Episteme (2026), 1–35
doi:10.1017/epi.2026.10144

episteme

ARTICLE

Asking Questions Aloud: A Case for Interrogative Transmission

Christopher Willard-Kyle

Philosophy, University of Kentucky, USA
Email: c.willard-kyle@uky.edu

(Received 18 August 2026 UTC; revised 18 August 2026 UTC; accepted 18 August 2026 UTC)

Abstract

I argue that questions can be transmitted through asking just as beliefs are transmitted through testimony. Just as we rely on testifiers to assert only when their epistemic position is good enough, so (I argue) we rely on queriers to ask questions only if they are in a position to know that the question is sound, which guarantees that the asked question has an answer. Along the way, I argue against the view that we can only ask questions of people who (we know) know the answer to our questions. A recurring theme of the paper is that we learn about the norms for asking not just in those cases in which we straightforwardly comply with or violate them, but also by the ways we creatively deviate from the norms to accomplish our conversational goals.

Keywords: Questions; asking; queries; testimony; soundness; rhetorical questions

1. Introduction

Testimony is how beliefs get around. In paradigmatic cases of testimony, S begins with a belief that *p*. S asserts that *p*. And a hearer, H, comes to belief that *p* on the basis of S's say-so. Exactly when it's appropriate for a speaker to assert that *p* and under what conditions a hearer is entitled to believe *p* on the speaker's say-so is contentious. But all parties agree that assertion is a paradigmatic way that beliefs get from one person to another – a way for beliefs to be *transmitted* through testimony.

Questions – or the speech act that I shall sometimes call *queries* or *askings* – are usually conceived differently. In paradigmatic cases of asking a question, I ask you a question not primarily to prompt you to form the question that I have but to get you to give me the answer that you possess.

Indeed, several philosophers have thought that it's inappropriate to ask a question unless you know that the speaker already knows the answer (and can thereby inform you). Most recently, Haziza (2023) has defended this norm:

> Addressee-Knowledge Norm (AKN): Ask addressee A the question Q only if A knows Q. (Haziza 2023: 113)

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

At least, Haziza thinks AKN applies to what he calls inquiry questioning (Haziza 2023: 114), in which the speaker is inquiring into – and trying to settle – the question they ask. Haziza has offered the most rigorous defense of this norm, but he is not alone. Consider the following comparable views:

- "A plausible norm for questioning is that one should ask someone a question only if she knows the answer" (Schaffer 2006: 98).
- "The questioner should have reason to believe that the questionee knows the answer" (Sorensen 1981: 159).
- "The question 'Is Mr. Smith at home?' can be expressed by three sentences in the indicative mood," one of which is "I believe that you know whether Mr. Smith is at home" (Jeffreys 1948: 378).

There are several reasons for holding such a norm. But at a high altitude, one reason to think this is that it gives the speech act of querying a satisfyingly complementary role to that of assertion. When we assert, we (typically) say what we know.[1] Assertion is a way to get knowledge from the speaker to the audience. The AKN for asking flips these roles for asking. When we ask a question, we do so because the audience can give knowledge to the speaker through an assertion that answers the question.

Understood negatively, my thesis is that this attractive picture of the speech act of questioning is mistaken. We routinely ask questions without knowing (or even reasonably believing, etc.) that the speaker knows the answer.

More positively, I argue that the reason the attractive picture above is mistaken is that asking is not merely the complement of asserting. When we assert, we put forward a proposition. When we query, we raise a question. Granted, we often raise a question in order to get an answer from our interlocutor. But we also do it sometimes to transmit the question. Just as beliefs get around through testimony, interrogative attitudes (IAs) get around through asking.

Just as we need rules governing testimonial transmission (i.e., only assert what is true), so we need rules governing interrogative transmission. Some testifiers are trustworthy informants – they (reliably enough) abide by the rules that govern testimony. We should also want to be trustworthy interrogators. But what does being a trustworthy interrogator require?

2. Against the addressee knowledge norm

In this section, I argue against the AKN. I do this, in part, because AKN is an interesting thesis in its own right that deserves consideration. But we also start here because the cases in which AKN fails are those in which it is clearest that something like interrogative transmission is going on. AKN is a demanding principle, but Haziza (2023) has put together an impressive compilation of linguistic data in its favor.

[1]See Williamson (2000) for the classic defense. There is, of course, a huge literature on whether knowledge really is the norm of assertion or whether it is instead, reasonability, justification, or the like. Those familiar with the literature on assertion can transpose this paragraph into their preferred normative category.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

2.1. Data for AKN

Haziza (2023: 8) invites us to imagine a conversation between Ann, who is looking for her keys, and her coworker Bob, whom Ann has no special reason to believe would know where her keys are:

> Ann: Where are my keys?
> Bob: Why would I know where they are?
> Ann: Do you know where my keys are?
> Bob: ??Why would I know where they are?

Haziza's judgment is that Ann's second question is preferable. Given that she has no idea whether Bob knows where her keys are, it is inappropriate for Ann to ask him where her keys are. It is much better for her to ask, "Do you know where my keys are?" This is evidenced by the fact that Bob seems to have a valid complaint in response to the first question ("Why would I know that!") that is not available to him in the same way in response to the second question.

Why is this evidence for AKN? Given that Ann has no idea whether Bob knows where her keys are, she doesn't know that Bob knows the answer to "Where are my keys?" But presumably, she does know that Bob knows the answer to "Do you know where my keys are?" Thus, AKN predicts that her second question is better.

I have two objections to this argument, the first technical and the second substantive. The technical puzzle for this argument is that, given that knowledge is anti-luminous,[2] it's not clear that Ann (always) knows whether Bob knows where her keys are. And so it's not clear AKN actually explains why Ann's second (indirect) question seems better. Suppose it's a borderline case whether Bob knows where Ann's keys are. Perhaps he vaguely remembers seeing them sitting on the reception desk, but his memory is a bit hazy, and he's not sure that he's right. (If this doesn't seem like a case of borderline knowledge to you, fill in the details of the case so that it does.) In this case, Bob might not know whether he knows where Ann's keys are. Or if you like, imagine Bob has been reading some skeptics lately, and he's unsure whether anyone knows anything (including whether he knows where Ann's keys are). In those cases, Ann violates AKN by asking Bob the indirect question whether he knows where her keys are: Bob, under the influence of the skeptics, doesn't know whether he knows. But it's doubtful that Ann violates a genuine norm by asking Bob if he knows where her keys are just because he's in a borderline case of knowledge, or because he's been brushing up on the Pyrrhonians.[3]

The deeper worry is that our tendency to ask indirect questions is a general phenomenon: we don't only do it when we suspect our addressee doesn't know the answer. Just as it'd be suspicious to cite a particular policy of the Scottish government as an explanation for an economic downturn affecting not just Scotland but the whole of Europe, so there's a worry that AKN's explanation is too narrowly tailored given the breadth of the pattern of asking indirect questions.

Brown and Levinson (1987) treat indirect questions in their seminal work on politeness. On their view, there are both positive and negative strategies for helping each other preserve face in the midst of face-threatening acts (FTAs). One important negative

[2]See Williamson (2000).

[3]In fairness to Haziza, in a different (2021) paper, he presents an argument for a KK principle that would rule out the possibility of Bob's knowing where Ann's keys are without knowing that he so knows. Even so, those who disagree with Haziza about the KK principle have a reason to reject this argument for AKN.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

strategy is indirectness. A speaker is often indirect "when faced with opposing tensions: the desire to give [the hearer] an 'out' by being indirect, and the desire to go on the record" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 132).

Brown and Levinson (1987: 68) list displaying "ignorance of something S is expected to know" as one way to lose face. When we ask someone a question, there is social pressure on them to respond. If they know the answer to the question, then (other things being equal) they can display their knowledge. If they don't, they must confess their ignorance on a topic directed to them (or deviate from social expectations in other ways, e.g., by suddenly changing the topic). Accordingly, when we ask someone a question that we don't know that they know the answer to, we generally risk imposing the loss of face on our interlocutor. Of course, there are other ways to ask questions in ways that may cause our interlocutors to lose face or suffer other harms – Berstler (2023) explores some of the dangers of asking intrusive questions, for instance. Asking questions that may force our interlocutors to display ignorance is thus just one way among many that we can ask a socially risky question.

Brown and Levinson argue that indirectness is an important strategy for saving face, often giving interlocutors "a line of escape" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 134) to maintain face. For example, suppose I would like to ask you to drive me to the airport, but our friendship isn't such that I am sure this is something you are happy to do. I could ask:

(1) Will you drive me to the airport?

But if you are not happy to do so, this puts you in the uncomfortable position of either being imposed upon (by agreeing to drive me to the airport even though you don't want to) or, embarrassingly for both of us, revealing that helping me achieve my goal of getting to the airport is not a priority for you.

To mitigate this risk, I may engage in what Brown and Levinson call "redressive" face-preserving behavior. Suppose instead of (1), I ask:

(2) Are you free to drive me to the airport?

This question gives you an out. If you don't want to drive me to the airport, you can answer that you are not free (where perhaps the addressee is given some latitude in what it takes to count as being "free"). You can answer "no" without either of us losing face. At some level, I'm not ultimately interested in whether you are free to drive me to the airport; I'm interested in whether you *will* drive me to the airport. Even so, we often prefer indirect, face-preserving questions over the direct questions we are ultimately animated by.

Indirect questions that begin with "do you know" similarly give addressees a face-preserving way out. When Ann asks Bob where her keys are, if Bob doesn't know, he won't be able to give an answer to the question he's asked. But it's very likely[4] that Bob can provide an answer to whether he knows where Ann's keys are.

It's true that, assuming Bob doesn't know where Ann's keys are, he will manifest ignorance either way. If Ann asks the direct question, he will display ignorance by replying "I don't know" in response to the question. If Ann asks the indirect question, his answer will be that he does not know where her keys are. But it's only in the first case that Bob displays ignorance on a question where a response from him is conversationally

[4]Failures of luminosity aside.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

expected. When responding to the indirect version of Ann's question, Bob is able to knowledgeably answer every question put to him.

In short, I've suggested that there's an alternative explanation for Haziza's data – an explanation that doesn't require AKN. Asking someone a question when they might not know the answer can be an FTA. It is thus for reasons of politeness (rather than a seemingly epistemically inflected norm like AKN) that we have a preference for indirect rather than direct questions when, for all we know, our addressees are ignorant.

Let's look at one more piece of linguistic data Haziza leverages in support of AKN. Haziza identifies certain constructions as "Moore-paradoxical" askings.[5] Consider the following (lightly adapted) cases from Haziza (2023: 9, 11):

> Ann: Do you know when the meeting starts?
> Bob: No.
> Ann: #When does it start?

> Ann: #You don't know whether Bob is coming to the party, but is he coming to the party?

AKN elegantly explains what's wrong with these examples; this data shows, yet again, why AKN should be taken seriously.

I tried to undercut Haziza's argument from indirect questions by offering an alternative explanation of the same data. That explanation carries over to Moore-paradoxical askings. If it risks making your addressee lose face to ask them a question they may not be able to answer, it's even less polite to ask such a question *knowing* that they don't know the answer.

Somewhat more tentatively, I note that while Haziza's examples of Moore-paradoxical askings do seem problematic (and rude) to me, I'm not sure they seem paradoxical in the way that Moorean paradoxes do. "You don't know wh-*Q*" doesn't obviously take back the question *Q* – even if it denies the addressee the ability to respond – in the way that "I don't know *p*" seems to take back an assertion that *p*.

Haziza has identified some important data: when we don't know that our speakers know the answer to *Q*, we prefer indirect questions that ask whether they know wh-*Q* to direct questions that simply ask *Q*. And it's awkward to ask *Q* immediately after asserting that one's interlocutor does not know. Haziza's explanation of that data is AKN. Mine is that asking direct questions when we don't know that our speakers know is an FTA. On my view, although we have a preference for indirectly asking whether our interlocutors know (the answer to) *Q* rather than asking *Q* itself when we are unsure whether they know, this preference is defeasible and motivated by considerations of politeness rather than anything epistemic. That is at odds with AKN insofar as AKN is thought of as an epistemically inflected norm, on par with, say, the knowledge norm for assertion.

