justification’ is a technical expression. So if all we can say is that the dispute is about epistemic justification, we have not yet said what the dispute is about. We cannot make sense

¹ Alston 2005
of a dispute about the nature of a property described only in undefined technical vocabulary.

So what do justification theorists actually say about what they mean by ‘epistemic’? Perhaps the most common way of doing this is to appeal to some relation to truth:

(1) Epistemic justification (unlike moral or prudential justification) is the kind of justification related to truth.

Of course, ‘related to truth’ is too imprecise for our purposes. How might we make it more precise? One way would be to say that

a) Necessarily, if P is epistemically justified, then P is true.

This definition stipulates that fallibilism, a doctrine subscribed to by most participants in the debate, is false. The relation between epistemic justification and truth is thought by most to be weaker than entailment. This weaker relation is often expressed by the claim that epistemic justification is “truth-conducive”:

b) Necessarily, if P is epistemically justified, then P is probably true.

For this definition to do any work, we need to know what notion of probability is being invoked. When Goldman says this, he seems to be referring to some kind of frequency or statistical notion according to which necessarily, most epistemically justified beliefs are true.²

This approach suffers from a problem analogous to the reference class problem for frequency conceptions of probability. What exactly is the domain of ‘most’?³ More importantly for our purposes, the proposed constraint is not theory-neutral. Evidentialists, and in particular mentalist evidentialists, hold that the justification of a belief supervenes on the internal states of the subject. It is consistent with such a view that subjects with justified beliefs are radically deceived. To say at the outset that necessarily most justified beliefs are true would disqualify mentalist evidentialism by description of the subject matter.⁴

Can we appeal to a notion of evidential probability? Non-evidentialists will reject any initial specification that epistemically justified beliefs are probable on the evidence. Remember that at this point we are not talking about theories of epistemic justification. Rather we are trying to determine what it is that theories of epistemic justification are about. To say they are about a notion intimately connected with evidential probability would rule out, again by description of the subject matter, non-evidentialist theories such as reliabilism.

Another approach relates justification to truth in a teleological way:

c) An epistemically justified belief is justified relative to the goal of attaining truths (or perhaps attaining truths and avoiding falsehood).

It is unclear whether this way of defining “epistemically justified” rules out evidentialist theories.

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² Goldman 1979
³ The first discussion of this problem occurs in Pollock 1984
⁴ We could relativize the requirement that justified beliefs be mostly true to a specified world, e.g., mostly true at the actual world or mostly true at normal worlds. (Goldman 1979, 1986). But such a fine-grained requirement looks more like part of a theory of epistemic justification, rather than a pre-theoretic account of the target of such theories. It’s unclear why anyone should agree in advance of theorizing that this is part of the target notion.
The notion of a belief being justified relative to the goal of attaining truths is simply too obscure. And how such goals figure in everyday belief acquisition is also far from clear. But even if we let pass these worries, the problem remains that appealing to cognitive goals makes it impossible to distinguish epistemic justification from practical justification. Suppose God tell me that if I believe whatever the Ouija board tells me, he will see to it that I acquire lots of true beliefs (and no false beliefs). While I might thereby be practically justified in believing what the Ouija board says (especially if I care about acquiring true beliefs) none of the participants to the dispute about epistemic justification would view this kind of justification as the target of their theories.\(^5\)

Perhaps we can define epistemic justification by appealing to knowledge rather than truth.

(2) Epistemic justification is the kind of justification required for knowing.\(^6\)

One problem with this approach is that some participants in the dispute deny that (or at least question whether) epistemic justification is necessary for knowing.\(^7\) The proposed definition would rule out this view. Even if justification is a necessary condition for knowing, presumably the issue is not settled by the description of the matter being discussed. One cannot respond to a challenge to the claim that knowledge requires justification simply by reminding the challenger of what the topic is.

