THE AIM OF INQUIRY?*

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1   INTRODUCTION

It is said that inquiry has an aim. And there is some debate over just what that aim is. Candidates are typically mental states like knowledge, true belief, reasonable belief, understanding, and so on.[1] Let's call this question — What is the aim of inquiry? — the *Specific Question*. There is a different sort of debate to be had over the aim of inquiry as well, this time over what we can call the *General Question*: What does it mean to say that inquiry has an aim?

In discussing the claim that belief has an aim, Ralph Wedgwood says the following,

> It is often claimed that beliefs aim at the truth. Indeed, this claim has often been thought to express an essential or constitutive feature of belief. But this claim is obviously not literally true. Beliefs are not little archers armed with little bows and arrows: they do not literally "aim" at anything. (Wedgwood (2002): 267)

And in a similar (albeit terser) spirit, John MacFarlane calls for a sort of quietism about the claim that assertion aims at truth, remarking: 'This idea is pretty obscure anyway.' (MacFarlane (2005): 227)

Wedgwood and MacFarlane are not talking about the aim of inquiry in these passages. But both are expressing puzzlement about a particular 'aim of π' claim (where 'π' is some practice-type) that is the subject of some discussion: Wedgwood about the claim that belief aims at truth and MacFarlane about the claim that assertion aims at truth. Neither passage expresses an objection to the claim that belief/assertion aims at truth in particular (rather than, say, knowledge), but rather expresses some puzzlement about

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[1]Some recent discussions of the specific aim of inquiry: Hookway (2007), Lynch (2009), Whitcomb (2010), Kvanvig (2011), Millar (2011), Ahlstrom-Vij and Grimm (2013), Kelp (2014, 2018, 2021), Treanor (2014), Smith (2020), and Archer (2021).

what it means to say that the relevant practice-type has an aim in the first place. This puzzlement is puzzlement about how to answer analogues of our General Question for aims for these practice-types.

Like MacFarlane and Wedgwood with respect to belief and assertion, I find the claim the inquiry has an aim somewhat mysterious. I see a few things it might mean, a few sorts of answers we might give to the General Question, but I'm worried about each of them. In what follows I'll flesh out some of those worries. Ultimately, I want to follow MacFarlane and call for a sort of quietism about 'the aim of inquiry'. While my focus in this paper will be on a few different options for answering the General Question, I'll also say some about the Specific Question in light of those answers.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways that aim-of-π claims are interpreted: normative and non-normative. For instance, in the paper cited above, Wedgwood argues that the claim that belief aims at truth should be understood as a normative claim about the correctness conditions for belief: it says (roughly) that a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. On this tack, the claim that belief has an aim just is a normative claim about the correctness conditions for belief. Most of those involved in an aim-of-π debate want to say that the claim that some practice-type π aims at α is going to be closely connected to some norms for π.[2] But a 'normative reductionist' about the aim of π (like Wedgwood with respect to the aim of belief) holds that the claim that some practice-type π aims at α is nothing more than a normative claim about π.[3] An alternative is a wholly non-normative treatment of the aim of π, with the normative implications to be worked out separately. This paper focuses on these sorts of non-normative treatments. Although I think that analogous arguments can be made for the most natural normative analyses, I won't have the space to make them here.

I will discuss two types of non-normative answers to the General Question, the first *structural* and the second *personal*. Structural answers to the General Question take the claim that inquiry has an aim to be a claim about inquiry itself. Roughly, the thought is that inquiry — the practice — has a teleological structure. Personal answers to the General Question take the claim that inquiry has an aim to be a claim about the aims or goals of inquirers. A structural account of the aim of inquiry can say that any token inquiry has some aim α, whatever the goals of the inquirers conducting that inquiry, i.e. whether or not those inquirers themselves are trying to achieve α. Personal accounts make inquirers' goals, what it is that inquirers (qua

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[2]See Côté-Bouchard (2016) for a discussion of the prospect of grounding epistemic normativity in belief's (putative) aim.

[3]From here on in I'm going to be less assiduous with my '-type' riders (unless that extra clarity is important for the argument).

inquirers) are trying to achieve, central.[4]

My plan in what follows is to start by looking at two structural answers to the General Question and argue that neither is satisfactory. A personal answer to the General Question fares somewhat better but doesn't align very well with the standing debate over the Specific Question. All of these answers to the General Question make for interesting discussion and are clearly not entirely off-base. That said, in the end it is hard not to feel as though one is chasing down a metaphor. I want to suggest that a more quietistic attitude towards 'the aim of inquiry' is appropriate.

To be clear though, the quietism I am calling for is about 'the aim of inquiry'. To adopt this sort of quietism is not to deny that inquirers are typically trying to get new knowledge or improve their epistemic standings. But the 'typically' matters. The claim that inquiry aims at α is not meant to be a claim about a relationship that typically holds between inquiry and α, but something stronger. Exactly what that stronger thing is is hard to say (as well see). Part of my quietistic thought is that we don't need to say. Instead I think we can theorize directly about the structure of inquiry, the norms of inquiry, and the goals of individual inquirers without going by way of the claim that inquiry aims at α (whatever the α). There are a number of properties of inquiry and inquiring that can be described as teleological or goal-directed, I don't mean to say otherwise (the discussion to come will bring some of them out). But those properties can be seen even if we put aside 'the aim of inquiry'. In the final section of the paper I'll suggest a different, question-oriented framework for thinking about the structure of inquiry and the motivations of inquirers.

2   THE GENERAL QUESTION: STRUCTURAL ANSWERS

In this section I want to think about two structural answers to the General Question — one that's discussed by almost everyone in any aim-of-π discussion, and another that's barely mentioned. Both are interesting and informative. They give us insight into some ways that we might conceive of practices themselves as having a teleological structure, as themselves having ends or aims or telē. I don't think either accurately describes the structure of inquiry though.

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[4]Throughout this paper I use a number of teleological words interchangeably, e.g. 'aim', 'goal', 'end', 'telos', etc. Perhaps there are more fine-grained distinctions to be made, but I don't think making them is necessary for our purposes.