2.2. Asking the ignorant

In the last section, I argued that AKN is not the only candidate explanation of Haziza's data. Here, I argue against AKN more directly by providing (what seem to me) counterexamples. If AKN were true, it would never be appropriate to ask questions of

[5]See Willard-Kyle et al. (2026: 397–99) for a different notion of Moore-paradoxical questions.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

people when they don't know the answer. But we routinely ask people questions even when we have no idea whether they know the answer.

I shall consider two types of cases. In the first set of cases, the primary goal of the inquirers is to get an answer to their question from the addressee. These are clearly cases of what Haziza calls "inquiry questioning." In the second set of cases, those asking the question are primarily interested in some other goal, such as expressing their wonderment or getting their interlocutor to take up their question.

2.2.1. (Merely) hoping for an answer

Although we typically ask questions expecting an immediate answer, this is not always so. This often happens when we are surrounded by strangers and need to ask someone without much reason to choose one addressee over another. Consider the following mundane case:

Train Station
Ann: Excuse me, what time does the next train to Glasgow depart?
Bob: Sorry, I don't know. I wish that I did.

Although Ann asks Bob something he doesn't know the answer to, there's no clear sense that Ann did something wrong. She's not engaged in obviously bad conversational behavior like someone who lies or who gives information that is not well-supported by their evidence.

Haziza puts much weight on the idea that it would be *better* for Ann to ask the indirect question "Do you know what time the next train to Glasgow departs" (Haziza 2023: 16)? I agree (though I think the relevant kind of betterness has to do with politeness). But this is different from the judgment that Ann has actively done something wrong.

Indirectness is one way to redress an FTA. But it isn't the only way. So a probative question at this stage is whether Ann could improve upon her conversation in **Train Station** in the same way by employing a different face-preserving strategy. I think the answer here is *yes*. Imagine these various ways the conversation could have gone:

Train Station*
Ann 1: Excuse me, do you know what time the next train to Glasgow departs?
Ann 2: Excuse me, I'm wondering what time the next train for Glasgow departs.
Ann 3: Excuse me, you might not know this, but what time does the next train to Glasgow depart?
Ann 4: Excuse me, there's no reason you should know this, but what time does the next train for Glasgow depart?
Bob: Sorry, I don't know. I wish that I did.[6]

In each of these cases, Ann executes a strategy for helping Bob save face. Ann 1 employs the strategy we've already spent the most time with: indirectly asking Bob whether he

[6]Haziza (2023: 15) considers a case where the speaker only thinks the addressee might know the answer. He thinks (the analogue of) Bob could appropriately criticize the speaker by retorting, "Then what are you asking me for?" But I think we would find this a particularly uncharitable response from Bob. Clearly, Ann is asking (in part) because she hopes Bob knows (even if she recognizes he may not).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

knows. Ann 2 keeps her question "off the record," allowing the addressee to avoid picking up the implied question if preferred (e.g., by responding "I also wonder what time it leaves – perhaps the attendant knows?").[7] Ann 3 and Ann 4 each communicate, in different ways, that Bob is not *expected* to know the answer to her direct question, mitigating the loss of face if Bob is unable to provide an answer.

If AKN is the right explanation of our preference for indirect questions (when we don't know that the addressee knows), then there should be a big difference between Ann 1 and 2 (on the one hand) and Ann 3 and 4 (on the other). That's because Ann 1 and 2 abide by AKN – Ann 1 by asking her question indirectly, and Ann 2 by not asking a question at all – whereas Ann 3 and 4 violate AKN. But in fact, all four speeches are about equally acceptable. We find sameness where AKN predicts difference. That suggests that, to the degree that Ann's direct question in the original **Train Station** case is dispreferred, it's because she does not execute any face-preserving strategies, not because she violates AKN.

Notice, too, that the seeming propriety of Ann 3 fits uncomfortably with Haziza's explanation of Moore-paradoxical assertions. Consider:

(3) I don't know that it's raining, but it's raining.

is Moore-paradoxical, but so is:

(4) I might not know that it's raining, but it's raining.

Even if (4) isn't quite as paradoxical as (3), both sound problematic. But the utterance in Anna 3 is free of the whiff of paradox:

(5) Excuse me, you might not know this, but what time does the next train to Glasgow depart?

This makes trouble for the contention that Moore-paradoxical askings are paradoxical in the same way that Moore-paradoxical assertions are.

Let's consider one final twist on **Train Station**. In this version of the story, Ann doesn't ask a random fellow passenger; Ann asks the customer service agent. But in this version of the story, Ann knows (or at any rate, reasonably assumes) that this isn't something the customer service operative knows off the top of their head. Rather, Ann expects that they will look up what time the next train leaves for Glasgow on their computer.

In this case (if you like, call it **Train Station****), the customer service agent is in a position to know what the answer is in the sense that they can learn the answer to Ann's question by looking it up. But there's no pressure in this case to say that Ann should have instead asked the indirect question "Do you know when the next train to Glasgow departs?" After all, Ann already knows the answer to that question is no – it's assumed the agent will have to look the information up. Moreover, it's the job of the customer service agent to answer queries like Ann's. And this social arrangement makes it hard to generate the feeling that Ann is being impolite by asking the direct question, even if the agent doesn't know the information offhand and needs to look it up.

[7]See Brown and Levinson (1987: 211–13).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

In **Train Station****, Ann still expects a more or less immediate answer to her question. So one could push back by arguing that there's a sense in which, for all practical purposes, the customer service agent counts as close enough to knowing when the next train leaves.[8]

But once we open the door to asking people questions they are merely in a position to know, it's not hard to stretch out the cases so that the addressees are further and further from knowing. Consider this case:

> **General and Scout:** A general sends a telegram to a team of scouts behind enemy lines. The general wants to know how many soldiers the enemy has assembled in their camp to the southeast. The general knows it will take his scouts a couple of days to get to the enemy camp, count the troops, and report back. The telegram reads simply: "How many troops are in the enemy's camp?"

The scouts are (or at least may be) in a position to (eventually) know how many troops are in the enemy's camp. But it seems wrong to say that the scouts are close enough to knowing how many troops are in the enemy camp for practical purposes. The general is sending them on a potentially dangerous mission to find out that information – it's not information they have at their fingertips.

Once again, notice there is no pressure for the general to ask his scouts the question indirectly. The general's social position is one that allows him to be direct with his troops without impropriety. Indeed, if the general had asked the indirect question "Do you know how many troops are in the enemy camp?", it's not clear that his scouts would have interpreted this as implicating the corresponding direct question. Plausibly, that's because the general's social position of authority removes (or at any rate weakens) the pressure to be indirect: if the general had wanted to know how many troops were in the camp, he could have just asked that. This, again, suggests that our preference for indirect questions when our addressees may not know is explained by rules of manner, not rules of epistemology.

So far, we've mainly focused on cases where the addressee is presumed to be in some kind of position to know the candidate answer to our question. But not all cases are like this. Sometimes, we exploit the fact that we can get information from non-answers to questions. In such cases, we can ask without expecting our addressee to (even be in a position to) know. Consider the following case:

> *Sleeping:* Ann and Bob are watching their favorite tv show before bed. Bob's eyes are half-closed, his mouth is slightly open, and Ann hears a noise that might have been a snore. Ann asks Bob: "Are you asleep?"

Sorensen (1981: 155–57) calls this a "pragmatic paradox liable interrogative." What he means by this, roughly, is that one of the possible direct answers to the question is such that it cannot be properly asserted by the addressee. In this case, if Bob is asleep, he cannot properly assert "I am asleep" (even though he can properly assert "I'm not asleep!" if he's awake).[9]

[8]On certain accounts of the extended mind, she might even count as knowing. See Haziza (2023: 14) for a related response.

[9]Interestingly, Sorensen is one of those philosophers we cited at the beginning as expressing the opinion that we shouldn't ask a question unless we have reason to believe they know the answer. At other points,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Ann's question is a perfectly sensible one to ask. And yet, precisely because she is unsure whether Bob is asleep, she is also unsure whether Bob knows that he is asleep – at least on the assumption that people who are asleep do not always know that they are asleep.[10] So this, again, is an example of properly asking a question without knowing that one's addressee knows the answer.

Finally, self-addressed questions pose a special challenge for AKN. One can assert to oneself (as in self-encouragement), one can issue commands oneself ("Get it together, Chris"), and one can ask questions of oneself. Millson and Risjord (2025: 159) give this example of a self-addressing question:

(6) Now where did I put my wallet?

After asking myself this question, I may get up and go look, thereby (in the good case) coming to know the answer to my question. Self-addressed questions are particularly tricky for proponents of AKN like Haziza (2023: 1) who also endorse the ignorance norm, according to which a speaker should not know the answer to the question they ask. Obviously, in the case of a self-addressed question, the speaker cannot be ignorant of and know the answer to their question simultaneously. So given the propriety of some self-addressing questions, AKN and the ignorance norm cannot both be true.[11]

2.2.2. Asking without (much) hope for an (immediate) answer

All the examples of the last section are paradigmatic instances of what Haziza calls "inquiry questioning," where the speaker is genuinely inquiring into the question they ask and trying to get the answer by asking. Such inquiry questionings are paradigmatic of the speech act of asking questions. But not all askings are paradigmatic.

Haziza's version of AKN applies only to inquiry questionings, and so it's reasonable to ask whether the future cases in this section really challenge AKN as Haziza understands it. It will be easier to evaluate this issue after examining the cases. But I briefly flag that nothing in these cases requires that the agents aren't genuinely curious about the answer to the questions they ask or that they wouldn't be happy to receive a knowledgeable answer from their interlocutor were it to be offered. It's just that getting an immediate answer isn't the primary purpose of the speech act.

Usually, we ask a question hoping for an answer from the addressee. But sometimes, asking a question sets a topic, but without the implication that the addressee will (necessarily) be the one to answer it. Consider the following case:

> ***Team of Detectives***: DCI Morse begins working with a team of detectives on a murder case after Prof. McDiarmid was killed at a gala at Lonsdale College. In

Sorensen makes the seemingly weaker claim: "The requester need only believe that it *might* be the case that the requestee can fulfil the request" (Sorensen 1981: 161, emphasis mine).

[10]I don't mean to deny that one *could* know that one is asleep. Perhaps one knows that one is sleeping during lucid dreams. But even if we sometimes know that we are asleep, all the argument requires is that we are sometimes asleep without knowing that we're asleep.

[11]Haziza might object that he only argues that AKN applies to "inquiry questioning" where this involves trying to settle *Q by asking it* (Haziza 2023: 3). In self-addressed questions, we don't try to get the answer *merely* by asking it, since the speaker then needs to get up and look. The speaker might, nevertheless, be trying to settle the question *in part* by asking it, since addressing the question to oneself might motivate one to figure it out, or direct one's attention so that answering the question is more likely.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

> order to figure out whodunnit, and immediately upon arriving at the scene of the crime, the team tries to establish a list of potential suspects based on who was at the gala. It's hard to determine who exactly was at the gala at the time of the murder, and Morse decides that this strategy is getting them nowhere. "We need a different approach," Morse says. "We should try to figure out if anyone benefits from her death. Did she have a life insurance policy, perhaps?"

This case plausibly exemplifies what Habgood-Coote (forthcoming: §4) has in mind when articulating the category of a shared asking, within his broader argument that askings are proposals in shared inquiry. Morse is setting the questions that he wants his team of detectives (including himself) to focus on. He certainly isn't expecting an answer right then. And it's not clear he expects an answer from the other members of his team – maybe Morse will be the one who discovers whether Prof. McDiarmid had a life insurance policy. Even so, his questions seem sensible. His asking them succeeds at setting strategic lines of inquiry, even if some of those lines of inquiry turn out to be dead ends.