A further problem lies in the appeal to the kind of justification necessary for knowing. Justification is a matter of satisfying normative requirements--to be justified in \(\Phi\)-ing is to satisfy the relevant normative requirements for \(\Phi\)-ing. For example, to be morally justified in \(\Phi\)-ing is to satisfy the moral requirements for \(\Phi\)-ing. Which normative requirements must a belief satisfy in order to be epistemically justified? What are the epistemic requirements for believing? According to the view we are considering, they are the normative requirements a belief must satisfy to be knowledge.

What are the normative requirements a belief must satisfy to be knowledge? Justification theorists divide over whether a belief must be evidentially supported, reliably produced, manifesting virtue, realizing proper function, etc., in order to be knowledge. But a belief must satisfy more than these requirements to be an instance of knowledge. According to orthodoxy, a belief must satisfy some gettier condition as well. Here we see evidential conditions involving defeasibility relations, reliability conditions like sensitivity and safety, as well as further virtue-theoretic, and proper function conditions. But why should we think of the former conditions as pertaining to justification and the latter as outside the scope of justification? Do the former correspond to normative requirements while the latter do not? There is no consistent use of ‘normative' that will settle this issue. It is not obvious why being supported by evidence or being produced by a reliable cognitive process can satisfy a normative requirement, but having the right defeasibility relations or being safe cannot.

Given that justification theorists think some of the normative requirement a belief must satisfy to be knowledge are irrelevant to whether the belief is epistemically justified, they cannot identify the normative requirements that figure in epistemic justification as those that a belief must satisfy to be knowledge.\(^8\)

A further problem for this approach will emerge is section III.

\(\text{II Epistemically Justified Belief as Rational Belief}\)

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\(^5\) For objections to various ways of spelling out the teleological conception, see Fumerton 2001

\(^6\) Merriam Webster defines ‘epistemic’ as “of or relating to knowledge or knowing”


\(^8\) Matters are further complicated by additional conditions on knowledge that are plausibly (or at least not implausibly) viewed as normative. Some philosophers argue that there is a deductive closure condition for knowledge. Others argue that there is a practical reasoning condition. Some have argued for higher-level requirements
Why not say that epistemically justified belief is rational belief? The virtue of this approach is that we could simply dispense with the problematic technical vocabulary replacing it with a natural language expression. One might think this proposal makes no progress because the meaning of ‘rational’ is as obscure as the meaning of ‘epistemically justified’. This would be to miss the fundamental difference between these expressions. If you ask sophisticated English speakers whether a certain belief is rational, they will understand what they are being asked. Again, they may not know the answer, but they will understand the question. This is not to say that the meaning of ‘rational’ is entirely clear. ‘Rational’ is difficult to precisely define in just the way much important natural language vocabulary is. Consider some other natural language expressions describing objects of philosophical theorizing--‘justice’, ‘causation’, “freedom’, ‘moral responsibility’, ‘identity’… Although these terms resist precise definition, as competent speakers of English, we are in a position to theorize about their referents. Similarly, we are in a position to theorize about the referent of ‘rational’. But with ‘epistemically justified’, we confront more than mere problems of precision. Because 'epistemic' is a technical expression, our linguistic competence does not provide us with any basis for theorizing about its referent.9

A worry about this approach is that some think beliefs can be practically rational and justification theorists do not mean to be talking about practical rationality. I am inclined to think one can be practically rational only in desiring to have a certain belief, or in bringing it about or intending to bring it about that one has a certain belief. One cannot be practical rational in the believing itself.10 This, however, is not the place to settle this issue. If you think believing can be practically rational, then you can view the dispute as concerning the kind of rationality that applies exclusively to believing.11 On this proposal for defining 'epistemic', it makes no sense to say that an action is epistemically justified.

I myself am perfectly happy to jettison talk of “epistemically justified” belief and simply recast matters as a debate about rational belief. Unfortunately, this way of viewing matters will be resisted by many parties to the debate who want to distinguish between epistemically justified belief and rational belief.