2.1 CONSTITUTIVE AIMS & THE GAMES ANALOGY

In discussions of the aim of inquiry — and the aims of the other practices mentioned: belief, assertion, and action generally — it is common to find two central thoughts. First, that the aim of inquiry (or the others) is a constitutive aim. And second, that we can understand some of what it means to say that inquiry (belief, action, assertion) has a constitutive aim by way of an analogy with games and game-playing.[5]

There aren't as many in-depth discussions of inquiry's aim as there are discussions of the aims of belief or action. But the claim that the aim of inquiry is a 'constitutive' aim runs through the existing literature. For instance, on the first page of Kelp (2021) we find the following claim: 'One interesting property of inquiry is that it is a type of activity with an aim, and indeed, a constitutive aim'. And, as Kelp develops his view in that paper, he draws on some of the familiar arguments and concepts from the literature on constitutive aims.

Talk of constitutive aims has figured prominently in arguments for (and against) 'constitutivism' about practical and/or moral norms and in debates about the aim of belief and the aim of assertion.[6] The crucial claim in these discussions is not just that some practice has an aim, but that this property of the practice — its having this or that telos — is constitutive of the practice. To say that (having) some aim is constitutive of some practice is at least to say that the practice or activity has that aim in every possible case and so that it's a necessary feature of the practice. It may also be to say more than that — to say something about the essence of or constitution of the practice that goes beyond mere necessity, or even to say that having that telos is unique to that practice so that it's a sufficient condition for identifying the practice.[7] I'm going to take the claim that some practice has an aim constitutively to be equivalent to the claim that it has that aim necessarily or in every case, and leave aside the stronger interpretations mentioned. That said, the modal interpretation still makes for a strong

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[5] As we've already seen there are a number of other aim-of-π debates: belief, assertion, action, science, and more. This section draws on these other debates as well. Though this should not be taken to imply that the various 'π aims at α' claims are tracking (or are even attempting to track) all the same features (mutatis mutandis) of these different πs.

[6] On the constitutive aim of action: Well-known constitutivists are Christine Korsgaard (in e.g. Korsgaard (2009)) and David Velleman (in e.g. Velleman (2000)). See Katsafanas (2018) for a good overview. On the constitutive aim of belief: The aim of belief literature is quite substantial at this point. See Chan (2013) for a nice introduction to the main issues. On the constitutive aim of assertion: Here, the bulk of the debate is about the closely related issue of the constitutive norm of assertion. This debate, also quite substantial, gathers steam in many ways in response to the discussion in Williamson (2000), chapter 11.

[7] See Reiland (2020) on constitutive rules for some discussion here.

claim. If some practice π has a constitutive aim α, even in the bare modal sense at issue now, then every instance of π aims at α, and any practice that didn't aim at α, would not be an instance of π.

The claim that inquiry has its aim constitutively obviously gives us only limited guidance with respect to our General Question. If we want to know what it is for some practice to have an aim, we're not getting much closer to an answer if we're told that the practice has its aim in every case. But discussions of constitutive aims typically aim to give us more insight into how to think of the relevant sort of teleologically-structured practice.

In particular, there is an analogy that comes up in almost every discussion of constitutive aims: the analogy with games and game-playing (mostly with chess and chess-playing, in practice). There seem to be at least two ways in which an analogy with games is meant to help us to understand the aim of inquiry (or belief or action). The first is via some structural properties of games, and the second is via some (putatively) necessary conditions for being a player of a game.

Let's start with the first. If we decide to play the card game War but you don't know how to play, I can explain it to you this way: We each get half the deck, and then, at the same time, we turn the top card in our respective piles face up. Whoever's card is higher wins and takes both cards into their pile. Then I'll explain what happens in the case in which our cards match and we go to war. And that's it, we're ready to play. After I tell you this you might still have a question left over: What's the point of this game? I can say: To get all the cards.

This 'point' of the game is (somewhat) plausibly essential to the game and can be thought of as the aim of War.[8] For any competitive game, this sort of point or aim is identical to the conditions under which the game is won. But even if all of this is true, I don't know how helpful this analogy will be for understanding the structure of inquiry.

Crucially, games are human artifacts, they are intentionally constructed and designed practices. This part of why the claim that some games have aims (whether constitutive or not) is fairly straightforward — we created the games and decided on their aims.[9] But inquiring is not an artifactual process or activity. How should the fact that an entirely conventional or artifactual practice like chess has an aim give us insight into the structure of a non-artifactual practice like inquiring? Williamson (2000)'s discussion of constitutive rules of assertion as analogues to constitutive rules of games is helpful here. Williamson points out that the analogy might not be very helpful if assertion turned out to be 'more like a natural phenomenon than

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[8]Only somewhat though: If we decide that the winner in our game will be the first to get three out of four aces, it's not at all clear to me that we are no longer playing War.

[9]Nguyen (2020) dubs games 'artifactual vessels'.

it seems' (239). Inquiring is a natural phenomenon. All sorts of creatures, simple and complex, inquire.[10] Inquiring is not a human construction or invention. Even if some games have rules or aims (constitutively), that they have them (constitutively) is a matter of human design and convention. But that's not the sense in which inquiry has an aim, and so it isn't clear how to extend this game model to aims (or rules) of inquiry.

That said, when the games analogy is drawn out, there is sometimes a subtle but important shift in thinking about how we're meant to understand that analogy. And this is the second way the analogy might be thought to help us to understand the structure of inquiry. Here is Paul Katsafanas on the aim of action,

> Certain kinds of action are distinguished by the fact that participants in these activities necessarily have certain aims. Games, such as chess, provide clear examples. Insofar as you play chess, you must aim at checkmating your opponent (or at least at attaining a draw). If you lack this aim—if you are simply moving pieces about on the board in accordance with the rules of chess, but are not aiming to checkmate your opponent—then you are not playing chess. It follows that the aim of checkmate is present in all episodes of chess-playing. If you do not have this aim, you are not playing chess. (Katsafanas (2018): 368)

If Katsafanas is fleshing out the claim that some activity has an aim by analogy to games, he's doing it in a way different from the way I've been discussing. This passage is about the aims of players of the game. Katsafanas is claiming that players need to have some aim in order to count as genuinely playing. Which aim do they need to have? In the example we're given it's the aim of the game. And I take it that's the idea, viz. that any genuine player of game g with constitutive aim α has α as their own personal aim (where this is a matter of their being in some sort of mental state, of their having some goal). I'm sympathetic to the suggestion that in thinking about the 'aim of inquiry' we should look to the personal goals of inquirers. But I don't think the analogy with games is helpful here either.

