

The Examined Life

Jane Friedman, New York University^{*†}

Before we begin, one clarificatory remark. I will be talking a lot about curiosity in what's to come. I mean to talk about it in its broadest sense. There is a very narrow use of the word 'curiosity' where we mean it only to cover an interest in a topic or question or in information *for its own sake*. That is, if a question arises for me in the course of some task, and I want the answer for this other end, then the question-arising state is not curiosity per se. I use the word here in a way that covers all of these cases — as a general term for the state a subject is in when a question arises for them (I'll sometimes use 'wonders' in this sense too). This is also a fairly ordinary use of the word. I also mean to cover more capacious forms of the state, e.g. what [Dover \(2024\)](#) calls 'erotic curiosity' and what [Vazard \(forthcoming\)](#) calls 'interest'. There is an important question about whether those latter two are question-directed or not, but both are epistemic drives. For this discussion, I will focus on question-directed curiosity, but that's largely for ease of exposition.

Next, two thought experiments — the cases of Chip and Bud. And after that, some discussion of some different kinds of zetetic value.

1 Chip and Bud

Chip

The tech industry knows us so well. It recognizes that we are really tired of having to figure things out and has finally devised a way to spare us the burden: The Curiosity Detector. The Curiosity Detector is a little chip that can be implanted in a user's brain that works as follows. Whenever the user becomes curious about a question, the chip detects this and just a moment later makes it that the user knows the answer to the question. Any question that arises for the user — any question that comes to mind, any question they become curious about, and so on — will prompt the chip to add the answer to that question to the user's store of knowledge. The chip is infallible. Curiosity satisfaction guaranteed!

^{*}✉ jane.friedman@nyu.edu

[†]DRAFT: 2026-08-19. Comments welcome! Please don't cite without permission.

An early adopter, Chip, gets the chip implanted. He understands what he's done and knows what to expect. I want to take some time to imagine Chip's life, and in particular, how different it is from our lives. To start to bring this out, I want to describe, in somewhat mundane detail, a recent morning of mine.

The morning in question, I was away at a conference. Here's some of how that went. I woke up in a hotel and wondered where I was for a second; I looked around and figured it out. Then I checked the time, checked my email, checked the news. I thought about how much time I had before I had to leave the hotel to make it to the conference on time. I checked out some area restaurants to figure out where I could get breakfast and a good coffee en route to the first session. I checked the weather and then thought about what to wear in light of what I learned. I rifled through my bag looking for my charger and wondered if I forgot it at home.

I can keep going with this sort of tedium. I take it I'm describing a very typical kind of conference morning. The point of the telling? What I have described is a series of inquiries. And I could go on describing the small inquiries I have to perform in order to get ready, and the bigger ones I perform alongside those, as I think about who is coming to this conference, whether my old friend will be there, whether I've got a good enough handle on the issues I'll be talking about, and so on. I haven't even left the hotel yet, and I've performed inquiry upon inquiry.

Think about Chip doing my morning. Let's say that all the same questions that arise for me arise for him. He wonders where he is when he wakes up. What happens next? He doesn't look around or search his memory or turn over the question in any way. Instead, just after the question arises for him, the chip answers it, and he thereby comes to know the answer. Each question that arises for me prompts some action or activity on my part, either mental or bodily or both. No question that arises for Chip prompts this sort of activity. Questions arise for Chip — he becomes curious about the same things that I become curious about — but that curiosity prompts no action on Chip's part. While I respond to my curiosities by inquiring, Chip does not. Not now, not ever. Chip does not inquire at all.¹

¹I take it that it's intuitively clear that Chip does not inquire, but it's a bit more subtle than it seems (at least for me). On my view, it is possible for S to inquire into Q even if S knows the answer to Q. This leaves some in-theory opening for Chip to keep inquiring. I don't think there is a real opening here though. Chip knows he got the chip implanted and knows what it does. We can assume that anyone who gets the Curiosity Detector is perfectly aware of all the knowledge they get and is perfectly certain of everything they know via the chip. So for Chip to inquire into Q after he knows Q would require him to investigate a question whose answer he knows in full awareness and is subjectively certain about. I, myself, don't know how to imagine the state of mind of this Chip. And in so

Just to draw this out a bit more in our specific case. When Chip wonders what time it is or who emailed him or what the weather is like or what's happening in the world today, he quickly gets the answer without doing anything further. He just lays in bed and comes to know the answer to any question that arises for him. From the inside, Chip's morning is very different from mine. Chip doesn't search his memory, doesn't reason or perform inferences to get answers, doesn't do any practical reasoning in trying to figure out what he should eat or wear or which route he should take to the conference (in general, Chip never tries to figure anything out). From the outside, his behaviour also looks nothing like mine — Chip just lays there and gets the answers to all his questions. He doesn't ever act on his curiosity: he doesn't look around to answer a question, or even shift his focus or attention. He inspects none of the objects of his curiosity.

This last aspect of the life of Chip can be better brought out by thinking a bit more about my conference morning. Once I got ready and left the hotel, I made my way to the conference. That required me to navigate a new city. I checked the street names and followed my map. And my epistemic interests drove my experience of the world in other ways as well. First, I came to that world at that moment with a range of pre-existing curiosities, topics I wanted to know more about, questions I was thinking about, and so on. Those directed my attention as I went, helping to determine what I noticed, saw, and learned. For example, because I was interested in birds, I noticed all the new chirps around me and spotted new birds as I went. You might have walked the same route at the same time and experienced none of that.

And second, the things I saw and noticed triggered new, small curiosities. Things caught my eye (again, often because of my pre-existing interests and curiosities): the novel street signs, the clothes someone was wearing, the shops along the way, the strange recycling bins, the alleyways, and so on. As I went, I responded to these details by shifting my focus and attention and physically moving in small ways to try to get more information. Sometimes I took bigger actions even — I walked over to some storefront to really 'check it out' or wandered down an alley to see what was at the other side.

While I'm telling a story about being in a new place, that detail is not essential. The typical experience of navigating the world is a version of this story. Sometimes we navigate distractedly, our minds set on some other task as we go, and we miss the details. But if we are minimally alert to the world, then our curiosities, and our desires for information more generally,

far as I do, I can only imagine Chip to be an ersatz inquirer. While perhaps this sort of Chip is possible in some sense, it would require a very different psychology than ours. My claim here then is that Chip never inquires (and I think it's even fair to say that he cannot inquire in an ordinary sense of 'cannot').

play a central role in determining which world we experience — both our pre-existing epistemic interests, and the ones triggered by the experiences we have as we go. We direct our attention, shift our focus, and move our bodies in response to the questions we already have and the new ones that arise given what we experience: why is there so much traffic today, what song is that guy playing, what’s that in the middle of the road, and so on. The experience of being in the world is deeply infused with pursuing our curiosities — acting curiously (as it were).

Chip makes his way through the world without ever acting curiously. Again, imagine Chip making his way to my conference. He does not look at the street signs to find his way, or check his map. Moreover, he has no standing curiosities, since all those have already been satisfied. Chip’s attention is not being drawn to things in the world he wants to know more about because as soon as he wants to know more about something, he does. Can Chip be interested in birds? In some sense perhaps, but not the same sense that I am. As soon as Chip wants to know more about birds, he does.² Will Chip notice the chirps as he walks in the way I do? It’s not clear. My noticing is in part epistemically motivated. His won’t be. And even if they do draw his attention, that experience won’t prompt any sort of exploratory or investigative behaviour on his part in the way it does for me.

