When Can Inquiry Come to an End?

Fatema Amijee (University of British Columbia)
Aristotelian Society
October 12, 2026

Preliminaries:

- I argue that an inquirer can rationally bring inquiry to a close only if they are epistemically entitled (i.e. rationally permitted) to regard the target of their inquiry—i.e., the *explanandum*—as having an explanation they can, in principle, know.

- *Explanatory inquiry* is a variety of inquiry that demands an explanation—whether the explanation in question is scientific, causal, metaphysical, or of some other variety—as an answer. The following are all examples of explanatory inquiries:

    a) Why did the bridge collapse?
    b) How is my coffee always bitter?
    c) What is knowledge?

  By contrast, the following are examples of inquiries that are *not* explanatory:

    d) Where are my keys?
    e) Who committed the murder?
    f) Is it true that salt dissolves faster in hot, rather than in cold water?

- Discovery of an explanation requires knowledge of the *explanans* as well as grasp of the explanatory relation that obtains between the *explanans* and the target of explanatory inquiry.

- I remain neutral about what ontological category an explanation might belong to (whether it might be a state of affairs that obtains, a regularity, or an event, for example), and whether it can consist in a plurality of entities. For convenience, I will henceforth take both the *explanans* and *explanandum* to consist in facts (i.e. one or many states of affairs that obtain), though nothing in my argument hangs on this choice.

Explanatory Reach or ER [*My Thesis*]: For every inquirer S and every target *p* of S's inquiry, where a target of inquiry is a fact, S is entitled on non-evidential grounds to rely on *p*'s having an explanation that is, at least in principle, one that S can know.

- To be entitled to rely on *p*'s having such an explanation that one can know is to be rationally permitted to treat as undefeated the possibility of one's successfully inquiring into *p*. That possibility is construed thinly as *metaphysical* possibility, and has two components: that *p* is not brute, and that *p*'s explanation is within one's cognitive reach.

- What "*in principle*" means: For my purposes, to say that an explanation is within S's cognitive reach "in principle" is to idealize away contingent practical limitations, such as limitations involving technological resources, time, and even memory, while holding constant the inquirer's cognitive faculties.

- What is an *evidential ground*? A ground is *evidential* relative to hypothesis H—where H describes a putative explanation for the target of inquiry—when it contributes to the inquirer's epistemic entitlement to accept or rely on H, by supporting H over at least one other rival hypothesis.

    Examples of evidential grounds include: Experimental results, testimony, perception, *a priori* argumentation, and theoretical virtues.

  A ground is non-evidential relative to hypothesis H when it contributes to the inquirer's epistemic entitlement to accept or rely on H in a way that does not involve supporting H over any other rival hypothesis.

Road Map:

1. Develop a puzzle about explanatory inquiry
2. Argue that evidential grounds alone cannot put an inquirer in the position to rationally bring any explanatory inquiry to a close.
3. Show that in order to secure the possibility of rational action on the basis of the results of one's inquiry, the inquirer must be epistemically entitled *on non-evidential grounds* to the target of their inquiry having an explanation they can know.

Part 1: *A Meno-Style puzzle for Explanatory Inquiry*

In Plato's *Meno*, Meno states the challenge of providing an account of 'excellence' as follows (*Meno* 80d–81e):

> How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

To which Socrates replies:

> I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

An analogous puzzle for inquiry: For any inquirer S and inquiry into *p*, unless S is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into *p*, S cannot rationally bring her inquiry into *p* to a close. Yet, no matter how abundant, evidential grounds cannot on their own entitle S to treat the possibility of successfully inquiring into *p* as undefeated. On the assumption that evidential grounds exhaust grounds for epistemic entitlement, S cannot rationally bring her inquiry into *p* to a close.

Why care about the rational closure of inquiry?

(i) ***Practical deliberation.*** When I deliberate about what to do, I reason from my own standpoint, and I need to be able to respond to the considerations that bear on my choice.

(ii) ***Own-Closure*****:** S's action on the basis of the result of *her* inquiry is rational only if S's own closure of inquiry is rational.

Part 2: The Requirements of Rational Closure

Why does the rational closure of inquiry into *p* require that S be epistemically entitled to rely on *p*'s having an explanation she can know (and so be rationally permitted to treat as undefeated the possibility of her successfully inquiring into *p*)?