First, this way of trying to draw an analogy between games and inquiry still relies on being able to make good on the analogy between the structure of the game and the structure of inquiry that I just questioned. If we still don't know quite how to think about the aim of the practice of inquiry then we're also not going to know quite how to think about the claim that inquiry is like a game because just as in game-playing, an inquirer needs to adopt the aim of the practice as their own personal goal.

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[10]See Carruthers (2018, forthcoming) for some discussion of animal inquiry.

But even putting that aside, is it true that any player of g with aim α has α as their own personal aim or goal? If it is, then anyone who doesn't adopt α as their aim cannot be genuinely playing g. This claim strikes me as quite implausible. If all competitive games have winning as a constitutive aim in the sense at issue, then playing those games non-competitively is impossible or conceptually incoherent. This does not seem right. It certainly doesn't seem to comport with our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about games. If I go out to play tennis with you but we end up just hitting around without playing any points, there is nothing at all wrong with reporting my activity as having played tennis. If I'm trying to throw a game of Tic-tac-toe because my nephew hates losing so much, there's nothing at all wrong with describing what I'm/we're doing as playing Tic-tac-toe. Moreover, many games have fairly specific conditions that a player must meet in order to win. It's difficult to see how the fact that a player is not trying to achieve exactly those specific conditions leaves them doing something else entirely. Imagine someone confused about the victory conditions of some game (they think the point of the game is α^* rather than α). It seems to me that with a bit of luck this sort of person can end up winning the game despite not having adopted the aim of the game as their own personal aim. But how can they have won the game if they weren't playing it?

I am not alone in concern or dissent here. The claim that one can only count as playing some game if one has adopted the point of that game as one's own personal aim is not without controversy.[11] Defenders typically dig in with claims that even when a player is trying to lose the game, there is still some sense (or *some sense*) in which they are trying to win, or perhaps that they are, in cases like that, playing a subtly different game (e.g. Shwar rather than War). Neither response strikes me as very plausible.

If I'm right, then it's difficult to see what insight is to be gleaned about the teleological structure of inquiry by looking to games and game-playing.[12] Inquiring is not similar to playing a game in the ways that would make the fact that games have a conventionally determined point/constitutive aim relevant — inquiring is not an artifactual practice in the way that playing a game of Tic-tac-toe or War is. Further, the claim that some game g's having a constitutive aim α implies that anyone playing g has α as their own personal aim looks false. And so the analogy with games is unhelpful either way. Of course, this doesn't mean that inquirers don't have personal aims in every case. It only means that an argument that they do that goes

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[11]A few dissenters: Williamson (2000), McHugh and Way (2018), Kelp and Simion (2020), Kelp (2021), and Nguyen (2019). The latter also includes a nice, in-depth account of the complex aims of game players.

[12]See Rowbottom (2014) for concerns about the games analogy with respect to 'the aim of science'.

by way of an analogy with games does not get us to that conclusion.

2.2 LANGUAGE: ASPECT AND TELICITY

Although not much discussed in the context of aim-of-π debates, there is, I think, some insight into the sorts of practice-theoretic structural features at issue now in some influential discussions of the aspectual properties of verbal predicates. Among other things, these discussions classify verb phrases (VPs) according to (at least roughly) some relevant metaphysical properties of the events/activities/practices that those VPs pick out (for the purposes of this discussion I'm classifying simple verbs as VPs). As we'll see in a moment, one of those properties (telicity) has to do with the endpoints of some events and activities. If a VP is telic then, the thought is, it is part of the meaning of that VP that the activity it picks out has an endpoint. My thought then is that these discussions have the potential to bring out a way in which some activities are essentially teleologically structured: the aims or ends of some activities can be read off of our descriptions of them.

To start, here is Rothstein (2004) introducing the notion of (lexical) aspect that interests us,

> Aspect traditionally concerns itself with what Comrie (1976) calls "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (pp. 3, 5). The intuition behind this definition is that while tense relates the temporal location of a situation or "eventuality" to some other temporal reference point such as the time of utterance, aspect is concerned with the structural properties of the event itself. (1)

So we can use aspectual distinctions to categorize verbal predicates according to the 'internal temporal constituency' of the events (or 'eventualities', a more general ontological category) picked out by those verbal predicates. Much of the current discussion of lexical aspect starts from Zeno Vendler's work on the topic. Vendler (1957) proposes that we distinguish between four different types of verbal predicates: state VPs, activity VPs, accomplishment VPs, and achievements VPs.[13] Although various modifications to this classification scheme have been proposed over the years, much of the scheme continues to be widely deployed.[14] A few examples of VPs in the different categories are as follows. State: 'know', 'believe', 'love'. Activity: 'run', 'push a cart', 'celebrate'. Accomplishment: 'run a mile', 'paint a picture', 'pick two oranges'. And finally, achievement: 'win', 'reach the top', 'recognize'.

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[13] Ryle (1949) is an important precursor here.

[14] Some well-known variants: Kenny (1963), Mourelatos (1978), Dowty (1979).

Corresponding to each of the Vendlerian VP-types is an eventuality-type — states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. Although the four Vendlerian eventuality-types have familiar names, and those certainly give us some guidance as to how to think of those types, it's better to think of these labels as largely technical rather than bits of ordinary language. To indicate this, I'll use a 'v' subscript when using the terms in the Vendlerian sense. And otherwise, words like, 'activity' and 'accomplishment' should be taken in their ordinary senses. That said, as expected, there is an important, intuitive distinction between states$_v$ and the other Vendlerian eventualities. States$_v$ are ways we are, while the other eventuality-types are more active processes or things we do. I'm assuming that inquiring goes on the active side. And so given that inquiring is our main focus here, I am going to largely put states$_v$ aside in much of what follows.

How should we be thinking of the other three categories? Here are the intuitive glosses. Activities$_v$ — e.g. running, walking, driving, driving a car, painting — are open-ended processes, doings, or happenings that unfold over some period of time with no obvious endpoints. This makes for a contrast with accomplishments$_v$ like running a mile, walking to the car, eating a sandwich, or singing 'Happy Birthday'. These are also activities in the ordinary sense of the word, but they do seem to have endpoints built in. Running a mile is an activity that ends when the mile is up. If you keep running after you've hit the mile mark, you are no longer engaged in that running of a mile (although you are still running). Walking to the car, eating a sandwich, and singing 'Happy Birthday' all have fairly clear terminuses or endpoints, e.g. the end of the song or the sandwich. Achievements$_v$, e.g. notice, reach the top, win, win the match, are happenings, but they seem to mark just the very end of some process — in this sense they are entirely endpoint. Noticing happens in an instant, as does winning and reaching the top. Many achievements$_v$ require plenty of activity in the lead-up (in order to achieve the thing achieved), but achievements$_v$ are just the achieved part, which Vendler thought of as occurring at a single moment and largely over as soon as they begin.