When Chip is out in the world, he has experiences, but the way in which these register in him and the ways in which they prompt him to action (or better: fail to prompt him to action) is very much unlike the way we respond to our experiences. Chip might look around to enjoy certain kinds of aesthetic experiences, but he never looks around because he wants or needs to know anything more about the world around him.³

In this sense, there is something quite zombie-like about how Chip moves through the world. He’s not the usual kind of zombie we talk about in philosophy — a creature without phenomenal consciousness. Chip is a different

²There’s a question about exactly how the chip works in these cases. If Chip is interested in/curious about birds, there may not be a specific question he has in mind about them. But we can imagine that for every bigger, more amorphous question he has (what’s up with blue jays?), the chip gives him some information. And if that raises more questions, it answers those, and so on. I assume our broader epistemic interests work like this. They draw us to objects and topics so that we can keep asking smaller questions and learning more. In some cases, these interests might be endless founts of questions and curiosities. We should imagine the same is true for Chip, but he always gets the information he wants from the chip instead of from the actual objects of his interest.

³The ‘might’ in this sentence is important. It is plausible that aesthetic experience is intimately connected to curiosity and wonder. If that’s right, then we might also get the result that Chip cannot really have aesthetic experiences either. He can literally stop and smell the roses, but it’s not clear to me how to think of the actions and experiences that involves if nothing Chip does is done out of curiosity or wonder.

kind of zombie, a kind of epistemic zombie. In virtue of not inquiring, Chip is only barely an epistemic agent, engaging in little cognitive activity. He also doesn't see the world or act in it the way we do. I'll flesh out this sort of epistemic zombie a bit more in a moment, but first I want to imagine one more aspect of Chip's life.

After my walk through town, I made it to the department where the conference was happening. There, I saw some old friends and caught up and met some new people. What happened in the conversations I had there? I asked my old friends how they'd been, what had been going on in their lives, how some big event had gone, how work was going; I asked the new people I met where they were from and what they were working on, and so on. My point here, again, is not at all limited to the particular setting of my story here. Try to imagine any conversation that does not involve the parties asking each other questions. Of course, lots of conversation involves asserting things, but, I submit, it is difficult to imagine any sort of actual back-and-forth that is at the core of conversation without the conversants asking each other questions.

Chip asks no one questions. Or if he does, it is only so as not to seem completely alien. Imagine he sees his old friend at the conference. He wonders how the friend has been doing, and his chip tells him. He walks up to his friend and just says, 'Glad you're doing well'. Then what? Perhaps his friend asks him some questions, and he answers. But every question he has about his friend is answered before he utters it. In this way, Chip cannot have a normal human conversation.⁴

Can Chip even have meaningful human relationships? He can still 'be there' for the people in his life in some ways. He can help them move house and play basketball with them. He can be a shoulder to cry on and sort of listen to what they say (more on listening in a moment). If Chip is curious about the lives of his friends, he will know a great deal about them. But little of that knowledge will come from interacting with the friends themselves. It is not clear to me that meaningful relationships could be sustained this way.

There is a general point here. Chip might encounter and interact with the objects of his curiosity — whether other people or things in the world — but he never engages with them 'inquisitively'. He may become curious about them and, as a result, learn a great deal about them. But that learning is never the result of querying those objects of curiosity themselves. He may be curious about them, but he never acts curiously towards them. Chip might accidentally learn something new about his friends while helping them move house (they are really into crystals), but anything he actually wants to know

⁴See [Dover \(2022\)](#) for just how much may be lost without this sort of conversation-based interpersonal inquiry.

about his friends, he will learn from the chip.

This long description of (one version of) the life of Chip is meant to bring out just how different Chip’s life is from ours. Chip never inquires. He becomes curious about all sorts of things, but that curiosity prompts absolutely no inquisitive action on his part. Chip never reasons his way to a conclusion or thinks things through. Chip engages in no practical reasoning dedicated to answering questions about what to do. In general, none of Chip’s actions — mental or bodily — are epistemically motivated. Chip can know a lot (as much as he wants, really), but none of that knowledge will be the product of an inquiry on his part.

So, Chip’s life is quite different from ours. But I also think it’s worse than ours. I hope that’s an intuitively plausible claim at this point. If we thought that the value of inquiry was entirely down to the value of the knowledge acquired at the end of inquiry, then there would be little space to say that Chip’s life is worse than ours — Chip can know a great deal, much more than we can. By that epistemic measure, he can be doing very well indeed. But he does not seem to me to be doing very well at all.

This is not to say that Chip’s life can’t be just fine and even good in some ways, especially in some epistemic ways. Chip can know incredible amounts. Chip is as knowledgeable as he is curious, and so if he’s curious enough, he will know a great deal. And we haven’t fleshed out the rest of the world Chip inhabits. If Chip is the only person with The Curiosity Detector, he might become rich and famous working as a guru or oracle since everyone will come to him with their questions. If everyone has the chip? I leave it to the reader to think about what that world would be like.

If Chip is doing well in these ways, why does his life seem so bad? A few reasons seem clear already. Not inquiring means that Chip misses out on some other things we think are valuable. This is to say that inquiring is instrumentally valuable, and in ways that aren’t just a matter of its being a means to the acquisition of knowledge and the like. For instance, as we saw, it is not clear to what extent Chip can have meaningful human conversation, and his relationships will be impaired at best. These are the sorts of things we think are essential to human well-being.

And while there are obviously some ways in which Chip is doing well epistemically, there are other epistemic goods he is plausibly missing out on. In discussing the value of ‘inquiring for oneself’ (rather than, say, deferring to experts), [Matheson and DiPaolo \(2025\)](#) list a number of epistemic losses we

might incur were we to always choose deference.⁵ For instance, they argue that subjects who always defer to experts will miss out on certain kinds of understanding. This is because some kinds of understanding require subjects to reason things through to really ‘get it’. Chip never does this, and so there are plausibly some things he won’t understand.⁶

This is to say, there are traditional epistemic goods — the sorts of goods we think of as the ends or aims of inquiry — that Chip misses out on.⁷ On the other hand, when it comes to traditional epistemic goods like knowledge, true belief, and the like, Chip can be doing incredibly well, so on balance shouldn’t he be doing okay at least? But he does not seem to me to be doing okay at all. Something significant seems to be lost in virtue of Chip’s not inquiring. If this is right, the loss is a loss accrued in virtue of not inquiring — in virtue of not engaging in that activity — despite largely getting the traditional telic spoils of the activity.

Epistemic zombies

Earlier I said that Chip was a kind of zombie. I think this is a good way to capture the ways in which things are going badly for him. In this section, I want to flesh out this claim.