Here is Alvin Goldman:

"Since 'rational' and 'justified' are different terms of appraisal, rules of rationality (R-rules) might well

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9 In Cohen 1995, I mistakenly argued the problem was with 'justified belief' rather than 'epistemic'.
10 For discussion of this issue, see Kelly 2002
11 When I presented this paper at Princeton University, Gideon Rosen noted that other attitudes besides belief can be rational in the way I claim is distinctive to belief, e.g. regret, fear, resentment, etc. Perhaps epistemic justification is the kind of justification that more generally applies to attitudes with mind-world direction of fit, though admittedly, this metaphorical characterization is not fully satisfactory. One view of attitudes like fear, regret, and resentment is that they have a belief component, e.g. one cannot fear x unless one believes x is dangerous. In that case, the rationality of the attitudes would be a function of the rationality of the belief involved in having the attitude. Even if these attitudes do not necessarily involve belief, we could say that the rationality of these attitudes is a function of the ex ante rationality of believing a proposition. So a subject cannot rationally fear x unless the proposition that x is dangerous is rationally justified for that subject (whether or not the subject actually believes the proposition). Finally, we could say that having an epistemically justified belief is a matter of having a sufficient epistemic reason for believing. We could then distinguish between epistemic and practical reasons for belief by viewing the former as a matter of having evidence. But this way of proceeding would not be theory neutral.
be distinct from rules of justification (J-rules)\(^\text{12}\)

More recently Jack Lyons has said:

“...it is good to keep in mind that when a reliabilist claims that a belief is unjustified, there is no imputation of irrationality or the like involved.”  \(^\text{13}\)

It is clear why non-evidentialists like reliabilists want to make this distinction. The so-called "new evil demon" counterexample to reliabilism purports to show that subjects with radically unreliable sensory faculties can still have justified beliefs. Whatever else we say about these subjects, it is hard to deny that some of their beliefs about their environment are \textit{rational}. To use a more contemporary example, subjects in the matrix can have such rational beliefs. These subjects clearly have lots of evidence for their beliefs, and it is hard to see how the rationality of a belief can be divorced from considerations of evidence. Some reliabilists attempt to avoid this kind of counterexample by arguing that while subjects in the matrix may have rational beliefs, they fail to have justified beliefs. \(^\text{14}\)

Unfortunately, distinguishing between rational beliefs and justified beliefs does not make any sense. It makes no more sense than distinguishing between moral acts and justified acts.

Justification is domain relative. A justification for $\Phi$-ing can be moral, rational, legal, etc. It is moral to $\Phi$ just in case $\Phi$-ing is morally justified. It is legal to $\Phi$ just in case $\Phi$-ing is legally justified. In the same way, it is rational to $\Phi$ just in case one $\Phi$-ing is rationally justified. So it is rational to believe just in case believing is rationally justified. \(^\text{15}\)

When one distinguishes between 'rational belief' and 'justified belief', one can only be distinguishing between rationally justified belief, and some other kind of justified belief. What is the other kind of justification? Epistemologists who make this distinction say they are talking about epistemic justification. The fact that $\Phi$-ing is rationally (morally, legally) justified just in case $\Phi$-ing is rational (moral, legal) underscores the obscurity of the appeal to epistemic justification. Is the claim then that $\Phi$-ing is epistemically justified just in case $\Phi$-ing is epistemic? Do

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\(^{12}\) Goldman 1986. He also distinguishes between rationality and justification in Goldman 2009


\(^{14}\) Lyons 2013, Bach 1985. Goldman initially characterized his view as a naturalistic reduction of epistemic justification. But instead it could be viewed as a naturalistic reduction of the evidence (or reason) relation. See Henderson and Horgan 2006 and Comesana 2010. While such a project certainly makes sense, viewing reliabilism in this way does not make sense of the dispute about epistemic justification. On this way of construing the issue, reliabilism and evidentialism are no longer competing views. Indeed, reliabilism and evidentialism could both be true. So again, this would not make sense of the dispute over epistemic justification. For a statement of the new evil demon problem, see Cohen (1984).