Given the (quasi)-instantaneous nature of achievements$_v$, I think the relevant question for us is whether the practice picked out by 'inquire' (and cognates) is an activity$_v$ or an accomplishment$_v$. And I hope the relevance of this question for our discussion is clear: accomplishments$_v$ have pre-defined or built-in endpoints. And so it's not a stretch to think of Vendlerian accomplishments as a type of activity with an essential aim or goal or telos. But is the practice picked out by 'inquire' (and the like) an accomplishment$_v$? If we left the discussion here, we might have assumed that it was: the idea that inquiry has an aim is very closely connected to the idea that it has some sort of special stopping point, the point at which the activity comes to its

(successful) conclusion. But this natural thought is not confirmed by the linguistic data. Rather, 'inquire' (and related verbal predicates) seems to pick out an (open-ended) activity$_v$ and not a (telos-having) accomplishment$_v$.

We can see this since Vendler offers a variety of relevant linguistic tests. In particular, he shows that there are two important properties that are especially relevant to dividing up verbal predicates: 'telicity' and (what I'll call) 'progressivity'. Roughly, a VP is telic if it picks out an eventuality that has a natural point of culmination or stopping point, and atelic otherwise; and a VP is progressive if it picks out an eventuality that progresses or has stages and non-progressive otherwise.

Verbal predicates that describe or pick out either accomplishments$_v$ or activities$_v$ tend to be progressive. They can be used to describe events in progress or underway, and, crucially, they can appear in the progressive (e.g. pushing a cart, painting a picture). State$_v$ and achievement$_v$ VPs don't naturally appear in the progressive.[15],[16]

(1) (a) I am running

(b) I am running a mile

(c) # I am believing that it is raining

(d) # I am noticing that it is raining

(1a) describes an activity$_v$, (1b) an accomplishment$_v$, (1c) a state$_v$, and (1d) an achievement$_v$. 'Inquire' does appear in the progressive (e.g. 'I am inquiring'), as it should since inquiry is the sort of thing that can be ongoing or in progress. This further confirms that the eventuality or practice picked out by 'inquire' is either an activity$_v$ or accomplishment$_v$. Here, as we've started to see, telicity matters. Accomplishments$_v$ have already been intuitively classified as eventualities that have clear points of culmination, while activities$_v$ are eventualities that do not. It should come as no surprise then that activity$_v$ VPs are by and large atelic, while accomplishment$_v$ VPs are by and large telic. Two well-known tests have become almost definitional with respect to telicity. But those tests put 'inquire' (and related VPs) firmly on the atelic side.

The first test for telicity is known as the 'temporal modification' test. Telic VPs freely combine with 'in'-adverbials but not 'for'-adverbials, and the reverse is true of atelic VPs.

(2) (a) I ran for 30 minutes/(*) in 30 minutes

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[15]Although, of course, there are exceptions. See Filip (2012).

[16]This is as expected: states$_v$ aren't events in progress (even though they may last for extended periods of time), and if achievements$_v$ are conceived of as having only momentary existence, they are also not best thought of as things in progress.

(b) I ran a mile in 10 minutes/(*) for 10 minutes

The second test for telicity is what we can call the 'progressive inference test' (this is sometimes called the 'imperfective paradox'). Atelic verbs licence an inference from the past progressive ('S was φ-ing') to the simple past ('S (has) φ-ed') but telic verbs do not.

(3) (a) I was running $\rightarrow$ I ran
     (b) I was running a mile $\nrightarrow$ I ran a mile

If I was in the process of carrying a suitcase then the bits of that activity that had already passed will be ones in which I carried a suitcase. But if I was in the process of carrying a suitcase to my brother's house, but hadn't got to his house yet, then the bits of the activity that already passed are not going to be aptly described as ones in which I carried a suitcase to my brother's. 'I carried a suitcase to my brother's' seems only to be true after I've successfully made it to his house.

Both of these tests indicate that 'inquire' is atelic.

(4) (a) I inquired for 30 minutes/(*) in 30 minutes
     (b) I inquired into what caused the fire for 10 minutes/(*) in 10 minutes

(5) (a) I was inquiring $\rightarrow$ I inquired
     (b) I was inquiring into what caused the fire $\rightarrow$ I inquired into what caused the fire

Moreover, other inquiry-related verbs, seem to pattern in the same ways. For instance,

(6) (a) I investigated the matter for 30 minutes/(*) in 30 minutes
     (b) I deliberated for 20 minutes/(*) in 20 minutes
     (c) They probed the issue for an hour/(*) in an hour

(7) (a) I was investigating the matter $\rightarrow$ I investigated the matter
     (b) I was deliberating $\rightarrow$ I deliberated
     (c) They were probing the issue $\rightarrow$ They probed the issue

So, it is fairly clear that 'inquire' is atelic (in the sense at issue). And these other VPs that describe inquiring (or closely related activities) seem to be too. Other verbal predicates that are closely related to 'inquire' seem to pattern in similar ways as well, e.g. 'look into', 'explore', 'examine',

'scrutinize', 'seek', 'delve', 'wonder', and more. Moreover, we've already seen that 'inquire' is also progressive (in the sense specified earlier). And these other inquiry-describing VPs seem to be as well. This puts the eventualities picked out by these VPs firmly in the activity$_v$ category and not in the accomplishment$_v$ category.

Of course that 'inquire' is atelic in the sense at issue now is not to say that inquiring doesn't have a telos in some other sense. All it means for now is that another route to making sense of the claim that inquiry is essentially teleologically structured is thwarted. Some verbal predicates describe activities in ways that make their endpoints clear, and some do not. 'Inquire' does not.[17]

It's interesting (and I think instructive) that our main inquiry-theoretic/zetetic vocabulary is not accomplishment$_v$ vocabulary. Part of what an accomplishment$_v$ VP does is describe a unit of activity by providing a time after which that unit of activity cannot — by definition (and metaphysics) — continue. If I'm running a mile, then once I hit the mile mark, I've finished running a mile. I might not know I've hit the mile mark, I might think I surely have not, I might keep running. No matter. The activity (accomplishment$_v$) of running a mile that I had been engaged in is over (even if the activity of running that I had also been engaged in is still going). My activity of running a mile has a terminus that's out of my hands in a particular way: once I've reached that terminus it is not possible for me to continue doing the thing I was doing. I can keep running, but I can't keep running that mile.