Let’s start with Chip’s mental life. Chip does not figure anything out, and he doesn’t even try to figure anything out. So any mental process that counts as a figuring out (or trying to figure out) is a mental process that Chip does not engage in. But it is fairly commonplace to think of both theoretical and practical reasoning as processes like these: as attempts to figure things out. These sorts of views are often stated without comment. For instance, here is Kelly (2003), ‘By theoretical reasoning I mean reasoning which is undertaken in order to determine *what to believe* (as opposed to practical reasoning, reasoning which is undertaken in order to determine *what to do*).’ (635; emphasis mine). And here is the very first sentence of Silverstein (2025), ‘The point of practical reasoning is to figure out *what to do*.’ (121; emphasis mine).⁸ It is natural to think of these processes as kinds

⁵For some further relevant discussion, see Paulson (2023)’s discussion of the ‘true belief machine’ and what’s missing in the life of someone who plugs in.

⁶And some of this missing understanding might be quite important. For instance, Hills (2009) argues that moral understanding cannot be got by deferring to the testimony of others. If Hills is right, then plausibly, Chip will lack moral understanding.

⁷Things are plausibly bad for Chip in another interesting way. Chip cannot choose which questions to pursue. When we become curious about a question, we don’t have to pursue the question any further, and often we choose not to act on our curiosities, or prioritize some over others. Chip can make no such zetetic decisions. He is forced to come to know the answer to every question that comes to mind.

⁸These are just two small examples, but many others make similar statements or have

of deliberation — deliberation about what to do or intend or what’s true or what to believe. Those are processes in which we are asking and trying to answer questions. So Chip isn’t going to do these. Chip will not reason to a conclusion.

A subject who engages in no practical or theoretical reasoning is not a subject doing very much thinking at all. I assume this is an important part of what makes Chip’s life seem so bad.⁹ Things can go on in Chip’s mind, e.g. he can engage his imagination (although this is limited as well, since it won’t be recruited in the service of any epistemic aim or thought experiment). Chip has thoughts. He has beliefs and knowledge, and he understands a lot. But he doesn’t do a lot of thinking. He doesn’t deliberate, or contemplate, or reason. If we look at any given time-slice of Chip’s mind, he seems to be doing very well epistemically. But if we watch it over time, nothing much is happening. This is part of what makes Chip a zombie.

Even though Chip is extremely knowledgeable, not inquiring leaves him mentally still. Beliefs get added, knowledge accumulates, but without any effort, activity, reasons-responsiveness, or agency on Chip’s part. There is just not much happening — moving, as it were — in Chip’s mind. But this is not the only way in which Chip is zombie-like. While Chip can be curious about all sorts of things, there is a way in which Chip sees the world and behaves just as an incurious person would. This has significant implications for how he experiences the world and how he acts. This is worth drawing out.

Let’s imagine this entirely incurious person (call him *X*). Again, I mean to talk about curiosity in the broadest sense. So in imagining *X*, what I want us to imagine is someone for whom no questions arise, who never wonders about anything, who never takes an epistemic interest in a person or a subject matter or some thing in the world. *X* never has a desire to learn anything new; he is without any epistemic desires, wants, needs, motives, drives, and the like — a kind of epistemic ascetic. We can imagine that *X* is someone who has lived a typical adult life, but then is given a drug that renders him entirely epistemically apathetic. What is *X*’s life like?

Well, short. If *X* runs out of food and doesn’t know how to get more, he’s in trouble. *X* won’t look for cars before crossing the street, or look down at where the next stair is. *X* won’t check to see why the flat smells like smoke, or whether the lake ice is really frozen, or what the right dosage of some medicine is. *X* is not long for this world.

closely related views about reasoning’s relationship to question answering, e.g. Scanlon (2007), Velleman (2009), Hieronymi (2013), McHugh and Way (2018), Rinard (2019).

⁹See Oza (2020) for discussion of why and how thinking is necessary for human flourishing. Indeed.

But let’s imagine a brief spell in X ’s brief life. X has beliefs and desires, and imagine one day X wants to go to the shop to buy some juice. He knows a way to the shop (and let’s hope he knows where the juice is once he gets there, otherwise he’ll go home empty-handed and thirsty). What experiences does X have en route to the shop? The first thing to say is: not many. That is, X will have only those experiences he cannot avoid. Why would X look around as he walks to the shop, or listen in to some sounds along the way if there is nothing at all he wants to know or learn or understand?

It’s not that X is incapable of looking around; he can move his head and eyes perfectly well. What I mean to be bringing out is that the reason we do that is often inquisitive. We investigate our surroundings, motivated by the questions we have or prompted by our epistemic aims, desires, interests, and more. If this sort of epistemic motivation were erased — if we were entirely epistemically apathetic — we would behave very differently.

One way to get at this idea is through the lens of attention. As I walk to the shop for juice, I face a huge range of possible perceptual experiences, and huge amounts of information I can take in; even a trip to the store is a massive opportunity to learn more. I can’t take in all the information available to me perceptually on the walk. Instead, I attend to some of it and ignore lots of it. What prompts me to attend as I do? To be sure, some of the prompting is exogenous/stimulus-driven/bottom-up — bright lights and loud sounds direct shifts in attention that are somewhat automatic.¹⁰ But much of what I turn my attention to is guided in a more top-down way by my interests and curiosities, and by what I want to know more about, see better, hear more closely, inspect further (and so on). My experience on this walk to the shops is thoroughly coloured by my epistemic motivations.

If we remove all top-down epistemic aims, goals, interests, and more from X ’s mind, how will he behave on his walk for juice? Top-down attentional control is by and large goal-driven attentional control.¹¹ Of course, these goals are not only epistemic goals; they include regular practical goals as well. But even when attention is controlled by our more obviously practical goals, the attentional tasks that leads to are typically epistemic/zetetic tasks nonetheless.

¹⁰Though see [Watzl \(2017\)](#) for discussion of the extent to which even ‘passive attention’ prompted by exogenous attention shifts is subject-level guided. The idea here is that while an exogenous attentional shift is caused by the environment, what happens after that — the actual attending — is guided by subject-level states and processes.

¹¹Many use the terms ‘top-down’ and ‘goal-directed’ interchangeably in this context. Some have argued though that other cognitive elements may exert top-down influence as well, e.g. bare preferences. See [Awh et al. \(2012\)](#) for some discussion of other top-down influences on attention that might not qualify as goal-directed. Still, it seems widely agreed that goals are the major determinant here.

For instance, say I too go to the shop for juice, but decide I also need some chocolate. If I'm at the shop looking at all the chocolate bars and want a Snickers bar, this goal will guide my attention as I perform my visual search. Although my ultimate goal is practical here (get a Snickers bar), the attentional tasks I perform in the service of that goal are epistemic/zetetic: I'm trying to find the Snickers in this vast array of candy. But that's an epistemic/zetetic task. In order to get the Snickers bar, I have to find it, which is to say that I have to come to know where it is. This is my primary attentional task. I take it that [Koralus \(2014a,b\)](#) articulates a version of this thought about the largely epistemic nature of our attentional tasks. Koralus argues that attentive perception involves bringing an interest to perception, where that interest encodes a question. Each perceptual task determines a question (Where is the banana? Is the ball in the goal yet?) and successful completion of the task is a matter of arriving at the answer to the question. Even when our attention is ultimately being guided by practical goals, the attentional tasks performed in the service of these goals are largely epistemic/zetetic.