Morse's question is plausibly also an example of what Millson and Risjord call topic-giving questions (Millson and Risjord 2025: 159). We often ask topic-giving questions when teaching. And since philosophical questions can be difficult, we often ask them without expecting a (knowledgeable) answer from our students.

> ***Philosophy Professor***: Prof. Myrtle Willoughby is teaching an introductory epistemology course. She's been leading her class through the classic Ford and Nogot Gettier cases, and her class is handling them well. She decides to challenge them with a harder and more controversial case: "Suppose you wind up in fake barn country . . . " she begins. Do you know there's a barn there when you happen to be looking at a real one?" Prof. Willoughby doesn't expect the class to settle the question—she's unsure of the answer and still wonders about the question herself! But she does want to get her class thinking about the fake barn case for pedagogical purposes. She wants them to join her in wondering whether the protagonists in such cases have knowledge.

Plausibly, this is the sort of case Bell (1975: 209) has in mind when he writes that a question can be *raised* without being *put*: "a lecturer may raise a question . . . simply leaving his audience to consider it if they wish." Notice that Prof. Willoughby's question isn't what is sometimes called an *exam* question.[12] Her goal in asking the question is not to test how much her student knows. Nor is she in any sense pretending to be ignorant (she really doesn't know what to say about fake barn country!). Her question reflects something she is really wondering about. If one of her students were able to provide a knowledgeable answer, their response wouldn't be out of place. Even so, she asks it without expecting a knowledgeable answer from her students.[13]

[12]Exam questions create puzzles of their own. Notice that typically in an exam question, the examiner does not know whether the examinee knows the answer (that's what the exam is meant to determine!). But exam questions are also distinctive in that it's typically assumed that the asker knows the answer to the question, whereas questions usually express speaker ignorance. My inclination is to treat exam questions as involving a conventionalized pretence (that the examiner does not know). A different strategy is to treat exam questions as a distinctive kind of conventionalized speech act with its own norms as carefully developed in Gaszczyk (2025).

[13]See also (the very short) Whitcomb et al. (2022).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

In concert with Bell's distinction, Millson and Risjord (2025: 160) argue that topic-giving askings like those of DCI Morse and Prof. Willoughby "announce a line of inquiry," whereby the speaker "acknowledges an erotetic commitment *without* making others apokritically responsible." By "not making others apokritically responsible," they mean (roughly) not imposing a defeasible obligation on the hearer to provide the answer to the question (Millson and Risjord 2025: 152–54). If asking a question can be a way of merely raising the question without expecting an answer to it, then we can do so without abiding by AKN.

Topic-giving questions aim to get one's audience to focus on a question rather than to give an answer. Certain other askings are not obviously aimed at getting our addressees to do anything; rather, they express our desire to know. We might call these expressive questions. This passage from van Elswyk (2025: 262) is instructive:

> Consider uses of interrogatives in contexts where the speaker knows or believes that the other conversational participants do not have the answer(s) to the question that is asked. Or, relatedly, consider questions that a speaker poses to themselves, such as those asked during a soliloquy. These are admittedly atypical uses. However, there is nothing defective about them as askings, the default speech act performed by using an interrogative. In these cases, it seems that the speaker merely expresses the desire to know the answer(s). They do not expect this desire to be satisfied because the addressee will tell them.

Such questions often manifest a sense of wonder or lament. Asking a magician "How did you do that**?**", knowing that the magician will not reveal their secrets, still succeeds at expressing what one wants to know. "How did she do that**?**", addressed to the equally befuddled audience member at your side, asks a question whose answer the addressee does not know.

Or Juliet famously asks, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" When Juliet asks this, she expresses a desire to know something – why has she, a Capulet, been fated to love a Montague? But although she may be genuinely curious, she does not expect an answer. Nor is Romeo any better positioned to answer it.[14] Her question does not anticipate an answer. But it is still a good asking, in part because it succeeds at expressing the questions she is gripped by.

Finally, we can sometimes ask questions even when it is logically impossible that anyone should ever give us a knowledgeable answer. For some truths are (known to be) unknowable, and yet it is sensible to ask them. Suppose no one will ever know whether the total history of the universe contains an even or odd number of stars (space and the total history of the universe are just too large). Even so, here's a question I could sensibly ask:

> **Stars:** Is it the case that (i) the total history of the universe contains an *odd* number of stars, but no one will ever know that, or is it instead the case that (2) the total history of the universe contains an *even* number of stars, but no one will ever know that?

[14]Perhaps (says the objector) her speech is not relevant because she is (or takes herself to be) talking to herself in soliloquy, and so her speech does not constitute an *asking*, which (one might think) essentially involves an addressee. But even if Juliet believes she is not overheard, she is speaking as if to Romeo – she addresses him as "thou" and follows her question by issuing (what would be) second-personal commands ("Deny thy father and refuse thy name").

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

The answer to this question is in principle unknowable. That's because each alternative (each answer) has a Moore-paradoxical form. If anyone knew (say) that <the universe contains an odd number of stars but no one will ever know that>, then they would also know that the universe contains an odd number of stars. And they would know that no one will ever know that the universe contains an odd number of stars. But then it would be false (and so they wouldn't really know) that no one ever knows that the universe contains an odd number of stars. So supposing that someone knows an answer to the question gets us into a contradiction.[15]

But even though this question cannot be asked in a way that satisfies AKN, **Stars** does not feel paradoxical in the way that a Moorean assertion does. It is of course unreasonable to expect an answer **Stars**, but it isn't paradoxical merely to raise the question by asking it.[16]

Stars is special because it is constructed to be metaphysically impossible to knowledgeably answer. But, in fact, I think I suspect we ask unanswerable questions with dreary frequency. Counterfactual questions are sometimes like this. We wonder what would've happened if we had gone to a different college or had not ended that relationship or had accepted that job offer or . . . I think there's good reason to be skeptical that anyone will ever really know the answer to those questions, but it's certainly something we can wonder about and ask aloud. Some philosophers have famously thought that no one will ever know whether there is a God. Maybe they are right, and maybe they are wrong. But we wouldn't expect people to stop wondering or asking whether there is a God even if the question turns out to be impossible to (knowledgeably) answer.

2.2.3. The scope of a norm

Admittedly, some of the askings in the last subsection have been less than paradigmatic insofar as they do not anticipate an immediate, knowledgeable response from the addressee. Haziza might object that these cases are not responsive to his version of AKN, since his version is explicitly restricted to "inquiry questioning," in which the speaker is inquiring into and trying to settle the question they ask by so asking.

Haziza's strategy suggests he thinks of AKN as applying to a subspecies of asking. Others have suggested that asking a question without trying to get an answer from one's interlocutor isn't really asking at all. For example, Flamini (2026a: 25) claims that "one asks a real question by uttering an interrogative sentence only if one's utterance is an attempt that aims to get the addressee to answer the question it expresses."[17] Merely topic-giving and expressive questions fall short of "real questions" on Flamini's proposal.

Both of these strategies would ease the pressure from the purported counterexamples in the last subsection. But I think there's a theoretical cost to each of them. It's both

[15]See Church's argument discussed in Salerno (2009). See also Raleigh (2025) for nuanced discussion of some potentially unanswerable questions about what science will eventually be able to discover.

[16]Cf. Deigan (2026: 423): "Wondering an apparently unanswerable question of this kind [where I haven't ruled out all the possible answers I can think of] does not itself seem to constitute or even indicate any kind of failing. . . . Sometimes the world just does not afford one opportunities for knowing what one wants to know."

[17]Although I think topic-giving questions make trouble for parts of Flamini's proposal, his account is sensitive to them in other respects. For example, Flamini (2026a: 33) writes that "one sincerely asks a question if one wants the addressee to answer the uttered question to settle an inquiring attitude, *or to make the target audience enter into it*" (emphases mine): topic-giving questions often help the audience "enter into" a question.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

plausible and theoretically simpler to suppose that all the examples of the last two subsections belong to a common speech act type and are subject to a unified norm.

There may be an important sense in which the default aim of the activity of asking a question is to elicit the answer from one's addressee, but we shouldn't infer that each real asking of a question thereby involves an attempt by the speaker to elicit the answer. Even if the primary function of asking questions as a practice is to elicit a knowledgeable answer from one's interlocutor, not every instance of asking has to satisfy this function in order to be norm-abiding. This is a familiar lesson from the literature on assertion. Even if the reason we have a speech act of assertion is to allow us to exchange information, speakers can permissibly use assertion to accomplish other aims, e.g., to encourage people by reminding them of what they already know, or to get one's opinion on the record even when (you know that) it won't persuade anyone listening.[18] The *raison d'être* and licensing conditions for a speech act can come apart.

Finally, even if topic-giving and expressive questions often have a goal *other* than immediately settling the asked question, that doesn't mean they are not also asked with the (perhaps ultimate) goal of resolving an inquiry into the question. Morse doesn't expect an immediate answer to his question, but he certainly hopes to resolve the question and eventually solve the murder. And he expects his topic-giving questions to be instrumental in ultimately answering the questions that he has. Prof. Willoughby might not have much hope that one of her students will presently solve the Gettier problem. But we needn't suppose that she doesn't really want to know the answer to her question or doesn't have the goal of resolving it. That is to say: as long as a speech act can have two goals (like any act), we can imagine both topic-giving and expressive questions as also meeting Haziza's criteria for inquiry questioning.

2.3. AKN reconsidered

We've considered a wide range of cases that jointly suggest it is often perfectly fine to ask someone a question even if we don't know that they know the answer. Admittedly, we often ask questions because we want (more or less) immediate answers.[19] When that's the case, it's a good idea to ask those who (we know) already know. But this isn't always the case.

Direct answers are the paradigm helpful response to a question. But direct answers aren't the only helpful responses. Partial answers (p or q), hedges (probably p), and hypotheses (perhaps p) can all be helpful responses to a question. Sometimes we helpfully respond to questions with other questions, by asking follow-up questions that would (if answered) help resolve the first.[20] AKN needlessly prohibits us from seeking out these motley responses when a direct answer is unavailable.

Sometimes, the best option available to us for getting the answer to our question is to ask someone who doesn't (yet) know. (**Train Station**** and **General and Scout** are like this). And sometimes, our purpose in asking the question is not (merely) to get an answer, but to spread a question. Topic-giving questions like those from our detective and philosopher fit this model. Sometimes, like Juliette, we ask a question in order to express

[18]I've discussed this briefly in Willard-Kyle (2021: 14687–88). Maitra (2011), Mehta (2016), and Marsili (2018) have nuanced discussions of the relationship between the goals and norms of assertion.

[19]This is related to, but distinct from, the thesis that asking a question expresses a desire to know. See van Elswyk (2025) for the latter thesis.

[20]In fact, there is a whole literature on erotetic inference devoted to the way questions flow from one another. See especially Whitcomb and Millson (2024) and Wiśniewski (1991, 1995).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

what we're curious about. In most of these cases, it's not just that the addressees didn't happen to know the answer to the question they were asked. The speaker knew full well (or at least thought it likely enough) that the addressee did not know. So these cases are not merely excused or otherwise blameless violations of AKN – they are real challenges to it.

Topic-giving questions, in particular, raise an important issue. If we sometimes ask questions in order to transmit them and not (merely) to get an answer, when is it proper to do so? Are we entitled to spread questions whenever we like on whatever topic interests us? Or, as is the case with testimony, are there standards and norms for when it is appropriate to put a question forward? Millson and Risjord (2025: 161) suggest the latter:

> Topic-giving inquiries sometimes invite others to join in the task of answering a question. In these cases, the speaker is not only acknowledging an erotetic commitment; they're also licensing others to do so. They are, at least implicitly, attributing to the audience an entitlement to adopt the same interrogative attitude they've expressed.

These are the issues to which we now turn.

3. Norms for asking

3.1. Theses and terms

Although I've been critical of AKN to this point, I actually think it's not far from the truth. We can think of AKN as having two related requirements. First, those who ask a question must know their question has an answer. Second, those who ask a question must know that their addressee knows the answer.