This does seem to be one way in which a practice can be teleologically structured. But, intuitively, if inquiry has a teleological structure, it's not this kind of teleological structure.[18] Even if inquiry has a telos and has a sort of directionality towards a terminus, reaching that terminus does not guarantee — as a matter of definition or metaphysics — the end of inquiry. When I keep running after I've hit the mile mark (say I don't know I've hit it), I'm still running, but I'm not running that mile; perhaps I'm running a new

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[17]There is some zetetic vocabulary that may come out looking more telic according to these tests, e.g. 'figure out'. Although there is also some evidence that 'figure out' denotes an achievement$_v$ rather than an accomplishment$_v$. 'Right boundary achievements' are achievement$_v$ VPs and so denote endpoints only, but they also imply that some preceding activity has taken place. So they are like accomplishment$_v$ VPs, but rather than denoting some activity, they imply it in some other way. Malink (2008) argues that right boundary achievements presuppose (rather than denote) activity, and he proposes a negation test that distinguishes them from accomplishment$_v$ VPs. 'Figure out', according to this test at least, falls on the achievement$_v$ side. If this is right then perhaps 'figure out' is better thought of as picking out the very end of a particular kind of successful inquiry rather than describing the activity of inquiry itself.

[18]It's interesting to think about the teleological structure of games in this context as well. 'Play War' looks atelic, but 'play a game of War' looks telic.

mile. But that first unit of activity has, of necessity, ended. But now assume that knowledge is inquiry's terminus in the sense at issue (or pick a different candidate attitude if you prefer). Say I'm investigating why my computer won't charge. And say the reason it won't charge is that there's a software bug that is preventing charging and that I know about this software bug and what it does. But imagine I don't know or realize that I know this, or that I think absolute certainty is the relevant terminus (rather than knowledge). So, I keep investigating. If inquiring were like running a mile, then my knowing about the software bug would make continued investigation into why my computer won't charge impossible. It would mean that the moment I come to know about the software bug, my inquiry into why my computer won't charge ends. Starting at that very moment, my continued inquiring would have to amount to my inquiring into something else, or not count as inquiring at all. But this does not seem right. Perhaps I should have stopped inquiring into the cause of the charging issue once I came to know about the software bug, but that coming to know didn't itself bring an end to my investigation; I kept at it. Ending my inquiry would be a separate step, not one identical to or necessitated by my getting the relevant piece of knowledge. Whatever the intuition that makes post-terminus running-a-mile crash, it is not at work here. Whatever it means to say that inquiry has an end or goal, it's not that it has a sort of terminus that once reached makes continuing that very inquiry impossible. This seems to be the sort of terminus that telicity tracks, and so it's not a surprise that 'inquire' is atelic in the sense I've been discussing.

3   PERSONAL AIMS & THE SPECIFIC QUESTION

'Inquire' isn't a telic verb (in the Vendlerian sense). And while inquiry may well be game-like in some ways, I don't see turning to games or game-playing as offering much insight into inquiry's teleological character per se. There are certainly other ways we might try to flesh out a structural, non-normative aim of inquiry, e.g. look to discussions of biological functions and teleology.[19]

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[19]But. Inquiring is not a state or trait or biological process, but a thing we decide to do, making an evolutionary account a somewhat awkward fit. Say we could tell a story about why inquisitive behaviour evolved that accounted for its appearance (in us and other creatures, perhaps) as a mechanism for (say) acquiring knowledge. We could then say that the point of inquiry was to get knowledge. Would we also say that the point of inquiry *is* to get knowledge? That is, would this evolutionary story be able to do more than record a historical fact about the emergence of a certain kind of behaviour? Additionally, would it tell us anything about how instances of our current practice ought to unfold? I'm not sure. Compare: the point of making fire was to stay warm and give light or the point of walking on two legs was to conserve calories or the point of hunting was to have meat to eat and hides to wear. Even if these are (roughly) true, it's not clear they tell us much

I'm not particularly confident that any will work out though, and so rather than trying further structural roads, I want to think about a 'personal' aim of inquiry. While it may be difficult to make sense of exactly what it means to say that inquiry itself — the activity — has an aim, it is not nearly so difficult to make sense of the claim that inquirers have aims.

Discussions of the aim of inquiry often move between talk of the aim of the practice and talk of the aims of the participants of the practice — sometimes acknowledging the shift, sometimes not. Other aim-of-π discussions also confront questions about whether the aim of the relevant practice should be thought of as a personal aim of the participants in the practice. The suggestion that we might locate the 'aim of inquiry' in the personal aims or goals of inquirers isn't terribly radical then. Are claims of the form, 'the aim of inquiry is α' made true by the goals of inquirers? More generally, do inquirers — all inquirers, qua inquirers — have particular kinds of aims or goals?

Notice how general this last question is. Are there any goals or aims or ends that all inquirers (qua inquirers) share? At this level of generality, a 'yes' answer to this question strikes me as plausible. First, inquiry seems to be a largely 'person-level' phenomenon — whole persons are inquirers. Even though various sub-personal processes contribute to our inquiries, we are the inquirers. Moreover, inquiring is something we do, it's not something that happens to us, it's not a reflex or a tic or 'mere behaviour'. On the whole, inquiring is a piece of intentional action — by and large it's an intentional activity.[20]

The following describe some of the ways we commonly distinguish intentional action from (say) mere behaviour: where intentional action is purposive, mere behaviour is not; intentional actions are done for reasons/are in the 'space of reasons', not so for mere behaviour; intentional actions can be thought of as 'tryings' and are subject to certain kinds of rationalizing explanations (e.g. there is good sense to be made of asking a subject why they did what they did), while neither of these applies to mere behaviour.[21] But having reasons, a purpose, trying to do something or get something, there being a reasonable explanation for why a subject did a thing are all fairly teleological notions. In a very broad sense, all intentional action is teleological or goal-directed or is done with some aim.

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about the point of those activities currently, nor give insight into how best to do them these days.