For X then, goal-directed attentional control is extremely limited (at best). But given how much these influence what we attend to, X 's attention is functioning very differently from ours. X 's attention will largely be at the mercy of bottom-up attentional influences — loud noises and bright flashes that automatically grab his attention. But even when X is assailed by the 'great blooming, buzzing confusion', his bottom-up attentional shifts are still not like ours. When a car honks at me, and I turn, a bit startled, I learn something about what's happening in front of me. But X has no interest in that. Perhaps in some cases he won't be able to help learning something when his attention is drawn to some stimulus, but in the absence of any curiosity or epistemic interest, it's plausible he will neither learn nor remember much based on those experiences.¹²

In one sense, Chip is nothing like X . Chip is not incurious or epistemically apathetic. In fact, he may be highly curious and interested in his world. Chip will obviously navigate his world much better than X , know much more than X , and succeed in ways that poor X cannot. But in other ways, Chip and X are very much alike. How they experience the world and act in it will, in some crucial ways, be just the same. Chip, like X , has no epistemic need for worldly experiences. X didn't need them because he was indifferent to learning; Chip doesn't need them because he already knows the things he could learn by perceiving the world. Like X , Chip's attention will not be much directed in a top-down way, since all his epistemic goals

¹²Cognitive science and neuroscience tell us that (and how) curiosity enhances our ability to learn and remember, e.g. [Kang et al. \(2009\)](#), [Gruber et al. \(2014\)](#).

will be met by the chip. Exogenous stimuli may grab his attention, but there will be nothing to learn there either.

This perceptual aspect of Chip's life is also central to the sense in which he is a zombie. The zombies from the movies have no thoughts and only one goal: eat people. Chip, we can assume, does not want to eat people, and has many goals. Nonetheless, he is not unlike this movie zombie, as we've seen. His mind is still in a crucial way, and his relation to his perceptual environment is like the zombie's — even if that environment is of interest to him, he behaves in nearly every way as if it's not. He might turn for a loud noise, but otherwise, there is nothing to see. The lights aren't off, but they are strange and dim.

Before moving on to the second thought experiment, I want to think about what lessons we should take away from this one. What I say here will have to be refined somewhat given the next case, but the basic framework should remain. There are two lessons, and I'll say more about each. First, inquiry is everywhere. Second, engaging in the activity of inquiring is valuable in itself or for its own sake, and even contributes to our well-being.

Inquiry everywhere

In painting a picture of the sad life of Chip, I've relied on claims about the utter ubiquity of inquiry. In suggesting one think about a creature who does not inquire, one might have thought, 'Oh, this person is just like me but never goes to the lab to do experiments and can't be a detective'. This way of thinking about inquiry makes it a somewhat rarified activity that we perform in only very select and controlled contexts. But part of what I hope to have brought out is that inquiring is not at all a rarefied activity, but utterly mundane and completely pervasive in our waking lives.

Part of the way I've tried to bring this out is by showing how much mental (and bodily) activity is inquisitive. I've argued that Chip won't reason because reasoning is an essentially inquisitive process: in reasoning we are asking and trying to answer questions about what to do. Other mental processes are also essentially inquisitive as well, e.g. running an imaginative thought experiment, searching memory.¹³ Other mental processes like inferring or judging might not be essentially inquisitive, but they are so often

¹³Is every memory search a full-blown inquiry or more like a smaller query or quasi-inquiry? I don't think this matters here. Chip certainly does not search his memory. If he wants to know where he went to dinner last week, or know whether he knows where they went or see whether he still remembers that, the chip makes sure he has that information.

done in the service of some epistemic pursuit that we shouldn't expect Chip to do much of these either.¹⁴

This claim extends, though in a more subtle way, to perceptual experience. Our epistemic goals and interests play a significant role in determining (causally) what we experience. I fleshed this out in *X*'s case via the notion of attention. What we attend to determines, in large part, what we experience. And our epistemic goals and interests are pivotal in determining what we'll attend to. There are more and less 'agential' ways in which this is so. Sometimes we decide (in the fullest sense of 'decide') to turn our attention to this or that (e.g. you decide to watch the bird building his nest), and that decision then largely determines what we see or hear. But even absent a clear, conscious decision, the questions and interests we have direct our attention. This means that much of what we experience at any given time is the product of those interests. This isn't to say that perceptual experience itself is an inquisitive process; it's not clear it's a process at all. But my claim is that for a typical subject, what they experience is utterly intertwined with the questions that are open for them and the things they are curious about and (epistemically) interested in. Perceptual experience would be radically different without this influence.

There's another way of getting at this claim about the interaction between perceptual experience and inquiry. States like perceiving or hearing or seeing something are often conceived of as 'passive'.¹⁵ But it is also fairly clear that there is a range of more active perceptual processes we engage in. We don't just see; we look at, look for, look out for, watch, observe, listen, listen in to, listen for, and so on. These are not states, but processes or actions of a perceiving agent. In this sense, plenty of perception is agential — these are things we do. These are exercises of a kind of perceptual agency.

Can Chip engage in perception in this agential way? Some of these agential modes of perceiving are clearly inquisitive: looking for, looking out for, listening for, and the like are kinds of perceptual search. These are ways of asking and trying to answer questions, something Chip will not do. But even the less clearly inquisitive perceptual activities like watching and listening to seem to be intimately bound up with asking questions.

Can Chip watch a bird? He can turn his head and eyes and see the bird and continue to see the bird throughout an interval of time. It's not

This isn't to say that a memory cannot pop into Chip's mind. Perhaps it can. But the activity of searching his memory is one he does not engage in.

¹⁴It's worth saying that many have argued for a very close connection between believing/judging and settling questions as well, e.g. Hieronymi (2008, 2009), McHugh (2011), Friedman (2019).

¹⁵Though not everyone agrees with this characterization, e.g. 'enactivists' like Noë (2004).

clear that this is enough to count as watching the bird though. For instance, Crowther (2009b) argues that watching an object *O* is a matter of watching *what O is doing* with the aim of knowing what *O* is doing (and he has a largely analogous account of listening to in Crowther (2009a)). Chip will not do these things. Can Chip listen to the bird chirping? He can hear it for an extended period of time, but without any epistemic interest or aims at all, it's not clear that that extended period of hearing will count as him having listened to the bird chirping. The idea here is that much of our perceptual agency is also inquisitive. Of course, there is much more to say here, but this starts to give us a sense of how much of our perceptual experience is determined (both causally and constitutively) by the questions we're curious about. Directing our perceptual attention and perceptual agency more broadly are very often ways of acting curiously.

Inquiry, non-instrumental value, and well-being

Chip's inquiry-free life is very different from ours. I also think that it's worse than ours. It's not great to be the sort of zombie I described — Chip's life goes worse because of it; he is harmed by not inquiring. I think this has implications for how we should think about the value of inquiry, as well as for the relationship between inquiring and well-being.

It's clear enough that inquiring is an instrumentally valuable activity. We typically do it in order to acquire particular epistemic goods, and it's an excellent means to those ends. If knowledge, true belief, understanding, certainty, and the like are valuable, then inquiry has instrumental value. But I think the life of Chip brings out that the activity of inquiring is also non-instrumentally good. Chip is up to his neck in the typical 'outcome goods' of inquiry. But the absence of the activity itself leaves him worse off.