1. The grounds for closure must be accessible from the first personal point of view**.**

   Closure is an intentional act: closing inquiry means stopping because one takes oneself to have found an explanation for one's target and proceeding on that basis. It differs from merely ceasing to inquire because of boredom, interruption, or lack of time. Rational closure makes the results of inquiry available as settled for further inquiry and action more generally.

2. Having the relevant belief is neither necessary nor sufficient for access to grounds for closure.

   a) That S justifiably believes or knows the explanation for *p* is insufficient for rational closure, for justified belief and knowledge (at least on the externalist conception) does not require first personal access.

   b) That S justifiably believes or knows the explanation for *p* is not necessary for rational closure.

      Many reject the view that if one rationally intends to φ, one believes that one can or one will φ. On such views, the intending agent may be agnostic about whether she can φ.

      Two distinct ways in which one might be agnostic:

      (i) S_1 has no reason to doubt that she can φ.

      (ii) S_2 has substantial reason to doubt that she can φ, and may even have enough evidence to justify her in believing that she *cannot* φ.

Part 3: The Insufficiency of Evidential Grounds

Why accept that evidential grounds alone cannot entitle S to treat the possibility of successful inquiry as undefeated?

Success Condition on Explanatory Inquiry: Explanatory inquiry succeeds only if the inquirer discovers what actually explains the target of their inquiry; discovering a merely possible explanation is not sufficient.

Best-of-the-Lot: Evidential grounds cannot do more than discriminate among hypotheses.

Inquiry typically proceeds by generating candidate hypotheses for what might explain the target of inquiry. This is real progress, but only because it narrows the search: fit with data, scope, explanatory power, coherence with background theory, parsimony, causal plausibility, predictive success, and robustness all tell us which candidate is *best supported*.

A Possible Objection—The Curious Case of Handwashing:

In 1847, Semmelweis faced an *explanandum*: mortality from childbed fever was far higher in Vienna's first maternity clinic than in the second. He hypothesized that examiners were carrying cadaveric matter on their hands, and after handwashing with chlorinated lime was introduced, mortality fell sharply.

One might then argue as follows. Explanatory inquiries like this have repeatedly succeeded: a fact was investigated, an *explanans* was proposed, and it was borne out; by induction, explanatory inquiry is an enterprise whose possible success we can claim to be entitled to.

My Reply: Successful intervention alone is insufficient for showing that inquiry has been successful because a reliable correlation can support practical success without explanatory discovery.

What more is needed?

An epistemic entitlement to *Bridge*.

> *Bridge*: Evidence E is more likely to obtain if the target of inquiry *p* has a reachable explanation than if *p* is unexplained, and more likely to obtain if *p* has an explanation reachable by S than if it does not.

Where does the entitlement to Bridge come from?

Option 1: The entitlement is evidential
We have evidence about how E behaves when the target has an explanation within our reach, namely the many cases where explanations were found. But Bridge needs us to compare that with how E behaves when the target is brute or its explanation lies beyond our reach, and we have no evidence of that kind.

Option 2: The entitlement is non-evidential
To be entitled to Bridge for *p* is to be entitled to treat E as raising the probability that *p* has an explanation reachable by S. But E can only strengthen the likelihood of something we are already treating as live. Nothing evidential entitles us to treat that possibility as live independently of an entitlement already in place.

Part 4. Whence a Non-Evidential Entitlement?

Two Unpromising Candidates:

(i) *Psychological Unavoidability:* On this option, entitlement stems from the fact that relying on a target's having a knowable explanation is something creatures like us cannot help but do.

> *However*: Being unable to avoid a practice does not confer epistemic entitlement to its presuppositions.

(ii) *Strategic Entitlement*: According to strategic entitlement, assuming that a target of inquiry has a knowable explanation is a dominant strategy relative to the important end of rational closure. If the target has such an explanation, the assumption helps secure a necessary condition for closure; if it does not, no alternative assumption does better. The resulting entitlement is therefore indifferent to whether the assumption is true.

> *However*: Strategic considerations give us reason to proceed as if a knowable explanation exists, but no reason to treat inquiry as capable of success.