[20] Although it doesn't feel quite right, just as a matter of ordinary language, to call inquiring an action, I don't know that there's much we should make of that. See Hornsby (2012, 2013) for some discussion of the close connections between action and activity.

[21] O'Brien (2014), ch.2 has a nice discussion of the family of concepts we use in discussions of intentional action.

So given that inquiring is intentional, it's goal-directed in some sense. That said, many actions that can be intentionally done can also be accidentally done, e.g. stepping on a bug, turning on the tv, eating meat. But can we inquire accidentally? Can we engage in the activity of inquiring without at all meaning to? Like knocking over a lamp in a dark room? I suspect not.[22] But if there is no accidental inquiry then we should say that inquiring is necessarily intentional and with that that every inquirer is acting with some aim or engaging in a kind of goal-directed activity. And I think we can say at least this much about those aims: they include aims to inquire — all inquirers are trying to inquire.[23]

This is all to say that a personal answer to the General Question seems plausible to me. And it seems plausible to me in part because a certain kind of answer to a personalized version of the Specific Question seems plausible to me, viz. that all inquirers are trying to inquire. But that sort of answer to the Specific Question is not much like the ones typically given. The claim that all inquirers (qua inquirers) are trying to inquire is obviously an extremely general answer to the question of what all inquirers qua inquirers are trying to do (as I hope is clear it's not trivial though). But, as I'll argue, if we say that 'aim of inquiry' talk is best thought of as talk about the aims of all inquirers then the less general sorts of answers to the Specific Question, the ones we're more familiar with, lose plausibility.

The Specific Question asks, What is the aim of inquiry? And these are the sorts of answers typically given: knowledge, understanding, truth/true belief, certainty, epistemic improvement, settled opinion, etc. Given that we're considering a personal aim now, the Specific Question changes shape a little bit. Now we should think of it as asking: What goals do all inquirers qua inquirers have? Or: What is it that all inquirers qua inquirers are trying to do? One thing worth pointing out right away is that strictly speaking the typical answers to the original Specific Question do not answer our new, 'personalized' Specific Question. 'Knowledge' and 'true belief' (etc.) are not

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[22]When Davidson alerted the prowler by turning on the light, his action was intentional under one description ('turning on the light') and unintentional under another ('alerting the prowler'). He meant to do one of those things but not the other; he did one of those things on purpose, the other by accident (see Davidson (1963) for discussion). One way to flesh out my thought about the impossibility of accidental inquiry in this paragraph is along these Davidsonian lines: There are no cases in which S φs and that φ-ing counts as S's inquiring, but it only counts as such accidentally. None of this is to say that we might not learn without meaning to or even figure something out accidentally. It's rather to say that we don't engage in the activity of inquiring accidentally.

[23]I am using 'trying to φ' and 'intending to φ' (and 'aiming to φ') interchangeably here. These are obviously closely related notions but also may well come apart in various ways. See Holguín and Lederman (2022) for some recent discussion of trying and its relation to this family of other intentional notions. For our purposes it's not essential to keep them apart.

answers to the question, 'What are inquirers trying to do?'.

There is an easy enough fix for this, of course. What are inquirers trying to do? Acquire knowledge, get true belief, and so on. There are two things worth noticing about these sorts of answers though. They all state first, that inquirers' aims are *acquisitive*, and second that what inquirers are trying to acquire are mental states or attitudes. These sorts of acquisitive mental state answers are only a subset of the possible (and to my mind quite plausible) answers to the question of what inquirers are trying to do. In this way, the current debate over the Specific Question might better be thought of as a debate over an even more specific question, viz. Which mental state is the aim of inquiry? Or in our new personalized context: Which mental states are all inquirers qua inquirers trying to acquire?

Many of our aims and goals have nothing to do with acquisition though. Much of the discussion so far has been about non-acquisitive aims or ends. When I'm trying to win at tennis or Tic-tac-toe or chess, I don't (or at least needn't) have acquisitive ends or goals — what I'm trying to do is win. And the same is true when I'm trying to carry the suitcase to my brother's or run a mile (and so on). For a certain kind of Kantian, it's constitutive of action that agents aim at being governed by the Categorical Imperative. In general, many of our goals are non-acquisitive goals. Are inquirers' goals necessarily acquisitive? Typical inquiries certainly seem to involve efforts to learn more about the world — to acquire new knowledge (and the like). But do they always and everywhere? Is it necessarily the case that inquirers are trying to acquire new attitudes? I don't think so.

Now that we've shifted to thinking about the aim of inquiry as a personal aim of inquirers, the Specific Question is a question about the aims of actual and possible people (and other sorts of inquisitive creatures perhaps). Parties in the debate over the Specific Question often argue for their preferred aim of inquiry. They are sometimes open to inquiry having other aims as well, but are typically arguing for one aim that they take to be essential. In our new personalized context we can then conceive of the different positions here as each arguing for a different replacement for σ in the claim (schema): All inquirers qua inquirers are trying to get σ. With the familiar doxastic and epistemic attitudes as the candidate replacements: knowledge, true belief, justified belief, settled opinion, understanding, certainty, and so on.[24] These

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[24]I don't mean to say that this is how the actual debate over the Specific Question has played out. The debate over the Specific Question is explicitly a debate about 'the aim of inquiry'. Do the parties in this debate understand that in a personalized way? It's difficult to say. Looking at the authors mentioned in footnote 1, there is a limited amount of discussion of just how their aim claims should be understood. In the few cases where this is made clear (or can be clearly read off of the language used), there is a diversity of views, some personal, some structural, and some normative. And often a few of these interpretations seem to me to be at work in a single discussion.

sorts of positions (let's call them each different versions of *σ-essentialism*) seem especially hard to sustain now though. And thinking about why will help bring out why we have reason to move away from making the goal of mental state acquisition an essential feature of the activity of inquiry.

I don't think we have reason to expect that even all actual inquirers (never mind the possible ones) share any one of the acquisitive aims at issue now. Has everyone who has so far inquired (which I take to be more or less everyone who has so far existed) been trying to get knowledge? True belief? Understanding? High credence? What about skeptics or eliminativists about those attitudes? And once we move to thinking about all possible inquirers, the prospects for *σ*-essentialism become dimmer still. There is nothing conceptually incoherent about an inquirer who is trying to be certain (Descartes?), nor one who is trying to settle their opinion (Peirce?), nor one who is trying to achieve tranquillity (Sextus?) nor one trying to get to the truth or come to know, and so on. Any of these personal aims seem broadly compatible with being an inquirer. And for any of those, we can imagine subjects who genuinely don't have the other aims, because they don't think there are such states, or merely because they simply aren't the ones they are after in some inquiry or another.