I assume that the average reader of this piece needs little convincing of how pleasurable inquiring can be, and what a loss it would be to no longer engage in that activity. Perhaps some of you chose academic philosophy only because you wanted answers, and nothing would be lost for you if you got those answers without inquiring at all. But, I take it many of us take great pleasure from *doing* philosophy: from thinking about philosophical questions and puzzles, from trying to put the pieces together in a way that makes sense, from working through the issues. I don't know how many of you would take a Philosophy Curiosity Detector chip if it were offered to you; the lure of all that knowledge might be quite powerful. But, my bet is that you would also deeply mourn what you would have lost in taking it.¹⁶

¹⁶Lessing contemplates a choice between truth and the search for truth: 'If God held fast in his right hand the whole of truth and in his left hand only the ever-active quest for

Moreover, it's not just *qua* philosophers that we love inquiring. We engage in games of inquiry throughout our lives (I Spy, Twenty Questions, Clue, crosswords, and so on). Imagine Chip 'doing' a crossword puzzle. He'd read a clue, the chip would give him the answer, and he'd write it in. Obviously, this is only a simulacrum of the activity many people regularly engage in. The activity Chip is doing is a writing task, and maybe he enjoys seeing the thing filled in at the end. But the thing the rest of us are doing is a zetetic task. There's nothing special we want to know when we do the crossword; we just want to work it out. We play because the zetetic activity itself is enjoyable.¹⁷

All of this is to say that we do, in fact, tend to take pleasure from the activity of inquiring itself. But that is not my main claim here. It's not just that we enjoy it or that it pleases us, but that it is a genuinely valuable activity in itself.¹⁸ There are further axiological questions one might want to ask here: Is inquiring also intrinsically valuable?¹⁹ Does it have non-derivative value? Basic value? I leave these questions for another discussion. But I do want to say that given the discussion in the last section, we should not be thinking that inquiry is valuable only in virtue of its relation to other, independent activities like theoretical and practical reasoning. At least some of what I brought out in that section was that those activities are themselves inquisitive. Put another way, they are ways of inquiring. In fact, the conclusions that inquiring is valuable in itself and that those activities are ways of inquiring open up a different way of thinking about the value of reasoning, perceptual agency, and the like. We can say that those things are valuable in themselves exactly because they are inquisitive processes, processes in which we investigate; processes in which we act curiously about

truth, albeit with the proviso that I should constantly and eternally err, and said to me: 'Choose!', I would humbly fall upon his left hand and say: 'Father, give! For pure truth is for you alone!' See [Lessing \(2005\)](#), p.98.

¹⁷Crossword puzzles are just one example of the sorts of 'games of inquiry' we play and enjoy regularly. In recent years, the Games section of *The New York Times* has become more popular than the main news sections (see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times_Games). These are all games of inquiry as well. And of course this is just one sort of example — so many of the games we play have as their aim or point figuring something out. Games like these (and others) have an interesting teleological structure, where we often adopt an end we don't care very much about (like knowing the crossword answers) for the sake of taking the means to those ends in the particular prescribed way. See [Nguyen \(2019\)](#) for more discussion on this sort of means-end relationship in many games.

¹⁸[Mitova \(2021\)](#) also argues that inquiry is non-instrumentally valuable, though from a different angle. She argues that we can harm others when we undermine them *qua* inquirers, and that this could only be so were inquiry to have non-instrumental value.

¹⁹See [Korsgaard \(1983\)](#) for an influential articulation of the distinction between non-instrumental value and intrinsic value.

and in the world.

I also want to make a further claim about inquiry's value. Chip's life feels like it's only barely a human life. This is because failing to inquire means failing to engage some basic human capacities (this is at the centre of why he's a zombie). Perhaps another way to say this: Chip's failure to inquire impacts the extent to which he can be a flourishing human. So, it's not just that inquiring is a non-instrumentally valuable activity, but whether or not we engage in that activity seems to matter to our well-being.

Spelling out, in detail, how inquiring matters to our well-being is beyond the scope of this piece. It would involve weighing in on debates about what our well-being consists in and just how those things contribute. But looking at Chip's life, it seems to me clear enough that not inquiring means Chip isn't a fully flourishing human — cognitively, epistemically, perceptually, rationally. Which is just to say that not inquiring negatively impacts his well-being.

This leaves it somewhat open whether we can explain the ways in which Chip is harmed in terms of some other, more basic, goods that he misses out on because he doesn't inquire. For instance, it is common to put items like achievement and rational activity on the lists of things that contribute positively to our well-being.²⁰ There is a particular kind of zetetic achievement that Chip never has (he never figures anything out for himself), and not inquiring certainly does mean that he is failing to exercise a particular rational power or engage in a (I think wide) range of rational activities. I think what I've said so far here makes at least the start of a case that inquiring is good for us in a way that isn't reducible to these others. The rest of that case will have to wait.

I want to highlight one more thing here before moving on though. It is quite common to see knowledge listed as one of the basic goods contributing to our well-being. So the claim that some of these basic goods are epistemic goods is not at all a novel claim.²¹ Nor, really, is the claim that a life without inquiry is deeply lacking. In the *Apology*, when Socrates is found guilty, it is proposed that he be put to death for his crimes. He then contemplates other potential punishments, one of which is to leave town and give up doing philosophy. He famously declines the option, saying that this sort of 'unexamined life' is 'not worth living'. Socrates is not making a claim here about a life without more knowledge. It's a claim about a life without more investigation. Of course, the sort of investigation and examination Socrates refuses to live without is high-minded philosophical investigation.²² Chip

²⁰See [Fletcher \(2016\)](#) for some lists among 'objective list theorists'.

²¹For some discussion see, e.g. [Baril \(2010\)](#), [Hooker \(2015\)](#), [Hazlett \(2016\)](#).

²²See [Kraut \(2006\)](#) for a good discussion of Socrates' claims here.

misses out on this too, but his life is unexamined in a far more general and ordinary sense — he simply never examines anything at all.

Socrates aside, in most discussions of the epistemic element of human flourishing, it is the stative one — knowledge — on the list. It's claimed (quite reasonably, I think) that having knowledge (or sometimes just 'important' or 'significant' knowledge) is an essential component of our well-being. It is worth saying though, that at least some of these discussions of the well-being value of knowledge shade into discussions of the well-being value of *seeking* or *pursuing* knowledge. The extensive discussion of the 'basic value' of knowledge in [Finnis \(2011\)](#) is a clear example of this. The chapter is ostensibly about the value of knowing things or of having knowledge, but in describing the task of the chapter he says, 'This chapter, then, is an invitation to reflect on one form of human activity, the activity of trying to find out, to understand, and to judge matters correctly' (60). And the discussion that follows is as much about pursuit as it is about state. In a way, this should not be surprising. Flourishing — living well — is not just a matter of having things, it's also clearly a way of acting, a matter of doing things. Eudaimonia is not a state, it's an activity.

Altogether then I think we should say that inquiring is non-instrumentally valuable and an important element of human flourishing. I think this is true, but as we'll see in a moment it needs to be refined a bit. To start to get at how, I want to think about a friend of Chip's: Bud.

Bud

We got a bit ahead of ourselves with the curiosity-detecting chip. Actually, the industry hasn't been able to quite get there yet. They do have the infallible question-answering chip, but they can't manage to figure out how to make it work as a brain implant. Instead, they decide to put the chip in a little wearable device that the user can take around with them everywhere so that all their questions can be answered: Buddy. The user speaks their questions to Buddy, and Buddy 'speaks' the answers back to the user.