I think that the second of these requirements is too strong. But I endorse the first. One should only ask a question if one knows there is a direct answer to the question:

> **Knowledge Norm:** One ought to: Ask *Q* (unconditionally) only if one knows that *Q* has a true, direct answer.

This is a strong norm. Notice that it also entails the (also controversial) soundness norm:

> **Soundness Norm:** One ought to: Ask *Q* (unconditionally) only if *Q* has a true, direct answer.

Variants of this norm have been defended as a norm of IAs in Willard-Kyle (2023), Whitcomb and Millson (2024), Carter and Willard-Kyle (2025), and Willard-Kyle *et al.* (2026) and of inquiry in Rosa (2024). In this section, I argue that this norm applies equally to askings. In this, it goes further along a path begun by Borge (2013) who argued that we should truly believe the presuppositions of our asked questions, and it partially agrees with a recent paper by Millson and Risjord (2025: 149, 156), who argue that those asked questions that acknowledge an erotetic commitment of the speaker require agents to be in a position to know that they are sound.[21]

[21]One difference is that Millson and Risjord do not think that all askings involve the erotetic commitment of the speaker in this way. Some askings rather impose an obligation on the addressee to answer a question,

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

I also think it's plausible – although I will not argue for it here – that there is an ignorance norm for asking:

> **Ignorance Norm:** One ought to: Ask *Q* (unconditionally) only if one doesn't know a direct answer to *Q* (as an answer to *Q*).[22]

This norm has been defended explicitly for (a certain kind of) asking by Whitcomb (2017) and as the default norm for questions expressed with the interrogative mood by Gaszczyk (2026). There is broader support for an ignorance norm that applies either to inquiry or to IAs, a thesis defended also in Whitcomb (2010), Friedman (2017), Millson (2021), Sapir and van Elswyk (2021), Rosa (2024), and Willard-Kyle et al. (2026).[23] My focus, however, will be on the knowledge norm.

Before going further, it will be useful to clarify some terminology. Since Hamblin (1973), philosophers have thought that whatever questions are, they are intimately associated with the set of their candidate answers. Perhaps the question just is the set of answers. Perhaps it is a partition that imposes a set of answers. Perhaps it is something else that has a set of answers as its alternatives. No matter what, there is some close relationship between a question and its (fully resolving) answers. For example, the question <Is it raining?> can be thought of as (intimately associated with) the set of answers {it is raining, it is not raining}. The question <Will the Padres or Dodgers win the game?> can be thought of as (intimately associated with) the set of answers {the Padres will win, the Dodgers will win}. The question <Who will be the next president of the United States?> can be thought of as (intimately associated with) the potentially infinite set of answers {Marco Rubio will be the next U.S. president, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez will be the next U.S. president, . . . }.

Those answers that fully resolve a question are sometimes called its *direct* answers (some prefer the term "complete").[24] Not every answer to a question fully resolves it. For example, <Chris won't be the next U.S. president> does answer (to an extent) the question of who the next president will be. But it doesn't provide all the information that the question calls for. Similarly, the answers <The next U.S. President will be a Democrat> or <The next U.S. President will be either Marco Rubio or J.D. Vance> do not fully – but only partially – answer the relevant question. They are not direct answers. One test for whether an answer is direct is whether an agent knowing that proposition would (other things being equal) make it true to say that the agent knows

and these latter askings need not (on their account) be sound as seemingly supported by the felicity of challenge questions (Millson and Risjord 2025: 158).

[22]See Rosa (2024: §6.4) for discussion of the way an agent must know an answer under the right guise to count as knowing the answer to a question in the sense the ignorance norm cares about. See also Peacocke's subtle (forthcoming) discussion of what it takes to have the answer to a question.

[23]For objections to the ignorance norm, see Archer (2021), Falbo (2021, 2023), Woodard (2022), Smith (2026), and Flamini (2026b). An optional way of tweaking the ignorance norm, suggested in some form by both Smith (2026) and Flamini (2026b), is to say that one ought not have an IA toward *Q* if one *occurrently* knows wh-*Q*. A nuanced way of defending the ignorance norm against permissible cases of double-checking when one already knows is articulated in Gaszczyk (2026).

[24]On direct answerhood, see Belnap and Steel (1976: 3), Wiśniewski (1991, 1995), and Whitcomb and Millson (2024). Complete answers are defined so as to impose a partition (*a la* Groenendijk and Stokhof 1984) but otherwise play a similar functional role. See also Ginzburg (1995a, 1995b) on *resolving* answers.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

wh-*Q*.[25] For example, if I know that it is raining, then I (typically) count as knowing *whether it is raining*. So that it is raining is a direct answer to whether it is raining.

Having a true, direct answer is an important property for a question to have. This property is sometimes called *soundness*: a question is sound iff it has a true, direct answer. Semanticists talk about the soundness of a question as its basic presupposition: The (semantic) presuppositions of a question are whatever is true given any of its direct answers.

Consider again the cases presented as objections to AKN. While none of the agents knew that their interlocutor knew the answer to their question, they all knew that their question *had* a true, direct answer. Ann knows, presumably, that there is a next train to Glasgow, she's just not sure when it departs. The General knows there is *some* number of troops in the enemy camp. Morse knows that Prof. McDiarmid either did or did not have a life insurance policy. The epistemology professor knows that there's an answer as to whether you know in fake barn cases, even if they aren't sure they'll ever know what that answer is. There is an answer to the **Stars** question even though no one will ever know it. This suggests that we try to ask questions that we know to be sound even if we don't always address them to interlocutors who know the answer.

With a working conception of soundness and direct answers in hand, we're now ready to appreciate three arguments for the knowledge norm. The first is a recycled argument originally given for the knowledge norm for inquiry. The second is a new argument from rhetorical questions. And the third is a new argument based on deception that takes inspiration from a deception-based argument for the ignorance norm put forward by Whitcomb (2017).

3.2. Three arguments

3.2.1. The argument from possibly defective questions

The first argument comes from the seeming impropriety of asking questions that, for all we know, are unsound – questions that are possibly defective.[26] Consider Jack, Jill, and John. Suppose I know that (exactly) one person in this group loves exactly one of the others, and that's the only relevant thing I know about them. It would be strange, in this case, to ask whether Jack loves Jill or (rather) whether Jill loves Jack. That leaves out options that (given what I know) are just as good as the others. For example, it leaves out the possibilities that John loves Jill or that Jack loves John. So, I shouldn't ask:

(7) Does Jack love Jill or (rather) does Jill love Jack?[27]

[25]Why other things being equal? If knowing wh-*Q* displays false belief sensitivity as argued in George (2018), then knowledge of a Q's answer can fail to constitute knowledge wh-*Q* if one also has other false beliefs about the answer to *Q*. See also Rosa (2024: §6.4) and Peacocke (forthcoming) for discussion of cases wherein an agent knows an answer to *Q* but not *as* the answer to *Q*. For the heuristic for direct answerhood, see Deigan (2026: 426).

[26]This argument recycles considerations in favor of the knowledge norm for inquiry in Willard-Kyle (2023) and applies them to askings.

[27]Importantly, this question is to be understood as having as its answers <Jack loves Jill> and <Jill loves Jack>. The question is *not* asking whether the disjunct <Jack loves Jill or Jill loves Jack> is true. This question is an example of a *neglectful* question in the sense articulated in Willard-Kyle et al. (2026).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

But I may ask:

(8) Does Jack love Jill, or does Jack love John, or does Jill love Jack, or does Jill love John, or does John love Jack, or does John love Jill?

Or since that's a mouthful, I'd probably ask:

(9) Who among Jack, Jill, and John loves which one of the others?

The knowledge norm offers an explanation for this pattern. It's wrong to ask (7) because I don't know that question has a true, direct answer – it wouldn't, for example, if (only) John loved (only) Jack. But I do know that (8) and (9) are sound: that's why I'm epistemically entitled to ask them.

Or suppose it's the semifinals at the World Cup, and the four teams that remain are France, Spain, England, and Argentina. At that point in time, it would be strange for me to ask:

(10) Will France or (rather) Spain win the World Cup?

That question may turn out to be sound (suppose Spain will in fact win). Even so, it's a strange question for me to ask given that, for all I know, the winner could also be Argentina or England. When I ask this question, I don't know that it is sound. That explains why it is a bad question to ask.[28]

It seems wrong to ask possibly defective questions – questions that we do not know to be sound. It's evidence for the knowledge norm that it explains this judgment.

3.2.2. The argument from rhetorical questions

The argument of the last section echoes arguments that have been developed for a knowledge norm on inquiry or IAs. In this section, I want to consider a new argument for a knowledge norm for asking, or at least for this weaker principle:

Soundness Norm: One ought to: Ask *Q* (unconditionally) only if *Q* has a true, direct answer.

The soundness norm is controversial enough in its own right. But its truth would also provide evidence for the knowledge norm insofar as the knowledge norm entails it.

This new argument is built on rhetorical questions and on the observation that we seem to be able to produce a rhetorical effect from asking flagrantly unsound questions. Rhetorical questions are often set aside when discussing inquiry-related norms. After all, aren't rhetorical questions just assertions in disguise?[29] But even if rhetorical questions are (usually) best understood as assertions in disguise, they get their assertoric effect by posing a question. That is to say, they are indirect speech acts (Searle 1975, Asher and

[28]Cf. Willard-Kyle (forthcoming) for a similarly structured case.

[29]See, e.g., Haziza (2023: 2–3) and Habgood-Coote (forthcoming: §3.2) for examples of setting rhetorical questions to the side in this way.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Lascarides 2001) that simultaneously play the role of questioning and asserting.[30] Accordingly, (I'll suggest) the norms governing asking questions play a role in explaining why rhetorical questions have the effect they do.

We'll work our way back to the soundness norm, but let's first remind ourselves of the ignorance norm for asking (Whitcomb 2017):

> **Ignorance Norm:** One ought to: Ask *Q* (unconditionally) only if one doesn't know a direct answer to *Q*.

At first glance, this norm runs into difficulty explaining rhetorical questions.

(11) A: [overhearing groans from the tv room during baseball season] Are the White Sox losing?
B: Is the Pope Catholic?

In response to A's question, B asks whether the Pope is Catholic. But surely B knows as well as anyone that the Pope *is* Catholic, so it looks like B is violating the ignorance norm. But there's nothing wrong with B's response. That's not what the ignorance norm seems to predict.

Whereas rhetorical questions look like a problem for the ignorance norm at first glance, they are actually, on reflection, further evidence for it. And that's because one kind of evidence for the existence of a norm is evidence that it can be flouted.

In what sense do rhetorical questions flout the ignorance norm? Sadock and Zwicky (1985) define rhetorical questions as "those a speaker uses just for rhetorical effect when not only is he sure of the answer, but he judges that the listener knows that he is sure of the answer as well" (Sadock and Zwicky 1985: 180). Rohde (2006: 147) says that "rhetorical questions require . . . obvious answer(s) in the existing commitments of the discourse participants." Often theorists require the relevant "effect" to be the same as an assertion. For example, König and Siemund (2007: 283) gloss a rhetorical question as "a statement expressed by an interrogative sentence."[31] In short, rhetorical questions typically flout the ignorance norm by asking a question whose answer is common knowledge in order to generate an assertoric effect.

When someone asks whether the Pope is Catholic, it's (near enough) common knowledge between the speaker and hearer that the speaker knows the answer to their question. The speaker is breaking the ignorance norm and not trying to hide it. That raises the question what the speaker is up to and creates "interpretive resistance" (Whitcomb 2017: 150). They aren't seeking to be informed about a question they don't

[30]For this reason, I think it's a mistake to categorize rhetorical questions as "fake" questions, as Flamini (2026a: 23, fn. 2) does, nor as "non-questions," as Watson (2021: 293) does, even if they behave unusually. Rather, rhetorical questions are a species of indirect speech act (Searle 1975, Asher and Lascarides 2001), whereby one succeeds at performing one kind of speech act by way of (also) performing another. Asher and Lascarides (2001: 194) explicitly list a rhetorical question as an example of a questioning speech act that doubles as an assertion.