To bring this point out further, it's worth thinking about a case. Say I'm convinced that inquirers are always trying to get knowledge. You don't think that's right. To prove it to me you decide to call up James Watson and ask him what sort of mental states he and Francis Crick were trying to get into when they investigated the structure of DNA. He says that they were trying to get to credence 0.95 in their double-helix answer so that they could announce their result (and beat Linus Pauling to the punch). He insists that both he and Crick considered 'knowledge' talk a relic of an outdated folk-psychological picture; there's no such thing, he says.[25] You hang up and tell me the news.

What should I say or do in response to this news? First, a different question. Was calling Watson a good strategy for getting information about our debate over the aim of inquiry? If the 'aim of inquiry' is an aim of inquirers, it's hard to see why not. If you want to know whether I'm trying to get a dog or a cat, you're going to want to know the specific things I'm doing, saying, and thinking. Analogously, if we want to know whether someone is trying to get (say) knowledge or high credence or just settled opinion, isn't it appropriate to ask or observe them? Of course these sorts of self-reports and observations aren't dispositive, but they do seem relevant.

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[25]This is an entirely fictional tale, but Watson wrote an autobiographical account of his and Crick's work and journey (Watson (1968)). In it he gives his account of what he and Crick were doing, trying to do, wanted, and more. A wide range of epistemic and zetetic vocabulary is used.

This is an important methodological shift though. The debate over the specific aim of inquiry has been largely an armchair debate. Answering a personalized version of the Specific Question though seems to require or at least be amenable to empirical investigation.

Back to the story. Is the news about Crick and Watson's pursuit of high credence rather than knowledge evidence against my view that knowledge is the (personal) aim of inquiry? It seems so, although it does feel like a serious failure of imagination on my part for it to have taken a call to James Watson for me to get there. Of course, I could try to explain away Watson's testimony by (say) trying to impugn his powers of introspection or recollection, or taking issue with his epistemic theories and concepts, but his testimony does seem to count against my view, at least prima facie.

That said, imagine you give me the news that Watson and Crick were trying to be 95% sure and not trying to know, and I say, in astonishment: 'I can't believe it. It turns out Watson and Crick never even investigated the structure of DNA!'. This is not a good response; it's absurd even. But it's not entirely clear why. After all, if my theory says that every A has property ψ and then I come upon something that lacks ψ, it's not absurd to conclude that it's therefore not an A. This isn't to say I should always modus tollens in a case like this, but just that it needn't be absurd. Why does it seem so bad in this case then?

Notice, it's not that there isn't any evidence Watson could have given me that would make it reasonable to conclude they never investigated. For instance, if Watson had decided to confess that he and Crick didn't do any work on DNA and didn't care about it at all, but some mystery scientists who wanted to forever remain anonymous handed them all their research, then it would be entirely reasonable for me to conclude that Watson and Crick didn't inquire into the structure of DNA. The problem with Watson's news is not that he couldn't have given me evidence that he and Crick never inquired into the structure of DNA, rather it's that his telling me they were trying to be 95% sure rather than know doesn't look like evidence for that conclusion at all.

There is nothing special about the replacement for σ that I chose in this story (knowledge). I could have used any of the other candidate attitudes, and (I submit) we could get the tale to play out in much the same way. In fact, it's not clear that Watson could give me a reason to give up my belief that he and Crick investigated the structure of DNA by asserting that they were trying to get σ^* and not σ, for any attitude-types σ and σ^*.[26]

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[26]While as constructed this thought experiment relies on the (fictional) self-reports of inquirers, I don't think assertions are essential to the case. That is, it's not just that we can imagine the relevant inquirers insisting that they are trying to get σ^* and not σ, but that we can imagine them in fact trying to get one rather than the other by, e.g. being

And other sorts of responses on Watson's part about what he and Crick were and weren't trying to do also seem to me perfectly compatible with their having genuinely inquired. For instance, imagine that Watson responds to our query entirely puzzled. He says he and Crick were thinking about DNA, not knowledge or belief or understanding; they were investigating the structure of a molecule, not trying to get themselves to think things. This strikes me as a coherent (and even fair) response on Watson's part. The activity Watson and Crick were engaged in was world-directed in an important sense, and the conception of it as at bottom about moving one's mind feels off. It's also not hard to imagine Watson insisting that he and Crick weren't trying to acquire anything at all — that they were just engaging in an activity. In general, couldn't we have inquirers only truly interested in the journey and not the destination, or ones who want to avoid ever getting to the destination for other reasons?[27],[28] It simply isn't clear that it matters one way or another to Watson's status as an inquirer whether he was trying to get knowledge, understanding, high credence, or not trying to acquire any new attitudes at all.[29]

Where does all of this leave us? All inquirers may well have some aims qua inquirers, but it doesn't look as though they all have, of necessity, one of the acquisitive aims that are the focus of the debate over the specific aim of inquiry. And it doesn't even look as though every inquirer needs to have any sort of acquisitive aim at all. It may well be true that we typically inquire because we want to know more but that sort of desire or personal goal is not essential to the activity.[30]

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sensitive to or satisfied with particular kinds of information rather than others.

[27]For more 'process-focused' accounts of inquiry and curiosity along these lines, see Dover (forthcoming).

[28]This evokes some other, perhaps more familiar, sorts of concerns about whether inquirers necessarily have the relevant sorts of acquisitive goals. For instance, typically there is information that subjects actively do not want, e.g. various forms of bad news. Nonetheless, it's not impossible to inquire when the upshot could be the discovery of bad news — betrayal, illness, failure, and so on. And there are familiar metacognitive concerns lurking as well. If an inquirer needs to have the various relevant epistemic concepts — knowledge, understanding, truth, belief — in order to aim to acquire those things, then we have the result that creatures that lack those concepts cannot inquire. But this isn't right: all variety of conceptually unsophisticated creatures inquire.