Now let's imagine a character, Bud. Bud gets one of these devices and commits to it fully in the following sense: Bud asks every question that comes to mind to the device. Bud does not merely put some questions to Buddy in some circumstances, but each and every question in each and every circumstance. And Bud trusts every answer he gets from his buddy completely, fully believing and coming to know it when he hears it. Bud submits zetetically to the device in full.²³

²³This is important to the thought experiment here. You might be thinking that you

Bud's life is importantly different from Chip's. When a question comes to Bud's mind, the answer doesn't automatically get added to his store of knowledge. Instead, Bud needs to formulate the question into a spoken sentence and utter it into a device. The device will then utter its own sentences in response. Bud will need to hear those sentences and come to know them. So Bud needs to do more than Chip to get the answers he wants.

In fact, I think the more that Bud needs to do makes it the case that Bud — unlike Chip — is an inquirer. When Bud puts his questions to Buddy, he is inquiring. What Bud is doing is not radically different from what he would be doing were he to put his questions to another person, which (at least on my view) certainly counts as inquiring. So, while Chip never inquires into the questions that arise for him, Bud does. And while Chip never acts curiously, Bud does.

So this is a real difference between Chip and Bud. But how much of a difference does it make? Bud acts curiously, but only in one very particular and limited way: by uttering interrogative sentences in the direction of an electronic device. I think this is enough activity to make it that Bud is an inquirer, but just barely. And given this, I think Bud's life is much more like Chip's than it is like ours.

Imagine Bud having my conference morning. He asks Buddy where he is, what time it is, what happened in his emails and the news, what to have for breakfast, where to get that breakfast, and how to get there. Buddy tells him what to wear, what the weather is like, where his charger is, and more. Crucially, just like Chip, Bud does not do any theoretical reasoning, he doesn't think things through, he doesn't do any question-focused practical reasoning either. Bud never works anything out; Buddy just gives him all the answers he wants.

When Bud heads off for the conference, his experience of the world will be much like Chip's (and *X*'s). Bud's curiosities and epistemic interests are always satisfied by Buddy and only Buddy. So, like Chip (and *X*), Bud doesn't bring those to his experience of the world. In general, while Chip acts like an entirely incurious person, Bud acts a bit more like a curious person, though a very strange one. His curiosity has an edge, a limit it cannot extend past. It reaches out into the world, but only a tiny step. Just like Chip, Bud does not at all directly engage with or interact with the objects of his curiosity, and is not much interested in perceptual experiences since they have no epistemic value for him. Bud is an epistemic zombie in

know a version of Bud. But you do not. Bud has a device that can truly answer every question he has, and Bud only pursues the questions he has in this one particular way. That is, the only action Bud ever takes in response to the questions that arise in his mind is uttering sentences to an electronic device.

much the same way that Chip is.²⁴

So, Bud's life does not seem significantly better than Chip's. If Chip is not flourishing, neither is Bud. But Bud is inquiring. This means the conclusion from the last section needs refining. If Bud is inquiring and Chip is not, why isn't Bud flourishing in the relevant ways?

In other work I've argued that all inquiring involves the asking of questions.²⁵ But for this to be true, we cannot think of question asking as just a speech act. Instead, I've argued that question asking is a more general act-type and that there are three broad types of question asking: interpersonal, intrapersonal, and extrapersonal. Regular illocutionary asking is a type of interpersonal asking. But we also regularly put questions to ourselves (this is intrapersonal asking), as we do with the a priori matters we contemplate or the armchair inquiries we engage in. And we regularly put questions to the world using our perceptual faculties when we, e.g. perform a visual search, listen in to a conversation, or touch the clothes in the dryer to see if they're dry.²⁶ There is much more to say about what can count as a target of an asking and which questions we can (and should) put to which targets, but this rough account should be helpful here already.

Chip doesn't put any question to any target. Bud does a bit better, but only a bit, since the only sort of asking he performs is illocutionary (though Bud's kind of illocutionary asking is not interpersonal asking). Bud puts his questions to a device, and that is the only sort of asking he does. He fails to put any of his questions to the world, to other people, or to himself. But it was the absence of exactly those activities that made Chip a zombie. Bud does no better on those scores.

Thinking carefully about the lives of Chip and Bud brings out how much is lost when we fail to treat the world as a thing to be directly investigated, interrogated, examined: perception becomes otiose and thin, only barely resembling ours. In virtue of not treating the world as a thing to be explored, Chip and Bud also never interact with the objects of their worldly curiosities. They may be curious about birds, but that curiosity never prompts them to directly interact with the creatures. They remain always removed from the things they are curious about.

It's worth saying a little bit more about the sorts of intrapersonal askings that Bud and Chip fail to do, and see more of why that sort of failure is

²⁴And though it hasn't been my focus here, Bud's conversations and relationships will go no better than Chip's, since he will never ask his friends any questions. In fact, Bud is probably worse off socially than Chip since he's much more annoying to be around, always chatting with his device rather than the friends themselves.

²⁵See Friedman (2026).

²⁶See Hintikka (1999) for much more on the idea that all scientific inquiry is a matter of 'putting questions to nature'.

so pernicious too. We regularly ask ourselves questions: Where did I leave my keys? Am I in the mood for Thai food tonight? Should I go to the talk this afternoon? Why did I act the way I did yesterday? And so on. I think we can divide these into broadly two types of queries. In the first kind (call it *extractive*), I treat myself as a store of information, and my query is an effort to pull information from that store. This is the sort of thing that happens when I search my memory for an answer or query my standing preferences. The second kind of self-query is more *productive*. I don't already have an answer to the question, but need to work it out. When we ponder a priori questions, theoretical, or conceptual questions, I take it this is what we're doing. We ask ourselves those questions and try to reason through their answers. These are exercises in using what we already know and the evidence we already have to answer some new questions. Much armchair philosophy is an exercise in this sort of self-asking, and a broad swath of our inquiries involve some self-asking.

Chip and Bud do no self-querying of either sort. This means that if they learn things about themselves, it is never by examining themselves.²⁷ And the failure to ask themselves productive questions has its own dramatic impact. As we saw, practical and theoretical reasoning are typically conceived of as questioning processes: we ask ourselves what we should do or what we should think. If we stop treating ourselves as sources of information in this way, we effectively stop reasoning.

Chip and Bud are zombies because they fail to treat the world, other people, and even themselves as sources of answers. And this changes how they interact with and experience the world and the things in it, how they interact with and experience other people, and even how they relate to themselves as epistemic agents. In the end, what's left is radically altered thinking and perceiving.