[31]That isn't to say that every question that acts like an assertion is thereby rhetorical. Asher and Lascarides (2001: 212) give the following example: A: Let's meet next weekend. B: How about Saturday? On their account, B's question (among other things) acts like an assertion that B can meet A on Saturday. But even though this question acts like an assertion, it is not a rhetorical question. So the claim that rhetorical questions are statements expressed as questions is better understood as a necessary condition than a definition.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

know the answer to, so what are they doing? We search for alternative explanations. And especially since this question is given in response to a question, it's natural to interpret it as an answer: yes, the White Sox are losing (with the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that this fact is just as obvious as the fact that the Pope is Catholic).

It would be wrong, therefore, to conclude that rhetorical questions are evidence against the ignorance norm, or even that they are irrelevant. In fact, rhetorical questions are evidence for the ignorance norm. For the fact that we flout the norm plausibly plays a role in the explanation of why rhetorical questions function the way they do. And you can't flout a norm that doesn't exist.

The literature on rhetorical questions has tended to focus on examples like "Is the Pope Catholic?" and "Who likes being criticized?" (König and Siemund 2007: 283) in which the speaker and audience obviously know the question's direct answer. But interestingly, not all rhetorical questions are like that. There are at least two ways in which some rhetorical questions depart from the paradigm.

First, the thing that's common knowledge is sometimes less than a direct answer. Consider King Théoden's (much memeified) rhetorical question from Peter Jackson's rendition of *The Lord of the Rings*:

(12) Where was Gondor when the Westfold fell?

In context, Aragorn has suggested to Théoden of Rohan that he call to Gondor, Rohan's ancient ally, requesting military aid. The implied answer to Théoden's question is "not here" or "not standing alongside Rohan." This is an eliminative (or perhaps partial) answer to Théoden's question, but it isn't a direct one: a direct answer would positively specify where Gondor's armies were. But in this case, the eliminative answer is resolving enough given the practical aims of the conversation, which is to decide whether to send riders requesting military aid to Gondor. No one in the movie theater needs to know the direct answer to appreciate the rhetorical effect of the question.

But some rhetorical questions seem not to have a true answer at all. Indeed, some rhetorical questions seem to flout the norm that a question be sound. Here's an example from *The Sound of Music*. At the beginning of the movie, Maria doesn't fit in at the abbey. While debating what to do with her, the nuns ask (in song, of course), "How do you solve a problem like Maria?" The song includes the following exchange between the sometimes exasperated sisters and the wise Mother Abbess:

Sister Margaretta: But how do you make her [Maria] stay? And listen to all you say?
Mother Abbess: How do you keep a wave upon the sand?
Sister Margaretta: How do you solve a problem like Maria?
Mother Abbess: How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?

The Mother Abbess's questions are rhetorical. No one expects an answer to them. But it's not because there is some direct answer she is ignorant of.[32] After all, no one – not even the Mother Abbess – knows how to hold a moonbeam in their hand.

[32]I actually think there's a way of understanding the ignorance norm according to which the Mother Abbess flouts it by asking this question. But that requires a notion of erotetic ignorance that entails soundness. For a defense, see Willard-Kyle (2024). Thanks to Veronica Campos for helpful conversation on this point.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

But the Mother Abbess is flouting *a* norm governing asking: she's flouting the norm that asked questions ought to be sound. Her rhetorical question implicates that, just as there's no way to hold a moonbeam in your hand, so there's no way to solve a problem like Maria. Perhaps that's because Maria is unsolvable; perhaps it's because she isn't a problem to be solved in the first place. In this way, the Mother Abbess's question has assertoric effect.

Nor is the Mother Abbess alone. Consider the question

(13) Why (should I bother to) be moral?[33]

when asked not by the sincere meta-ethicist but by the flippant scoundrel. The scoundrel's question gets its rhetorical effect because we judge that the scoundrel believes there is no true answer to that question. Or again, consider:

(14) Why not us?
(15) Why couldn't it be us?

These questions, when asked defiantly by the written-off underdogs, rhetorically suggest that there's no reason it couldn't be them – something which can only be true just in case there is no true answer to them.

I think that once we see rhetorical questions as (often) involving flouting norms on querying generally (rather than just the ignorance norm), other examples of rhetorical questions start coming to mind. We can, plausibly, get rhetorical questions by violating other (not necessarily epistemic) norms on questioning. Imagine the following responses to 16(a):

(16) (a) Are you pregnant?
(b) Oh, and how much do you weigh?
(c) And how much money do you make?
(d) Have you had a vasectomy?

By asking 16(b), 16(c), or 16(d), the speaker flouts a norm on asking invasive or impolite questions. But they do so in a way that points out that the query in 16(a) violated the very same social norm, thereby explaining their refusal to answer.[34]

Some readers, I suspect, will be put off by my liberal usage of "rhetorical question" as applied to all of the questions above, preferring to restrict the term to questions whose answers are common knowledge, as Sadock and Zwicky (1985: 180) require. I think my liberal use is defensible. The speaker doesn't expect an answer to any of the questions above, and they all at least implicate propositional content.

But I don't think the argument hangs on terminology. Let us say that the examples of this section have a rhetorical effect (even if they aren't rhetorical questions, narrowly

[33]I owe thanks to Anita Superson for suggesting this case.

[34]I suggest that rhetorical questions often (though not necessarily always) function by flouting norms on asking a question. Easwaran (2025: 11) has suggested that rhetorical questions are "bullshit," in virtue of not being made with the "characteristic intention" of so asking. Easwaran and I share the thought that there is something (perhaps intentionally) deviant about rhetorical questions relative to the default rules, but it's a separate question whether rhetorical questions thereby count as bullshit because, as Sundell (forthcoming: §6) argues, the rhetorical question may still serve the particular goals of the conversation. See also Whitcomb (2023) for another take on bullshit questions.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

construed). They are (at least) structurally similar to rhetorical questions in that they have a rhetorical effect other than prompting an answer, they implicate propositional content, and they do that in part by flouting the norms that generally govern acts of querying. We've discovered that flagrant violations of a soundness norm (like the Mother Abbess's question) can generate this kind of rhetorical effect.

Do all ways of flagrantly violating norms on asking questions generate rhetorical questions? No. As Searle (1975: 70) points out, "an indirect speech act utterance of *Can you reach the salt?* may be defective in the sense that S may already know the answer" (obviously yes, that's why I asked *you*!). In cases like this, "the speaker issues a directive BY WAY OF asking a question" (Searle 1975: 70) – so the speaker really is asking a question, even if the primary illocutionary effect of their utterance is directive. Even so, the question "Can you reach the salt?" is not rhetorical. Unlike rhetorical questions, the utterance anticipates a response (e.g., "yes, of course"). And unlike rhetorical questions, the utterance constitutes a directive rather than an assertion. Notably for this discussion, however, although either speech act may intentionally break the ignorance norm, the breaking of a norm plays an essential role in the rhetorical effect of *Is the Pope Catholic* in a way that it doesn't in *Can you reach the salt*. Asking whether the Pope is Catholic in a room of people who have never heard of the Pope would fall flat as a rhetorical question. But I may succeed at getting you to pass me the salt by asking whether you can reach it even if the salt is just far enough from you that I'm really unsure as to the answer.

Let's take a step back. What argument does this section suggest?

We get rhetorical (or rhetorical-like) questions, in part, by flouting norms on asking questions. (e.g., "Is the Pope Catholic?" flouts the ignorance norm.) But not all rhetorical questions flout the ignorance norm. Some questions like the Mother Abbess' "How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?" are better understood as flouting a soundness norm. One can only flout a norm that actually exists. Therefore, we should think there is a soundness norm for asking questions.

3.2.3. Interlude: An olive branch for AKN

I spent the first part of the paper arguing against the AKN. Now, I present an olive branch. The argument from rhetorical questions also provides evidence for AKN. That's because we sometimes get a rhetorical effect by asking questions our addressee obviously doesn't know the answer to.

Consider Job. Job demands an account from God as to why he has suffered despite his righteousness – declaring that he will defend himself in divine court against his apparent indictment.[35] When God responds to Job, he does so with a series of rhetorical questions. Most of the rhetorical questions are typical, in that the direct answer is common knowledge between God and Job:

(17) Have you entered the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you? (*implied answer:* no)[36]

[35]"O that I had one to hear me! (Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!) O that I had the indictment written by my adversary! . . . I would give him an account of all my steps; like a Prince I would approach him" (Job 31: 35–37). All biblical translations are NRSVUE.

[36]Job 38: 16–17.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Some plausibly (are known to) have no answer:

(18) Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? (*There is no place Job was when God laid the foundations of the earth.*)[37]

But others get their effect by calling attention to the fact that Job, the addressee, is ignorant of the answer:

(19) Where is the way to the dwelling of light, and where is the place of darkness,
(20) that you may take it to its territory and that you may discern the paths to its home? Surely you know, for you were born then, and the number of your days is great![38]

It's common knowledge between God and Job that Job is ignorant of the answer to these questions. These questions get their rhetorical effect by violating the typical social expectation that the addressee (Job) knows the answer to the question. This, then, is evidence for AKN.

We've already seen, however, that questions can generate a rhetorical effect by violating norms of politeness (e.g., "Have you had a vasectomy?" in response to "Are you pregnant?"), which generally seek to avoid or mollify FTAs. Moreover, it is crucial to God's questioning of Job that he is humbling him by displaying Job's ignorance, one of the ways Brown and Levinson (1987: 68) specify as a way to lose face. God's questions to Job are FTAs. It is humbling for Job to admit the limits of his knowledge after declaring he would approach God "like a Prince"[39] in court. And indeed, Job's final words in the book are self-effacing: "I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."[40] The effect of the question is not to get Job to respond with an answer but to humble Job – to cause Job to lose face.[41]

What, then, shall we say about the rhetorical effect of God's final question? Does it get its rhetorical effect from a distinctively epistemic AKN or from more general considerations favoring politeness and face-preserving speech acts? Considered independently, I think both answers are plausible. Given the apparent counterexamples to AKN in Section 2, I prefer the second alternative. Even so, we should give AKN its due: AKN offers a simple explanation of why some rhetorical questions are generated by the common knowledge that the addressee does not know the answer.

3.2.4. The argument from deceptive questions

One of Whitcomb's (2017: 150) arguments for the ignorance norm is that we can deceive people into thinking that we don't know the answer to a question by asking it. Here's one of his examples:

> [S]uppose that my Dean is forming a committee to study teaching evaluations, and says that any committee members should have some knowledge of psychometrics.

[37]Job 38: 4.
[38]Job 38: 19–21.
[39]Job 31: 37.
[40]Job 42: 6.
[41]Readers of Job will know that the text is much more ambiguous than I have presented it here. Although God's questions humble Job, God also honors Job by granting his request for an audience and richly rewards him at the end of the book.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

> If I have been studying psychometrics for years but don't want to do any committee work, I can just ask the Dean 'What's psychometrics?'. By asking this, I can mislead her into thinking I don't know what psychometrics is. (Whitcomb 2017: 150)

The ignorance norm is a good explanation of the fact that we can thus deceive each other with questions. The Dean believes that the protagonist doesn't know what psychometrics is because asking a question implies ignorance of the answer.

But we can also deceive each other by asking questions we don't know to be sound. This analogously suggests the knowledge norm. A particularly grim example of deception through questioning can be found in police interrogations. Consider this passage from Wright (2026: 1005–1006):

> Interrogators are encouraged to being the interrogation by claiming that they have sufficient evidence of the suspect's guilt, . . . [and] interrogators redefine the nature of the interrogation, making it seem that the suspects' guilt is already established and that they simply want to understand why the crime happened.

In effect, this is a shift from asking questions that aim to establish whether the suspect committed the crime to questions that aim to establish why the suspect committed the crime – it's a shift from a question that does not presuppose the suspect's guilt to a question that does.