[29]I take it that part of the reason it doesn't matter is that we know a lot about what Watson and Crick did, e.g. studied Chargaff's work on the chemistry of nucleic acids, pored over Franklin's x-ray diffraction images, arranged and re-arranged cardboard cutouts of molecules examining the different possible configurations, and so on. But part of what that means is that the activity they were engaged in is quite visible even if we don't know where they wanted to end up (if anywhere).

[30]It's also worth saying that trying to acquire doxastic or epistemic attitude σ is also not sufficient to make it that the activity one is engaged in by so trying counts as inquiring. There are many things we can do that are designed to get us these sorts of attitudes but

4 BEYOND THE AIM OF INQUIRY

The contemporary literature on inquiry emphasizes questions about its aim. There are surely many reasons for this, and it's not my intention to speculate about the motivations of other authors, but I can report some of my own. The idea that inquiry is a 'goal-directed activity' feels like some sort of first principle about inquiry. One way to capture this thought is with an 'aim claim': a claim of the form, 'inquiry aims at α'. Part of what I've tried to do in this paper is offer up some interpretations of this sort of zetetic aim claim. Most I've found unsatisfying and those that seem plausible don't lead in the expected direction. We could try others. There are surely other structural and personal options and I haven't said anything about potential forms of normative reductionism.[31] But it is not clear that the best approach to understanding inquiry — even its teleological aspects — is to stay focused on this sort of aim claim. At some point it starts to feel as though one is chasing down a metaphor. Part of what's emerged in this discussion is that the idea that inquiry is a goal-directed activity can make reference to a number of different aspects or features of inquiry — its structure, its norms, the mental lives of its participants. These are all aspects and features of inquiry that I care about and want to understand better. My suggestion though is that we might have a better chance of understanding these aspects and features if we stop worrying about 'the aim of inquiry'.

But I want to end on a less quietistic note and very briefly suggest a different angle of approach in thinking about matters zetetic. Rather than beginning at the very end of inquiry and focusing on how that endpoint casts its shadow back over the activity, this approach tries to focus on the activity and its participants directly — on the aiming (as it were) rather than what is aimed at. My version of this more direct approach starts by taking seriously inquiry's close relationship to questions and questioning.

Why look to questions and questioning? First, while our zetetic vocabulary may not be robustly telic it is robustly interrogative. Zetetic verbs and verb phrases take interrogative complements, e.g. inquiring, investigating,

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that are not going to amount to our inquiring. Going to college is an activity I may decide to do to get more (say) knowledge, so too taking the SATs to get into college, as well as taking the train to my classes, and so on. These aren't all activities we want to describe as inquiring, I take it. Perhaps we can get knowledge (and the like) by hypnosis or head injury or brain surgery or taking a magic knowledge pill, but doing those things to myself in efforts to come to know also needn't count as inquiring.

[31] A very quick note on the prospects for the normative reductionist here. Although it's perhaps not apt to talk about correctness conditions for inquiry (as it might be for belief), talk of inquiry's 'success conditions' seems (at least prima facie) in good standing. However, fleshing out what these zetetic success conditions are is no easy task. See Clark (2023) for some discussion.

examining, probing, querying, interrogating, looking into, trying to figure out, and so on. So at least one thing we investigate or inquire into or try to figure out, or any of the others seems to be a question. Moreover, as I argue in Friedman (2017, 2019) all inquirers qua inquirers have particular kinds of question-directed attitudes (I call these 'interrogative attitudes') — attitudes like curiosity or wondering.[32] On my view, a subject does not count as inquiring into a question at a time without having some interrogative attitude towards that question at that time. And that interrogative attitude is part of what motivates and guides inquiry, encoding the inquirer's zetetic goals. This tells us something about the activity of inquiring, and in particular about its internal structure and motivations. But thinking about inquiry's relation to questioning gives us more still. What do inquirers do with the questions they have in mind? In which ways do these interrogative attitudes show themselves in thought and action?

Here is the start of a suggestion. What is the canonical question-involving act or activity? What is it that we typically do with questions? We ask them. In ordinary English, 'asking' describes an act of speech. But in a series of papers Jaakko Hintikka claimed that scientific inquiry, and perhaps science itself, should be conceived of as a series of 'questions put to nature'.[33] Putting a question to nature is at least in part a matter of asking the world that question. How do we 'ask' the world a question? We might try the speech act, but that won't be very productive. I can approach a tree and utter, 'Tree, how tall are you?', but I will not get an answer back. So taking Hintikka's suggestion seriously requires a notion of question-asking that goes beyond the illocutionary.

Can we meaningfully conceive of illocutionary asking as a subtype of a more general action-type (asking in general)? I think so. In asking questions we try to remake our informational environments in particular ways: ways that align with our questions. In illocutionary asking we do that by communicating our intentions and requesting that someone else update our informational space by making a particular kind of utterance with a particular content. But there are many ways to rearrange our informational environments so that they speak to our questions. We can ask someone else to make answers available to us, but we can also change our locations, modulate our focus and attention, manipulate our surroundings and more. These sorts of actions and activities can move us from informational environments that do not speak to our questions to ones that do, and as such

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[32]For a more general argument in defence of the existence of question-directed attitudes — attitudes that have questions rather than propositions (or something else) as their contents or objects — see Friedman (2013).

[33]See, e.g. Hintikka (1981, 1988), Hintikka and Harris (1988).

resemble illocutionary asking in epistemically important ways.[34] My very preliminary suggestion then is that the (or at least a) central zetetic act is question-asking.

If that's right then inquiring is an interrogative activity (at least) twice over — inside and out. Qua inquirers we are motivated by question-directed attitudes and we act on those attitudes in ways that can be conceived of as question-askings. Of course all of this is a mere (proto) sketch of these interrogative aspects of inquiring. In my view though, this interrogative framework can prove extremely fruitful, giving us insight into the norms of inquiry, the nature of the activity of inquiring, the intentions and motivations of inquirers, and more. In this way it proves a helpful framework for theorizing about inquiry and inquirers in a more direct way: by looking at the activity of inquiry and its participants head-on rather than via a shadow cast backwards from its very last moment.*

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[34]Even if asking a question is a matter of trying to modify one's informational environment in particular ways, what the asker does with that remade environment is largely open. Typically we try to get our informational environments to speak to our questions because we want to know (be more sure of, understand better, etc.) the answers to those questions, but not always. And crucially, it's not essential to making sense of the activity of question-asking that we specify this tail end. I can ask you a question because I want to know the answer or because I want to see if you know the answer or because I want to annoy you or something else.

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