One of the conclusions I drew after thinking about Chip was that inquiring is a non-instrumentally valuable activity, one that contributes to our well-being. This conclusion still stands, although thinking about Bud pushes us to refine it a bit. Bud only inquires in one way, and doing that doesn't improve his life much over Chip's. There are two things we might conclude here. One is that someone who inquires in only limited ways is not fully flourishing. I think this is right. But I think we can also say a stronger thing. It's not just that Bud's modes of inquiry are insufficiently diverse,

²⁷This point extends to their relations to the social world. They never treat other people as worthy of investigation, exploration, or contemplation. They never ask anyone about themselves, about their lives, pasts, preferences, feelings, thoughts, and so on. They simply do not engage in interpersonal inquiry at all. As with the external world, part of where Chip and Bud go so wrong is in failing to treat people — including themselves — in this way.

but that his chosen mode does not make his life go better than Chip's. So, while I think we should say that zetetic diversity is certainly good, some modes of inquiring are better than others (in the sense at issue here).²⁸

2 The dual nature of zetetic value

One of the conclusions here is that some ways of inquiring contribute to human flourishing, but not all do. I take it we can say then that there's at least one sense in which those former ways of inquiring are better than the latter ones. For instance, it's better (in the relevant sense) to investigate in ways in which you interact with the objects of your curiosity than ways in which you do not (all else equal, of course).

But with this thought, something of a puzzle emerges. Here is one way to bring it out. Imagine you are on a game show. Contestants on the show answer questions for cash prizes. It's your turn, and when you walk onto the stage, there is a giant industrial-sized vat of jellybeans. Your question: How many jellybeans are in the giant vat (**J**)? You have as much time as you want to answer **J**. If you get the right answer, you get a million dollars, but if you get the wrong answer, you go home with no money. The host then announces that for this round of the game, a special guest will join — the candy man who loaded up the vat with jellybeans! He knows exactly how many jellybeans are in the giant vat, and the host tells you that if you want, you can ask him **J**. Moreover, this candy man never lies about candy, and so he will absolutely tell you the true answer to **J**.

What should you do? You have many options for answering **J**. Let's think of these as different 'paths through' **J**. You could eyeball the giant vat and do some math; count each one by one; scoop out some beans, count how many are in the scoop and then figure out how many more scoops are in there; ask the candy man; and many more. Which path through **J** is the best or optimal one? My own intuition is that the optimal path through **J** here is to ask the candy man; the other paths mentioned seem clearly worse.

²⁸If Bud posed all his questions to another person (an all-knowing one) rather than a device, would things be going better for him? I think there is a lot to say here. Briefly, it seems to me that there are broadly two forms of interpersonal inquiry: 'firsthand' and 'secondhand'. Firsthand interpersonal inquiry is inquiry about the person being asked, while secondhand interpersonal inquiry is not. Of course, this distinction in 'aboutness' is not hard and fast, but I think it helps capture what would be going wrong for Bud even if Buddy were a real boy (but also, what might be going better). Firsthand interpersonal inquiry has a kind of value that secondhand interpersonal inquiry need not have. Firsthand interpersonal inquiry is a way of directly interacting with the objects of your curiosity, and it is a way of learning about and connecting with another person. In secondhand interpersonal inquiry, we are largely at a distance from the things we are curious about, learning about them via another's say-so.

The game show is meant to dramatize a more general point. When you're on the game show, you have a very clear goal: get the answer to J. This is to say, the activity you are engaged in there is clearly telic, and the goal you are trying to achieve is clear as well. But once these things are the case, the norms of instrumental rationality seem to kick in. For instance, someone pursuing a goal g will be under normative pressure to pursue g efficiently, where 'efficiency' here is just a function of costs in time and effort. And someone pursuing g will be under normative pressure to take a reliable route to g .

Imagine a subject S pursuing a goal g (and say this is her only goal). S has a number of options for achieving g — different routes she can try to take or different strategies she can try to deploy to get to g . Take two of these: r_1 and r_2 . These routes are courses of action S will do in an effort to get to g . Let's say that both routes are equally likely to get S to g (and S knows this), but that r_1 is clearly (including to S herself) more efficient than r_2 . This is to say, S would spend much less time and effort getting to g via r_1 , than she would via r_2 . In this case, we'll expect S to take r_1 . All else equal, a rational subject won't take a more costly route when a clearly less costly one is available.

The same is true (*mutatis mutandis*) with respect to the reliability of our routes. Say that r_1 and r_2 are in fact equally efficient — each route will cost S the same in time and effort to do (and S knows this). But now say that r_1 is more reliable: S is more likely to make it to g if she takes r_1 than if she takes r_2 (maybe she is more likely to make a mistake on r_2 or encounter some roadblock; again, S knows all this). Again, in this case we'll expect S to take r_1 . All else equal, a rational subject won't take a more risky route when a clearly less risky one is available.

Of course, all else is often not equal. A subject might, in any given case, have good reason to pursue a goal less efficiently or less reliably — the scenic route is typically much more beautiful. My point is not that in every case, the overall best route to our goals is the most efficient and most reliable. My point is that these are *pro tanto* norms on goal pursuit. All things considered, they might be defeated or outweighed in a case, but they are basic normative constraints on subjects in pursuit of ends.

I take it this is an important part of the explanation for why you should ask the candy man J in on the game show. There is no other path through J that will cost you less in time and effort than that one, and no path through J that is more reliable than that either (the paths that involve counting, reasoning, and estimating are more likely to go wrong). Why would you waste more time and effort and risk not getting the answer (and the money), when you can just ask the candy man?

My point here is obviously not one about a jellybean counting game show. Plenty of inquiry is very clearly telic in the way your game show inquiry is: inquirers are pursuing clear epistemic goals, e.g. knowing the answer to some question. But from that perspective, and all else equal, more efficient paths are better and more reliable paths are better. But this generates at least a *prima facie* tension with what I've argued so far. Bud is taking highly (perhaps maximally) efficient and reliable paths through his inquiries. And so from this perspective his paths plausibly optimal. But I've argued that the paths Bud takes are not optimal in an important sense: his life goes worse by taking these paths. And it's not just Bud. The sorts of zetetic paths that contribute to our living well are not always going to be the most efficient or reliable. Looking for yourself, working something out — there is often a more reliable and efficient path available.

That some zetetic paths may be optimal in one sense and non-optimal in another is not incoherent. When we think about how to conduct our inquiries, there are plausibly many values we'll have to balance and respect, and tradeoffs might have to be made. Any complete theory of zetetic 'path norms' and 'path values' will have to say much more about how those tradeoffs should be made. That (large) task will have to wait for another occasion. Instead, I want to end by doing more to diagnose the tension here and show how deep it runs, but also point to a way forward.

Part of what's emerged in this discussion is that the activity of inquiring has both instrumental and non-instrumental value. In [Friedman \(2024\)](#), I argued that inquiring is not essentially telic. But it is clearly an activity we typically perform in order to procure some epistemic ends we want to procure: knowledge, truth, understanding, certainty. Moreover, these ends are genuinely valuable, so inquiry is not just useful for getting things we want, but conducive to acquiring things of genuine value. This has some normative implications for which paths through our inquiries are better and worse (and which we should and should not take).

But I've also argued that some ways of inquiring are (also) non-instrumentally valuable. And this too seems to have normative implications. From this non-instrumental perspective, some paths through an inquiry are better than others. While this is a different perspective from which to catch sight of zetetic path values, it is not impossible that these values harmonize with those we get by looking at inquiry through a more instrumental lens. Instrumental rationality presses us to take the best means to our ends, but if that 'best' means were just whichever was most conducive to our flourishing, then these two value perspectives would be largely aligned.

But the picture that's emerging so far is not that harmonious one. The instrumental perspective puts normative pressure on inquirers to conduct

their inquiries efficiently and reliably, but the non-instrumental perspective presses us to investigate in potentially less efficient, but more engaged ways. Again, this isn't to say that there aren't ways we might balance these, but it is to say that they are, at least at first glance, tugging us in different directions.