For example, suppose an interrogator asks the following without evidence:

(21) How come we found your DNA at the scene of the crime?

Assuming they have found no DNA evidence, this would be a deceptive question. Why is it deceptive? Because the interrogator doesn't actually know that the question is sound. If the suspect's DNA is not at the scene of the crime, then the question has no true answer.

Notice that the question is deceptive even if the suspect's DNA is at the scene of the crime. The interrogator would still falsely make it seem like they *knew* that the suspect's DNA was at the scene of the crime, when in fact (we are imagining) they have no such evidence.

Indeed, the ability to deceive with questions is one of the things Belnap and Steel (1976: 115–16) flagged in their pioneering work on the soundness (they would call it the "truth") of questions:

> To ask something with a false presupposition . . . is very much like making a false statement. One can do it knowingly and maliciously, and be exactly on a par with a liar . . . For this reason we hereby make it a proposal to call a question "true" or "false" according . . . as it does or does not have some true answer. (Belnap and Steel 1976: 115–6)

Intentionally asking an unsound question is like intentionally asserting a false proposition. Both are means of deception.

As wary students know, one species of the deceptive question is the trick question. Consider this familiar example:

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

(22) If a plane crashes on the border of California and Nevada, where are the survivors buried?

Of course, the *survivors* aren't buried anywhere. This counts as a trick question because it is "designed to box recipients in, forcing them to choose among propositions none of which they endorse" (Millson and Risjord 2025: 153). The appropriate response is not a direct answer at all, but to reject a presupposition of the question. The intentional unsoundness of the question explains why it is a trick question and why students feel justified in complaining about trick questions on exams.

Just as the ignorance norm explains how we can ask questions deceptively by implying that we are more ignorant than we are, the knowledge norm explains how we can ask questions deceptively by implying that we know more than we do.

4. Objections

I've argued that there is both a soundness and a knowledge norm on asking. One should only ask questions that have true, direct answers; indeed, one should only ask questions when one *knows* that they have true, direct answers. In this section, I consider objections. In response to the final objection, I'll modestly weaken the norm that I ultimately defend.

4.1. Presupposition-checking questions

Habgood-Coote (forthcoming) argues that "we can use asking to check whether the presupposition of a question is correct." As an example, he offers the following sentence:

(23) I don't know how your university is structured, but are you a member of the philosophy department?

This question seems fine to ask. But arguably, the question presupposes that the university is structured in such a way that it has a philosophy department, while simultaneously denying that the speaker knows the university is structured this way. If so, that's a problem for my account.

But I think we can stare down this purported counterexample. First, the speaker could know that the university has a philosophy department and yet truly say that they don't know how the university is structured. Perhaps even though they know the university has a philosophy department, they don't know what other departments there are, or how the departments are grouped within various colleges, and so on.

But maybe we can change the example to get around this problem:

(24) I don't know whether your university has a philosophy department, but are you a member of the philosophy department?

I contend, however, that (23) sounds significantly worse than (22). And if we change the utterance to make it even clearer that the question presupposes that the university has a philosophy department, the sentence comes out even worse:

(25) I don't know whether your university has a philosophy department, but is it the case that: (a) your university has a philosophy department and you are a member of it or (b) your university has a philosophy department and you are *not* a member of it?

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

This question clearly is problematic. This question obviously ignores the open (by the speaker's lights) possibility that the university has no philosophy department whatsoever. The clearer it is that the sentence expresses a violation of the knowledge norm, the clearer it is that the sentence is problematic. That's the pattern we should expect if the knowledge norm is true.

4.2. Merely justified belief that a question is sound

Falbo (2024) presents several objections to the knowledge norm. While her discussion focuses on norms governing inquiry, some of her cases neatly translate into objections to a knowledge norm for asking. Here's one of them:

> Dog Park: Randy, a stranger, approaches Thomas at the dog park. He starts to pet the dog that Thomas walked into the park with. Randy asks: "What's your dog's name?" Thomas answers: "Porco." Unbeknownst to Randy, the dog isn't Thomas's—he's dogsitting Porco for his roommate—but Thomas doesn't mention this because it would be pedantic and irrelevant to Randy's reasons for inquiring. Randy just wants to know the dog's name so he can use it while playing with the dog for a couple of minutes at the park. (Falbo 2024: 970)

Thomas (let's suppose) doesn't have a dog. Any answer to Randy's question would have the form "Thomas's dog's name is *x*," but every proposition of that form is false. So the question is unsound. But then Randy has violated the knowledge norm for asking. But, arguably, Randy does nothing wrong by so asking. Certainly, Randy hasn't behaved in an epistemically irresponsible way. Ostensibly, that's a problem for the knowledge norm.[42]

Nor are these cases rare; on the contrary, they are common in the history of science. As Henne (forthcoming: §5) notes:

> In the history of science, we find countless scientific inquiries into questions that make no sense today (Jardine 2000) or that rely on an incorrect or imperfect conceptual framework, e.g. by carving the possibility space in the wrong way or by incorporating incorrect assumptions about what objects and properties exist in the world. Such inquiries ask defective questions in Willard-Kyle's sense. The fact that norms of inquiry would forbid such commonplace and widespread cases of inquiry is . . . suspicious.

As Henne notes, both the presuppositions and framing of historically important questions often turn out to have been unsound or otherwise problematic. And yet surely scientists have, in some sense, been asking the right questions as our knowledge of the physical world has evolved.

These cases mirror a certain kind of objection often made against the knowledge norm for assertion. Knowledge is factive, so whenever we say something false, we thereby violate the knowledge norm for assertion. But sometimes we assert things based

[42]There's a variation on this case in which Thomas *does* have a different (and absent) dog who isn't Porco. In this variation, Randy's query has the structure of a Gettiered question. It *is* sound, and he is justified in believing it to be sound, but his justification for believing the question to be sound and the actual reason the question is sound are not related in the right sort of way to give him knowledge that the question is sound. For related discussion, see Carter and Willard-Kyle (2025).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

on our best evidence and conceptual schemes or as a result of employing our typically reliable cognitive processes and, nevertheless, get things wrong. In such cases, we assert what we *reasonably* or *reliably* or *rationally* or *justifiably* believe even though we fall short of knowledge. Many people have the intuition that in such cases, we perform as we ought to, assertorically speaking. If they are right, the norm of assertion is not knowledge but something weaker and non-factive: the norm of assertion is justification, or some variant thereof.[43]

This standard objection has a standard reply. Such assertions, though norm-violating, are excused (roughly) because the agents were behaving in the sort of way that generally leads to complying with the knowledge norm of assertion. So if Randy went home and told Sandy, "I met Thomas's dog, Porco, at the dog park," he would be asserting responsibly even though, because false, his assertion does not satisfy the knowledge norm.

Unsurprisingly, this reply has not satisfied everyone. One reason this reply has not satisfied everyone is that the debate turns on deep theoretical disagreements about the nature of norms and how externalist (or internist) we should expect them to be. We won't make further progress on that aspect of the debate here.[44]

But another reason this reply has not satisfied everyone is that it seems insufficient merely to say that Randy is not blameworthy. Rather, Randy does something good as a question-asker; merely saying that he failed to be blameworthy does not capture this positive reaction to Randy's question. As Falbo (2024: 971) puts it, it's not that Randy is "merely blameless or excused for having inquired into Q [namely, "What is Thomas's dog's name?"]. Instead, they positively ought to have inquired into Q." We need to be able to say something *good* about Randy's question, not merely to abstain from one species of criticism.

I think we can, however. Notice that Randy succeeds in manifesting a disposition to succeed at asking sound questions reliably enough in normal circumstances. (In related work, Adam Carter and I have thus described inquirers like Randy as satisfying a competence norm, even if they fall short of full, erotetic success.)[45] After all, it's normally a dog's owner who takes them to dog parks. The disposition to ask people at the dog park what their dog's name is normally results in asking sound questions. So, it's not merely that we can avoid blaming Randy: we can praise him for manifesting an interrogative competence – a competence to ask questions only if they are sound reliably enough. Compatibly with that, we can deny him full interrogative success by saying that he falls short of the knowledge norm.[46] Just as we can say something good about the speaker whose assertion, though justified, falls short of knowledge – it manifest a justified belief and a disposition to assert only what they know – so we can say something good about the speaker whose question falls short of the knowledge norm in the analogous way.

[43]For example, Douven (2006) argues for a norm of rational credibility, Lackey (2007) for reasonability of belief, and Kvanvig (2009) for justification.

[44]But see both Henne (forthcoming: §5) and Palmira (2025) for excellent discussion on the sorts of norms that may apply to questions.

[45]See Carter and Willard-Kyle (2025) for more on the relevant notion of competence.

[46]For another way to solve this problem, see Palmira (2025), who proposes that we distinguish between evaluative and prescriptive norms in order to account for the sense in which questions like Randy's are in some sense good and in another sense problematic.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

4.3. Interpersonal questions

Another of Falbo's cases concerns the care with which we should ask interpersonal questions:

> **Best Friends**: Lucinda and Tyra have been best friends for decades; they are as close as can be. Tyra isn't a big fan of Lucinda's on-again-off-again boyfriend, Clay. Clay likes to drink—a lot. Over the past few months, Clay's drunken blackouts have become more frequent and more aggressive. Tyra has started to worry about Lucinda's safety. During a visit, Tyra notices that Lucinda isn't her usual happy-go-lucky self. She seems tired and deflated. Tyra also notices several small finger-sized bruises scattered across Lucinda's arms. Lucinda and Tyra make eye contact, and in that moment, Lucinda realizes that Trya has seen her bruises. Lucinda quickly crosses her arms, covers up the bruises, and nervously looks away. Assuming the worst, and feeling deeply concerned for her friend's safety, Tyra asks: "How long has he been doing this to you?" (Falbo 2024, 972).

There's a lot going on in Falbo's case, which is carefully constructed with an eye toward skillfully navigating delicate and (perceived to be) shame-inducing topics in interpersonal inquiries.

First, let's see how this case is a challenge to the knowledge norm for asking. We are to understand the case as one in which Tyra suspects or assumes that Clay has hit Lucinda but does not know that for sure. All answers to Tyra's question, "How long has he been doing this to you?" have (something like) the form, "Clay has been hitting me for x period of time." Accordingly, Tyra's question only has a true, direct answer if Clay has been hitting Lucinda for some period of time. But since we assumed that Tyra does not know that Clay has been hitting Lucinda, neither does Tyra know that her question has a true, direct answer. And nevertheless, it seems like Tyra is asking a good question in an especially sensitive way. That's a problem for the knowledge norm.

What's the best response? As a first pass, one might say that this is a case in which Tyra is performing well as a friend but poorly as a querier. Clearly, in this instance, it's more important to be a good friend than a good querier – to pay more attention to what Lucinda needs as a friend than to what the norms for asking legislate.

Even though I think there's ultimately something right about this response, it is unsatisfying as developed so far. After all, shouldn't the norms governing acts of questioning be sensitive to our goals as agents? And if we are relational people who thrive when we can ask each other good interpersonal questions, why shouldn't facts about what it is good for Lucinda to ask as a friend be relevant to what it is good to ask as a questioner?

A more complete response to Falbo's challenge is this: that Tyra is violating (or at any rate, skirting) the rules governing question-asking in part explains the way in which she succeeds in being a sensitive friend. But then, of course, we need to posit the existence of the rules Tyra is (perhaps judiciously) skirting.

Here's the core thought. Lucinda passes over the issue of whether Clay has hit Lucinda. There are (presumably) lots of questions that Tyra does not ask Lucinda in this exchange. She doesn't ask (we may imagine) what her plans for the weekend are, or what her mother's middle name was, or whether she wants to get lunch. All these questions go unasked. But the question "Has Clay hit you?" is not just unasked: it is elided. Passed

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

over. Skipped. The judgment that something important is passed over is consistent with some of the illuminating things Falbo says about the case:

> [By not asking] the more direct and confrontational question ("Are you being physically abused?"), Tyra is perhaps aiming to minimize the amount of potential shame or embarrassment that Lucinda may feel. In this sense, we might interpret Tyra's question as what Brown and Levinson (1987) call a face-saving act: it is an attempt to reduce the stigma or negative impact that this conversation may have on Lucinda's reputation or self-image.