\(^{15}\) How does justification relate to the traditional deontic notions of requirement and permission. It's clear that justification is weaker than requirement. One is required to $\phi$ only if one is justified in $\phi$-ing, but one can be justified in $\phi$-ing without being required to $\phi$. Being justified is akin to being permitted. One is justified in $\phi$-ing just in case one is permitted to $\phi$. In some contexts, "$\phi$-ing is rational" means that $\phi$-ing is rationally required. In those contexts, justification might seem to be stronger than permission. For example, while I am morally permitted to scratch my nose, it sounds odd to say I'm morally justified in scratching my nose. But it also sounds odd to say that although I'm permitted to scratch my nose, I'm not justified in scratching my nose. There are no doubt complicated issues here about whether these date are to be explained semantically or pragmatically. None of these issues affect the general point that justification is domain relative. As duals, requirement and permission are interdefinable and both can be defined in terms of the more familiar notion of 'ought': "One is required to $\phi$" =df one ought to $\phi$. "One is permitted to $\phi$" =df it's not the case that one ought not to $\phi$.  

\(^5\)
those who distinguish between epistemic and rational justification want to say that an epistemically justified belief is an epistemic belief? We simply have no idea what normative domain 'epistemic' refers to.

Moreover, distinguishing in this way between rational justification and epistemic justification yields the curious result that the rationality of a belief is not an epistemic property. One would have thought that whatever domain 'the epistemic' refers to, the notion of rational belief would be positioned squarely within that domain.

And it gets worse. Insofar as epistemologists want to distinguish between epistemic justification and rational justification, it appears that the parties to some long-standing disputes are simply talking past each other. Consider the dispute between evidentialism and reliabilism. Feldman and Conee have explicitly stated that when they talk about justified beliefs, they mean to be talking about rational beliefs. But as we have seen, reliabilists like Goldman and Lyons explicitly deny that when they talk about (epistemically) justified belief, they are talking about rational belief. As near as I can tell, Feldman and Conee are in a much better position. At least we know what they are talking about, viz., rationality. But we do not know what justification theorists who deny they are talking about rationality are talking about.

III Implicit Definitions of Technical Terms

I have been arguing that justification theorists cannot specify what they mean by 'epistemic' in a way that makes sense of the dispute concerning the nature of epistemic justification. But there are other ways of introducing technical vocabulary besides providing an explicit definition. Will any of these serve the needs of the justification theorist?

(1) Paradigm cases

Epistemologists sometimes introduce the notion of epistemic justification by appealing to standard cases of perception, memory, and inference. People seem to be able to "latch on" to what is being talked about. Doesn't this show there is some property picked out by 'epistemic justification' that is the target of justification theorists?

The problem with this way of proceeding is that the beliefs in the paradigm examples all have the property of being rational. And as I noted, many justification theorist deny they are talking about rationality. Are there two properties exemplified by the beliefs in the paradigm cases—being rational, and being epistemically justified? But now the mystery returns concerning what this other property is and the defender of epistemic justification cannot simply point to the paradigm examples to explain what they are talking about.

Suppose some theorists introduce the technical term 'β' by saying that being β is the normative property all of the following actions have—keeping promises, telling the truth, refraining from harming others, treating others with respect, etc. But suppose further that the theorists say they distinguish between an action being β and an action being moral. I submit we would be at a loss to know what 'β' means. We certainly would be unable to have a serious dispute about what the property of being β is. Similarly, when justification theorists introduce the expression "epistemically justified" by the paradigm cases while telling us they distinguish between a belief being epistemically justified and a belief being rational, we are at a loss to know what they mean. We are unable to have a serious dispute about what epistemic justification is.

Insofar as one denies that epistemic justification is rationality, a similar problem arises for the previously discussed strategy of defining "epistemic justification" as the kind of justification necessary

16 reference
for knowing. If a belief must be in some way justified in order to be knowledge, a plausible suggestion is that the belief must be rationally justified. Certainly this is what evidentialists have in mind. An advocate of this strategy who resists identifying epistemic justification with rational justification must hold there is some other kind of justification required for knowing. But now it is no longer adequate to say that epistemic justification is the kind of justification required for knowing.