There is much more to say here, of course. But, if inquiry is non-instrumentally valuable in the ways I've argued, then this does shift the normative landscape in an important way, I think. If inquiring were merely instrumentally valuable, if the activity itself had no value, but just its telos did, then the pressures to inquire in ways that get us to the valuable end with the least time and effort seem to me great. On this picture, the activity is not valuable, but a mere means, and so we should get it over with. The opportunity costs of inquiring on a view like this are huge. There is certainly something better one could be doing, and, in a way, time spent on the activity is time wasted. Of course, you might enjoy the activity and want to extend it for that reason, but this can feel like something of a frivolity on this picture.

When the activity is valuable in the way I've said, the normative calculus seems to me very different.²⁹ For one thing, while the value of the activities you don't do while you're inquiring remains the same, in a crucial sense the cost of not doing them is less since the activity you are performing is genuinely valuable, unlike on the previous picture. So while in one sense the opportunity costs are the same, in another they are lower, potentially much lower. From this perspective, the normative pressure to wrap things up is diminished. Moreover, given what I've argued here, inquiring in some of the potentially less efficient ways is very far from frivolous. Failing to inquire in those ways doesn't just mean that we miss out on the value of figuring something out for ourselves (which is indeed valuable), but that we fail to engage some of our basic human faculties: we fail to think or reason, we fail to actually examine the world outside of ourselves, we fail to engage meaningfully with other people. These sorts of activities could hardly be less frivolous.³⁰

²⁹It's also worth saying — though I won't explore it further here — that the two normative perspectives on inquiry (the instrumental and the non-instrumental) emerged at different time scales. In thinking about the non-instrumental value of inquiry, we zoomed out and took a 'whole-life' perspective, rather than the one-off, somewhat momentary perspective of a single inquiry. This too seems to me to be relevant to the ultimate normative calculus here.

³⁰Thanks to Daniela Dover and Bar Luzon for commenting on drafts of this paper. And thanks to audiences at Jean Nicod, the University of Zürich, and the Chapel Hill Normativity Workshop for discussions of some of this material.

References

- Awh, E., Belopolsky, A. V., and Theeuwes, J. 2012. Top-down versus bottom-up attentional control: a failed theoretical dichotomy. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 16(8):437–443.
- Baril, A. 2010. A Eudaimonist Approach to the Problem of Significance. *Acta Analytica*, 25(2):215–241.
- Crowther, T. 2009a. Perceptual Activity and the Will. In O’Brien, L. and Soteriou, M., editors, *Mental Actions*, pages 173–191. Oxford University Press.
- Crowther, T. H. 2009b. Watching, Sight, and the Temporal Shape of Perceptual Activity. *The Philosophical Review*, 118(1):1–27.
- Dover, D. 2022. The Conversational Self. *Mind*, 131(521):193–230.
- Dover, D. 2024. Two Kinds of Curiosity. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 108(3):811–832.
- Finnis, J. 2011. *Natural Law and Natural Rights*. Clarendon Law Series. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2nd edition.
- Fletcher, G. 2016. Objective List Theories. In Fletcher, G., editor, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, pages 148–160. Routledge, New York.
- Friedman, J. 2019. Inquiry and Belief. *Noûs*, 53(2):296–315.
- Friedman, J. 2024. The Aim of Inquiry? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 108(2):506–523.
- Friedman, J. 2026. The Interrogative Structure of Inquiry. Manuscript.
- Gruber, M. J., Gelman, B. D., and Ranganath, C. 2014. States of Curiosity Modulate Hippocampus-Dependent Learning via the Dopaminergic Circuit. *Neuron*, 84(2):486–496.
- Hazlett, A. 2016. Epistemic Goods. In Fletcher, G., editor, *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, pages 148–160. Routledge, New York.
- Hieronymi, P. 2008. Responsibility for Believing. *Synthese*, 161(3):357–373.
- Hieronymi, P. 2009. Two Kinds of Agency. In O’Brien, L. and Soteriou, M., editors, *Mental Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hieronymi, P. 2013. The Use of Reasons in Thought (and the Use of Ear-marks in Arguments). *Ethics*, 124(1):114–127.
- Hills, A. 2009. Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology. *Ethics*, 120(1):94–127.
- Hintikka, J. 1999. *Inquiry as Inquiry: A Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Hooker, B. 2015. The Elements of Well-Being. *Journal of Practical Ethics*, 3(1).
- Kang, M. J., Hsu, M., Krajbich, I. M., Loewenstein, G., McClure, S. M., Wang, J. T., and Camerer, C. F. 2009. The wick in the candle of learning: Epistemic curiosity activates reward circuitry and enhances memory. *Psychological Science*, 20(8):963–973.
- Kelly, T. 2003. Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66(3):612–640.
- Koralus, P. 2014a. Attention, Consciousness, and the Semantics of Questions. *Synthese*, 191(2):187–211.
- Koralus, P. 2014b. The Erotetic Theory of Attention: Questions, Focus and Distraction. *Mind and Language*, 29(1):26–50.
- Korsgaard, C. M. 1983. Two Distinctions in Goodness. *The Philosophical Review*, 92(2):169–195.
- Kraut, R. 2006. The Examined Life. In Ahbel-Rappe, S. and Kamtekar, R., editors, *A Companion to Socrates*, pages 228–242. Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Malden, MA.
- Lessing, G. E. 2005. *Philosophical and Theological Writings*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Matheson, J. and DiPaolo, J. 2025. Navigating Inquiry. In Creller, A. B. and Matheson, J., editors, *Inquiry: Philosophical Perspectives*. Routledge, New York, NY.
- McHugh, C. 2011. Judging as a Non-Voluntary Action. *Philosophical Studies*, 152(2):245–269.
- McHugh, C. and Way, J. 2018. What is Reasoning? *Mind*, 127(505):167–196.

- Mitova, V. 2021. A new argument for the non-instrumental value of truth. *Erkenntnis*, 88(5):1911–1933.
- Nguyen, C. T. 2019. Games and the Art of Agency. *The Philosophical Review*, 128(4):423–462.
- Noë, A. 2004. *Action in Perception*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Oza, M. 2020. The Value of Thinking and the Normativity of Logic. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 20(25):1–23.
- Paulson, S. 2023. Epistemic Normativity & Epistemic Autonomy: The True Belief Machine. *Philosophical Studies*, 180(8):2415–2433.
- Rinard, S. 2019. Equal Treatment for Belief. *Philosophical Studies*, 176(7):1923–1950.
- Scanlon, T. 2007. Structural Irrationality. In Brennan, G., Goodin, R., Jackson, F., and Smith, M., editors, *Common Minds: Essays in Honor of Philip Pettit*, pages 84–103. Oxford University Press.
- Silverstein, M. 2025. The Aim of Practical Reasoning. *Ethics*, 136(1):121–146.
- Vazard, J. forthcoming. Inquiry beyond curiosity: Interest and the value of attending. *The Philosophical Quarterly*.
- Velleman, J. D. 2009. *How We Get Along*. Cambridge University Press.
- Watzl, S. 2017. *Structuring Mind: The Nature of Attention and How It Shapes Consciousness*. Oxford University Press.