Given that we are to understand the case as one in which Tyra really doesn't know whether Lucinda has been abused, she's taking a gamble by skipping over the question. If she's not being abused, Lucinda may be upset and defensive ("Why would you assume that?"). But if she is, Tyra may guard against the (undeserved but real) shame or embarrassment that Lucinda may feel by directly admitting it. By treating the admission as past – by smuggling in the information that she is being abused into the presupposition of the question rather than making it the at-issue content – Tyra graciously passes over a question that may shame her friend.

Lucinda may be grateful that her friend has passed over this question. But in what sense is Tyra passing over the question of whether Lucinda is being abused? In order to satisfy the knowledge norm for asking with respect to the question "How long has this been happening?", she'd have to know the abuse has been happening. Tyra counts as skipping the question "Has he been abusing you?" because she needs to know the answer to that question before she's in a position to properly ask the question she *does* ask.

In this way, I think the knowledge norm is part of the explanation of the questions (asked and elided) in **Good Friend**. True, Tyra has not abided by the knowledge norm for asking. But she succeeds at being a good friend by skirting the rules. Tyra skips over a question that, in some sense, ought to have been asked first. As a good friend, Tyra probably made the right decision. But the feeling of relief that Lucinda feels upon having the question skipped can only be explained if there's a sense in which the question ought to have been asked. The knowledge norm for asking is the rule that Tyra judiciously circumvents by skipping ahead.

4.4. Challenge questions

Challenge questions pose an especially tricky problem for the knowledge norm. Millson and Risjord (2025: 158), who are otherwise quite sympathetic to the idea that asked questions should be sound, give the following as an example of an addressee-challenging question:

(26) Why should I believe what you say? [Context: the interlocutor has just made an assertion]

Its apparent propriety is especially challenging for soundness-based norms since through it

> "speakers seem to express a belief that there is no true answer to their question" (Millson and Risjord 2025: 158). That's because the question apparently

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

presupposes that I *should* believe what you say but also (when asked challengingly) implicates that I don't yet believe you. Since I don't yet believe you, it's also doubtful I think I should believe what you say, since it is baldly akratic to simultaneously think I should believe that *p* while not doing so. Therefore, it appears that we don't always believe that our challenge questions have true answers – we ask information of the speaker expecting them to fail because (we judge) there is (or at least may be) no true answer to give.

Challenges also sometimes come in conditional form. In the opening scene of *Star Wars,* Darth Vader interrogates rebels after boarding their ship. One soldier refuses to cooperate, protesting that they are merely a consular ship on a diplomatic mission. Darth Vader asks a challenge question:

(27) If this is a consular ship, [then] where [on this ship] is the ambassador?

Vader is not really curious where the ambassador is: he knows there's no ambassador on board. The question at the end of the conditional is unsound. That Vader's question seems appropriate thus poses a problem for the knowledge norm.

Or rather, it would, if the knowledge norm were not restricted to cases where an agent asks a question *unconditionally*. Just as the knowledge norm of assertion does not require that the propositional consequent of every asserted conditional be true, so the knowledge norm of asking does not require that the interrogative consequent of every conditionally asked question be sound.

But Vader's case is still worth considering: in a roundabout way, Vader's question is actually yet more evidence that we expect questions to be sound. Imagine Vader had instead responded with this conditional:

(28) If this were a consular ship, then there would be an ambassador on board.

We would then immediately recognize Vader's response as an enthymeme. The missing, implicit premise is that there is no ambassador on board, whereby we infer that (according to Vader, at least) this is not a consular ship.

Vader's conditional challenge question has a similar, enthymematic feel. Whereas the missing premise in (27) is that the consequent is false, the missing premise in (26) is that the question in the consequent is unsound. In both cases, we infer that (Vader thinks that) the antecedent is false – this is not a consular ship. But if anything, this is yet more evidence that (as Belnap and Steel proposed) we treat soundness for questions like truth for propositions.

But what about the first kind of challenge question that Millson and Risjord raise – cases like "Why should I believe what you say?" – where the implication is that there's no reason I should believe what you say? These are hard cases; even so, I think we can justify holding onto the knowledge norm and staring down the apparent counterexamples.

Challenging a speaker's assertion is interpersonally risky: it's an FTA for the asserter. This seems to explain why we often present our challenges as weaker than we really mean them:

(29) (a) The Democrats will take the Senate in the upcoming election.
(b) No, that's not true.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

(c) I don't think that's true.
(d) Are you sure?
(e) Why do you think that?
(f) Why should I believe what you say?

Any of these responses to (28a) is a way to challenge the assertion. But they don't all do so as baldly as the straight denial in (28b). (29c) hedges the denial.[47] (28d) gives the speaker a chance to weaken the assertoric force of their own assertion. The rest give the speaker an opportunity to give further reasons for their assertion, suggesting that the speaker isn't convinced yet. And the final one actually presupposes that the listener should be convinced – there is a reason to believe what the speaker says – but simultaneously asks for further explanation as to the reasons.

For this reason, I think challenge questions like "Why should I believe what you say?" or "How do you know that?" are usually best understood as face-saving pretences. It's a strategy for questioning the speaker's reasons without directly calling into question the content of the assertion. But because there's an element of pretence about them – or, at any rate, an element of provisional deference – we shouldn't build our norm to accommodate these cases.[48]

4.5. Selfless questions

A final objection to the knowledge norm for asking is inspired by Lackey's selfless assertions. Consider the following (lightly abridged) case from Lackey (2007: 598–99):

> **Distraught Doctor**: Sebastian is a pediatrician who recognizes that the scientific evidence shows that there is absolutely no connection between vaccines and autism. However, shortly after his daughter received one of her vaccines, she was diagnosed with autism. The surprise brought on by his daughter's recent diagnosis cause him to abandon his previously deeply held beliefs regarding vaccines. While performing a well-baby checkup, the child's parents ask him about the rumors surrounding vaccines and autism. Recognizing both that the current doubt he has towards vaccines was probably brought about through his own, recent, personal history and that he has an obligation to his patients to present what is most likely to be true, Sebastian asserts, 'There is no connection between vaccines and autism,' although it's false that Sebastian himself believes or knows this proposition.

Selfless assertions are controversial,[49] but I'm sympathetic to the lesson Lackey draws from them. Sometimes, we can do well as asserters even when we can't do well as believers. Ideally, our assertions will be sincere in the sense that we'll believe what we say. But especially when there are psychological obstacles to believing as we ought, it's more important that we assert what we are in a position to know[50] than that we preserve a perfect match between our assertions and our beliefs.[51]

[47]On hedging, see Benton and van Elswyk (2020) and van Elswyk (2022, 2024).

[48]I owe thanks to Giada Fratantonio for helpful conversation about challenge questions.

[49]See, *inter alia*, Kvanvig (2011), Sosa (2011: 47), and Turri (2015).

[50]For an account of being in a position to know, see Kearl and Willard-Kyle (forthcoming).

[51]Lackey argues (roughly) that the norm of assertion is that we should assert what it is reasonable for us to believe (rather than what we know or even reasonably *do* believe). I've argued for the view (Willard-Kyle

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Put another way, when we assert insincerely, something has gone wrong. But the thing that has gone wrong is not necessarily the assertion. In proper cases of selfless assertion, a speaker succeeds in asserting as they ought even if they fail to believe as they ought.

If selfless assertions are proper, then so also are selfless questions. Assertions are selfless when the agent doesn't believe them (their "doxastic self" isn't behind the assertion), but the assertion aligns with the speaker's overall epistemic position anyway. Asked questions are selfless when an agent lacks an IA (or interrogative attitude) in their asked question (their "interrogative self" isn't behind the asked question), but the question aligns with the speaker's overall epistemic position anyway.

One reason an agent might not have an IA in a given question is that they don't actually believe (and so don't actually know) that the question is sound. Consider the following cases:

> **Distraught Doctor Redux:** Sebastian is in the same situation as before (he can't get himself to believe that vaccines don't cause autism, although he appreciates on some level that this is what the evidence overwhelmingly supports). Another doctor in his office used to work with a team of scientists developing vaccines for children. He asks his colleague: How come vaccines don't cause autism?

Notice that his question presupposes that vaccines *don't* cause autism. Every answer to his question has the form, "Vaccines don't cause autism because . . . ." Since he doesn't know that vaccines don't cause autism, he doesn't know that his question has a true, direct answer. Plausibly, the question he is *really* wondering isn't *how come* vaccines don't cause autism but *whether* they do. Even so, his question seems appropriate.[52]

Or consider another case:

> **Biased Father:** John is on a panel judging a poetry competition at a local high school. His daughter Anne submitted one of the poems. John loves Anne's poem, and even though at a certain level he appreciates that it isn't the technically most proficient or the artistically most inspired, he reads Anne's poem with a father's eyes and can't rid himself of the thought that it might be the best of the bunch. Even so, he does his best to be impartial when meeting with the other panellists. At the outset, he asks, "So which was the best poem: Judy's or Jodie's?", two clearly excellent poems, thereby passing over the possibility that the best poem was Anne's.[53]

John – biased as he is by love for his daughter – doesn't really believe (and so doesn't really know) that the only plausible candidates for the best poem are Judy's and Jodie's. It's consistent with John's doxastic commitments that Anne's poem is the best. Accordingly, it's natural to think that the question John really has is whether the best poem is Judy's, Jodie's, or (rather) Anne's. Even so, on the assumption that Judy's and

2020, 2021) that the norm of assertion is to assert what we are in a position to know. See also van Elswyk and Willard-Kyle (2025: 728–9) on the limits of normative parallels between belief and assertion.

[52]That isn't to deny that he could also have asked his colleague: "*Do* vaccines cause autism?" After all, he also knows that this question is sound.

[53]You might be skeptical that there is such a thing as a best poem. I invite you to suspend disbelief for the example. If you'd like, you can change the competition to one where there is clearly an objective ranking.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Jodie's poems are objectively a tier above the rest, and that he is to some degree cognizant of the way his attitudes toward Anne's poem may be biased, his question seems appropriate to ask, despite the fact that he does not believe (and so does not know) that his asked question is sound.

These cases show that the case for selfless questions is as strong as the case for selfless assertions. Since I'm sympathetic to the permissibility of selfless assertions, I'm also sympathetic to the permissibility of selfless questions. I think, therefore, that the norm I've been defending so far should really be modified to allow for selfless questions:

> **The Position to Know Norm:** One ought to: Ask *Q* only if one is in a position to know that *Q* has a true, direct answer.

Indeed, a version of this norm has been anticipated by Millson and Risjord (2025: 156), who write that "entitlement to undertake an erotetic commitment . . . appears to be mostly an epistemic affair – i.e., a matter of whether you're in a position to know that your question has an answer" (although they do not think all askings are ways of undertaking an erotetic commitment).[54] The position to know is, admittedly, a slippery concept, the meaning of which can vary according to the practical and theoretical needs of a given context. In order to accommodate selfless assertions, the position, or ability, to know, should be understood in such a way that merely psychological obstacles do not always prevent one from being in a position to know something in the sense relevant to the theoretical goals of articulating a norm for asking. Further discussion can be found in Kearl and Willard-Kyle (2026).

But we needn't settle the details to see the general point. The important feature of the position to know for our purposes is that one can be in a position to know that *p* even if one does not actually know (or even believe) it. Sebastian and John are (in some sense) in a position to know that their questions have true, direct answers even though they do not believe so (and so do not know so). The revised version of the norm rightly countenances the possibility of permissible selfless assertions while still affirming that knowledge is central to the speech act of asking.