(2) Theoretical Role

Some technical terms are defined by the functional or causal role they play in a particular theory. Can the justification theorist define 'epistemic' by pointing to the role the notion of epistemic justification plays in epistemological theories?

I do not see how. Epistemic justification does not have any substantive theoretical role. The assumption is that it is an important normative property and the dispute is about which property that is. According to some philosophers, epistemic justification has a role in the theory of knowledge. But what exactly is that role? We cannot we say that epistemic justification is that property that turns a true belief into knowledge. The near unanimous acceptance of the gettier counterexamples rules out that option. Can we say that epistemic justification is the property that plays the role of turning 'ungettiered' true belief into knowledge? The problem with this proposal is that 'ungettiered' is itself a technical term. A belief is “gettiered” just in case it is epistemically justified and true but fails to be knowledge. Absent a solution to the Gettier problem, this is the only clear meaning it can have. This makes this proposal for defining 'epistemic justification' circular.

(3) Use by Epistemologists

Perhaps technical expressions can have more in common with natural language expressions than I am allowing. How do natural language expressions get their meaning? Certainly, a large part of the story is that they acquire their meaning by being used in a particular way by a community of speakers. Can we say that a technical term like 'epistemic' acquires its meaning by being used in a particular way by a very specialized community—the community of epistemologists? If so, then when epistemologists talk about epistemic justification, what they are talking about is determined by how they have been using that expression.

If this account of how 'epistemic’ acquires its meaning is correct, then it is hard to make sense of standard practices of epistemologists. It is not uncommon for an epistemologist to give a talk about the nature of epistemic justification before a general philosophy audience. But if the proposed analogy with natural language is correct, then just as one should not give talks in English to non-English speakers, so epistemologists should not be giving talks about epistemic justification to non-epistemologists. Since their audience is not part of the linguistic community whose conventions of use give 'epistemic' its meaning, the audience will not know what they are talking about. Similarly, interdisciplinary-minded epistemologists should not be enlisting the aid of non-philosophers for understanding the nature of epistemic justification. A cognitive psychologist, for example, would be unable to understand what the target notion is.

Perhaps the most serious problem for this approach is that it allows that there is a fundamentally important normative notion that cannot be expressed in natural language. It would be very surprising for such a notion to be in this way ineffable. This would be akin to the word 'moral' not existing and there being no way to express what morality is. It is important to see that the point is not

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17 Lewis 1972
18 Thanks to Jessica Brown for raising this objection in her comments on an earlier version of this paper presented at the University of Oslo.
simply that there is no single natural language word that picks out the relevant property. According to the proposal we are considering, there is no way to use the resources of natural language to characterize it. If there were such an ineffable normative notion, it is not clear why we should care about it. Presumably, if it were an important notion, we would have developed a way to talk about it.

IV Epistemic Evaluation of Action

Many philosophers claim that actions or dispositions to act can be epistemically justified or rational, or that we can be epistemically obligated to do certain things. For example, some philosophers think that in certain situations, we are epistemically obligated to gather evidence. What does it mean to say you have an epistemic obligation to do something? Of course we could stipulate whatever meaning we like for 'epistemic'. But can we define it in a way that is continuous with its meaning when applied to beliefs (as is implicitly assumed)? None of the ways we have considered for defining 'epistemic' as it applies to belief would make sense of epistemically evaluating actions. It doesn't make sense to say actions are probably true, or that acting in a certain way is a necessary condition for knowing. Nor can actions be rational in the distinctive way that beliefs can be rational.

Perhaps we could appeal to the truth goal: One is epistemically obligated to just in case -ing would contribute to the goal of attaining truths and avoiding error. But it is ludicrous to suppose there is such an obligation. Memorizing the phone numbers of all the people listed in the phone book would allow me to attain many truths, but I am in no sense obligated to do so. It might be practically rational if someone were paying me to do it, but I have no idea what it would mean to say it is epistemically rational.

The problem is especially acute when philosophers use 'epistemic' in an explicitly univocal way in connection with both action and belief. According to Hartry Field, there are epistemic norms "both for believing and for acting so as to improves one's epistemic situation (e.g. by trying to gather more evidence...)". John MacFarlane argues that the preface paradox illustrates how one could have an obligation to gather more evidence. He says that in a "preface situation", it looks as if you have no rational options. Either you hold a set of beliefs you know to be inconsistent or you ignore the evidence of your own fallibility. So what does rationality require of you in a preface situation? Here is MacFarlane:

"You must see to it that either you do not disbelieve the conjunction of your claims… or you do not believe any (or most) of these claims. How would you go about it? You would step up critical examination of these claims. You would do more studies, try harder to embed them in established theory, publish them so that others can scrutinize them, and do all of the things a good scientist does. That is, you would change your beliefs indirectly, by seeking new evidence, not by force of will. This is precisely what you ought to do. When one finds oneself with preface-like beliefs and disbeliefs, one ought to see to it that they change."

What kind of ought is MacFarlane referring to? Clearly one is under no moral obligation to do things

20 Field, MacFarlane, Kornblith 1980, Kvanvig 2010,
21 Harman 1986
22 Field 2009
23 MacFarlane (unpublished)
to avoid having inconsistent beliefs (except perhaps in very contrived situations). Is it a prudential ought? In some cases, it might be. But of course, one may be offered a lot of money not to do anything about one's inconsistent beliefs. So the only thing MacFarlane could have in mind is an epistemic ought. Does it make sense to say, as Field does, that one can be epistemically obligated to improve one's epistemic situation by gathering more evidence? One can be morally obligated or prudentially rational to gather evidence. If your child is critically ill, you are morally obligated to investigate the various options for treatment. If you want to buy a safe car, it would be imprudent not to look into which models get the highest safety ratings. But what does it mean to say that one is epistemically obligated to gather evidence? If one believes P with insufficient evidence, one does have epistemic obligations. But they pertain to one's beliefs. One is rationally required to stop believing P.

Could we say that if one has insufficient evidence for P, one is epistemically required to either give up P, or to find more evidence in support of P? Note that even if one decides to gather more evidence for P, lacking sufficient evidence, one is still obligated to give up P pending the results of one's investigation. Once one stops believing P, is one in any sense required to gather more evidence? If one wants to know whether P is true, it could be rational for one to gather more evidence pertaining to P. But again, this would be prudential rationality, arising from one's desire to know whether P.

I have been arguing that one cannot be under any non-practical rational obligation to gather evidence. Rationality requires one to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence one has. There is no further (non-practical) rational requirement that one seek out further evidence. To argue for such a requirement is to conflate rationality with curiosity.

Having said that, it is plausible to claim that there are (perhaps constitutive) norms for inquiry that do require one to gather evidence. If one is investigating whether P, and one does not gather (enough) evidence concerning P, then one's investigation is defective. One is inquiring badly. But it does not follow that one's beliefs are irrational if one, perhaps due to lack of curiosity, chooses not to engage in inquiry. So long as one's beliefs fit the evidence one has, one's beliefs are rational.

V Knowledge norms

Timothy Williamson has argued that assertions are governed by the norm: assert P only if you know P. Williamson says that this norm of assertion is constitutive. That is to say, it is in the nature of assertion that it is governed by this norm. If one performs a speech act that is not governed by this norm, then the speech act is not assertion. This claim has resulted in a huge literature discussing whether there is such a norm. Many people are suspicious of the idea of a constitutive norm. By and large, the knowledge norm is discussed without any reference to its being constitutive. Some philosophers have characterized the norm of assertion as "epistemic". According to John Hawthorne,

"...insofar as we distinguish the 'epistemic correctness' of an assertion from other aspects of propriety, it may be arguable that knowledge suffices for epistemic correctness".