5. Conclusions

This paper has two goals. First, it has argued for a certain picture of interrogative transmission. Sometimes we ask questions not (merely) to get an answer, but to raise and transmit our question. In this way, asking a question bears some analogy to asserting a proposition. As beliefs in propositions get passed around by testimony, so IAs toward questions get passed around by asking.

Insofar as we can count on people to ask good questions – to ask questions that we may be willing to adopt ourselves on the basis of their so asking – we do so, at least in part, because we take their questions to be good ones. We need some standard or norm

[54]Here is their full norm (Millson and Risjord 2025: 149):

> **QUERY:** A speaker asks *Q* iff she either (a) acknowledges an erotetic commitment to *Q* (herself) or (b) addresses an apokritic commitment to *Q* (to others).

It's just the first of these alternatives, according to Millson and Risjord, whereby one gains entitlement to undertake the relevant commitment by being in a position to know that the question is sound.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

for assessing the quality of asked questions, the reliability of conforming to which serves as a barometer of reliability or trustworthiness.

I've argued that AKN is too strong to play this role. It's too strong because it requires us to only ask questions when our addressees know the answer. This fails to account especially for topic-giving questions. Even so, something in the ballpark is right. We should only ask questions that have true answers; indeed, we should only do so when we are in a position to know that our questions are sound.

The evidence for a norm is not just that we typically abide by it. We don't just comply with the rules: we bend, break, and even flagrantly violate them. We bend the rules to be polite; we flout the rules to make a rhetorical point; we break the rules to deceive. In the right circumstances, these are useful departures from the norm. But the exceptions prove the rule insofar as the usefulness of the exception is parasitic on its distance from the norm. The soundness norm for asking is supported not only by our conformity to it, but by our systematic departures from it.

Acknowledgements. I'm grateful to André Abath, Veronica Campos, Amandine Catala, Erhan Demircioğlu, Arianna Falbo, João Fett, Jason Kawall, Jennifer Lackey, Baron Reed, Mohammed Tayssir Safi, Tim Sundell, and Sarah Wright for asking good and challenging questions about earlier versions of this paper.

References

Archer A. (2021). 'The Aim of Inquiry.' *Disputatio* **13**(61), 95–119.
Asher N. and Lascarides A. (2001). 'Indirect Speech Acts.' *Synthese* **128**, 183–228.
Bell M. (1975). 'Questioning.' *The Philosophical Quarterly* **25**(100), 193–212.
Belnap N. and Steel T. (1976). *The Logic of Questions and Answers*. South Braintree: Yale University Press.
Benton M. and van Elswyk P. (2020). 'Hedged Assertion.' in S. Goldberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Assertion*, pp. 245–63. New York: Oxford University Press.
Berstler S. (2023). 'Bad Question!.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **51**(4), 413–49.
Borge S. (2013) 'Questions.' In M. Sbisà and K. Turner (eds.), *Pragmatics of Speech Actions*, pp. 411–44. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
Bromberger S. (1971) 'Science and the Forms of Ignorance.' In M. Mandelbaum (ed.), *Observation and Theory in Science*, pp. 45–67. Baltimore: JHP.
Brown P. and Levinson S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
Carter A.J. and Willard-Kyle C. (2025). 'Virtue Epistemology for the Zetetic Turn.' *MIND* **134**(536), 943–66.
Deigan, M. (2026). 'Questions should have Answers.' *European Journal of Philosophy* **34**(2), 423–40.
Douven I. (2006). 'Assertion, Knowledge, and Rational Credibility.' *The Philosophical Review* **115**(4), 449–85.
Easwaran K. (2025). 'Bullshit Activities.' *Analytic Philosophy* **66**(3), 306–28.
Falbo A. (2021). 'Inquiry and Confirmation.' *Analysis* **81**(4), 622–31.
Falbo A. (2023). 'Inquiring Minds Want to Improve.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **101**(2), 298–312.
Falbo A. (2024). 'Inquiry for the Mistaken and Confused.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **109**(3), 962–85.
Flamini L. (2026a). 'On Asking.' *Theoria* **41**(1), 22–35.
Flamini L. (2026b). 'Occurrent Knowledge is the Sole Aim of Inquiry.' *Inquiry* **69**(4), 2420–49.
Friedman J. (2017) 'Why Suspend Judging?' *Noûs* **51**(2), 302–26.
Gaszczyk G. (2025) 'Interrogatives, Inquiries, and Exam Questions.' *Erkenntnis* **90**, 1437–56.
Gaszczyk G. (2026) 'Double-Checking: In Speech and in Private.' *Episteme* **23**, 156–72.
George B.R. (2018) 'Knowing-'Wh', Mention-Some Readings, and Non-Reducibility.' *Thought* **2**(2), 166–77.
Ginzburg J. (1995a) 'Resolving Questions I.' *Linguistics and Philosophy* **18**(5), 459–527.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Ginzburg J. (1995b) 'Resolving Questions II.' *Linguistics and Philosophy* **18**(6), 567–609.
Groenendijk J. and Stokhof M. (1984) Studies on the Semantics of Questions and the Pragmatics of Answers, Dissertation: University of Amsterdam.
Habgood-Coote J. (forthcoming). 'Asking a Question is a Proposal in Shared Inquiry.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.
Hamblin C.L. (1973) 'Questions in Montague English.' *Foundations of Language* **10**(1), 1–53.
Haziza E. (2021). 'Assertion, Implicature, and Iterated Knowledge.' *Ergo* **8**, 312–35.
Haziza E. (2023). 'Questioning and Addressee Knowledge.' *Synthese* **201**(4), 1–23.
Henne C. (forthcoming). 'Inquiry into the Unfamiliar.' *Inquiry*.
Jardine N. (2000). *The Scenes of Inquiry: On the Reality of Questions in the Sciences*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Jeffreys H. (1948). *Theory of Probability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kearl T. and Willard-Kyle C. (2026). 'Epistemic Cans.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **112**(2), 462–70.
König E. and Siemund P. (2007). 'Speech Act Distinctions in Grammar.' In T. Shopen (ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, pp. 276–324. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Kvanvig J. (2009). 'Assertion, Knowledge, and Lotteries.' In D. Pritchard and P. Greenough (eds), *Williamson on Knowledge*, pp. 140–60. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kvanvig J. (2011). 'Norms of Assertion.' In Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen (eds), *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, pp. 233–50. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Lackey J. (2007). 'Norms of Assertion.' *Noûs* **41**(4), 594–626.
Maitra I. (2011). 'Assertion, Norms, and Games.' In J. Brown and H. Cappelen (eds.), *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, pp. 277–96. Oxford University Press.
Marsili N. (2018). 'Truth and Assertion: Rules Versus Aims.' *Analysis* **78**(4), 638–48.
Mehta N. (2016). 'Knowledge and Other Norms for Assertion, Action, and Belief: A Teleological Account.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **93**(3), 681–705.
Millson J. (2021). 'Seeking Confirmation: A Puzzle for Norms of Inquiry.' *Analysis* **80**(4), 683–93.
Millson J. and Risjord M. (2025). 'Asking Questions in the Space of Reasons.' In P. Stovall & L. Koren (eds.), *Why and How We Give and Ask for Reasons: Perspectives from Philosophy and the Sciences*, pp. 138–64. Oxford University Press.
Palmira M. (2025). 'Erotetic Permissibility and Defective Inquiry: A Puzzle.' *Philosophical Studies* **183**(1), 357–74.
Peacocke A. (forthcoming). 'Inquiry and the Problem of Answering.' *Noûs*.
Raleigh T. (2025). 'What Can We Know about Unanswerable Questions.' *Philosophical Quarterly* **75**(1), 213–27.
Rohde H. (2006). 'Rhetorical Questions as Redundant Interrogatives.' *San Diego Linguistic Papers* **2**, 134–68.
Rosa L. (2024). *Rules for the Inquiring Mind: A Unified Framework of Norms of Inquiry*. New York: Routledge.
Sadock J.M. and Zwicky A.M. (1985). 'Speech Acts Distinctions in Syntax.' In T. Shopen (ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, pp. 155–96. Cambridge University Press.
Salerno J. (2009). *New Essays on the Unknowability Paradox*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Sapir Y. and van Elswyk P. (2021). 'Hedging and the Ignorance Norm on Inquiry.' *Synthese* **199**(3–4), 5837–59.
Schaffer J. (2006). 'The Irrelevance of the Subject: Against Subject-Sensitive Invariantism.' *Philosophical Studies* **127**, 87–107.
Searle J. (1975). 'Indirect Speech Acts.' In P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics*, Vol. **3**, pp. 59–82. New York: Academic Press.
Smith J. (2026). 'Curiosity and Mental Search.' *Episteme* **23**, 251–68.
Sorensen R. (1981). 'Pragmatic Paradox Liable Questions.' *Philosophical Studies* **39**(2), 155–62.
Sosa E. (2011). *Knowing Full Well*. Princeton University Press.
Sundell T. (forthcoming). 'Bullshit, Broadly Construed.' *Philosophical Quarterly*.
Turri J. (2015). 'Selfless Assertions: Some Empirical Evidence.' *Synthese* **192**(4), 1221–33.
van Elswyk, P. (2022). 'Hedged Testimony.' *Noûs* **57**(2), 341–69.
van Elswyk P. (2024). 'Hedging in Discourse.' *Synthese* **204**(3), 1–31.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

van Elswyk P. (2025). 'Asking Expresses a Desire to Know.' *Philosophical Quarterly* **75**(1), 254–67.
van Elswyk P. and Willard-Kyle C. (2025). 'Hedging and the Norm of Belief.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **103**(3), 718–39.
Watson L. (2021). 'What is a Question?' *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* **89**, 273–97.
Whitcomb D. (2010). 'Curiosity was Framed.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **81**(3), 644–87.
Whitcomb D. (2017). 'One Kind of Asking.' *Philosophical Quarterly* **67**(266), 148–68.
Whitcomb D. (2023). 'Bullshit Questions.' *Analysis* **83**(2), 299–304.
Whitcomb D., Habgood-Coote J. and Watson L. (2023). 'Can a Good Philosophical Contribution Be Made Just by Asking a Question?' *Metaphilosophy* **54**(1), 54.
Whitcomb D. and Millson J. (2024). 'Inquiring Attitudes and Erotetic Logic: Norms of Restriction and Expansion.' *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* **10**(3), 444–66.
Willard-Kyle C. (2020). 'Being in a Position to Know is the Norm of Assertion.' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **101**(2), 328–52.
Willard-Kyle C. (2021). 'P, but You Don't Know that P.' *Synthese* **199**(5–6), 14667–90.
Willard-Kyle C. (2023). 'The Knowledge Norm for Inquiry.' *The Journal of Philosophy* **120**(11), 615–40.
Willard-Kyle C. (2024). 'Ignorance, Soundness, and Norms of Inquiry.' *Philosophical Studies* **181**(6), 1477–85.
Willard-Kyle, C. (forthcoming). 'Eliminating Wrong Answers.' In T. Szabó Gendler and J. Chung (eds), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Willard-Kyle, C., Millson J. and Whitcomb D. (2026). 'Evoked Questions and Inquiring Attitudes.' *Philosophical Quarterly* **76**(1), 384–406.
Williamson T. (2000). *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wiśniewski, A. (1991). 'Erotetic Arguments: A Preliminary Analysis.' *Studia Logica* **50**(2), 261–74.
Wiśniewski A. (1995). *The Posing of Questions: Logical Foundations of Erotetic Inferences*. Dordrecht: Springer.
Woodard E. (2022). 'The Ignorance Norm and Paradoxical Assertions.' *Philosophical Topics* **49**(2), 321–32.
Wright S. (2026) 'False Confessions, Epistemic Agency, and Repairing Self-Trust.' *Philosophical Studies* **183**(3), 995–1019.

Christopher Willard-Kyle is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kentucky. He specializes in epistemology with interest also in the philosophy of language and philosophy of religion.

Cite this article: Willard-Kyle C. (2026). "Asking Questions Aloud: A Case for Interrogative Transmission." *Episteme* 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 17 Nov 2026 at 06:19:50, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2026.10144