24 Feldman 2000
25 Here I am talking about propositional rationality. It is of course possible that one could have evidence of evidence against one’s belief that one does not possess. In such a case, one’s belief would fail to be rational, not because one fails to seek out this new evidence, but rather because in such a case, one would already count as possessing evidence against one’s belief.
26 Williamson 2000
Ernest Sosa puts it this way:

"Knowledge is said to be necessary for proper assertion. The propriety here must of course be epistemic."

But asserting is something we do, and as I have argued, it is unclear how there can be epistemic norms for actions. What does it mean to say that one is epistemically required to refrain from asserting something?

While the norm does require the satisfaction of an "epistemic" condition, it does not follow that the norm is itself epistemic. Consider the (simplified) norm: Don't shoot an intruder in your house unless you know he intends to harm you. Even though this norm requires the satisfaction of an epistemic condition, the norm itself is moral rather than epistemic. In the case of the norm of assertion, the lack of clarity in the meaning of 'epistemic' encourages the slide from the norm's containing an epistemic condition, to the norm's being itself epistemic.

While this confusion about the meaning of 'epistemic' is relatively harmless, more serious problems arise in connection with Williamson's more provocative thesis that knowledge, in addition to being the norm for assertion, is the norm for belief.

"... the knowledge rule for assertion corresponds to the norm that one should believe p only if one knows p."

Since one's believing p is justified only if one's believing p satisfies the relevant norm, one's believing is justified, on Williamson's view, only if one knows p. Ernest Sosa has also endorsed the view, and Jonathan Sutton has written an entire book defending this thesis. But what kind of norm does the thesis refer to?

Sutton and Sosa say explicitly that knowledge is the epistemic norm of belief. But there is something very puzzling about this claim. As I noted earlier, it is uncontroversial that one can be rationally justified in believing a proposition. Moreover, one can rationally believe p while failing to know p. So what do Sosa and Sutton mean when they say that knowledge is the epistemic norm of belief? Perhaps they are making the peculiar claim that the rationality of belief is not epistemic. If so, then they certainly need to tell us what they mean by 'epistemic'. They might claim that the knowledge norm is the norm of belief that is distinct from the rationality norm. But I think we could be forgiven for failing to grasp what it is they have in mind.

Although Williamson's thesis has been widely taken as a challenge to traditional views about epistemic justification, Williamson himself does not say explicitly what kind of norm for belief he is talking about. He does connect the knowledge norm of belief to the knowledge norm of assertion. He says that belief and assertion are related "as inner to outer". So just as knowledge is the norm of assertion, it is also the norm of belief. This suggests that the knowledge norm of belief, like the knowledge norm of assertion, is a constitutive norm. But this conflicts with his claim that constitutive norms govern game-like phenomena, where the rules of a game are constitutive of the game. He contrasts game-like phenomena with natural phenomena for which he claims there may be no

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28 Sosa 2010
29 Williamson 2000
30 Sutton 2007, Sosa (2010). Hawthorne has expressed sympathy for this view in conversation.
31 Sosa says that knowledge is required to believe with "full epistemic propriety". He may mean by this something other than full epistemic justification. But it’s not clear what else he has in mind.
32 reference
constitutive norms. Since belief is, in the relevant sense, a natural phenomenon, this account of the domain of constitutive norms conflicts with viewing the knowledge norm of belief as constitutive.

It is unclear whether Williamson intends that the norm of belief is epistemic or constitutive. If he views it as epistemic, he faces the same problem as Sutton and Sosa, viz. explaining its relation to the rationality norm of belief. If he views it as constitutive, then he can allow that the rationality norm is epistemic. But in that case, Williamson's thesis that knowledge is the norm of belief, does not conflict with the views of other epistemologists who claim that there is a weaker normative requirement for belief. They are talking about epistemic norms. There is therefore no challenge to their views presented by Williamson's thesis that knowledge is the constitutive norm for belief.34

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33 Although in (2000) Williamson says several things that presuppose that one can believe rationally without knowing, in recent work, he argues that one can rationally believe p only if one knows p. For a response to his arguments, see Cohen and Comesana (2013)
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