

## Jane Friedman, “The aim of inquiry?” (2024)

*Epistemology Reading Group (Nov. 17, 2025)*

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### 1. Introduction

The *Specific Question*: What is the aim of inquiry?

Several candidates: knowledge, true belief, reasonable belief, understanding, etc.

The *General Question*: What does it mean to say that inquiry has an aim?

Focus of the paper: Two types of non-normative answers to GQ:

1. *Structural*: the claim that inquiry has an aim is a claim about inquiry itself – inquiry has a teleological structure.
2. *Personal*: the claim is about the aims or goals of inquirers.

Neither is satisfactory. A personal answer to the GQ fares better but doesn't align well with the standing debate over the SQ.

A **quietistic attitude** towards ‘the aim of inquiry’ is appropriate:

“To adopt this sort of quietism is not to deny that inquirers are typically trying to get new knowledge or improve their epistemic standings. [...] 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  $\alpha$  (whatever the  $\alpha$ ).” (pp. 507-508)

Friedman moves toward a **question-oriented framework** for understanding the structure of inquiry and the motivation of inquirers.

### 2. The *General Question*: (two) structural answers

They give insight into how to conceive of practices as having a teleological structure. But neither of them accurately describes the structure of inquiry!

#### 1. Constitutive aims and the games analogy

(A) The aim of inquiry (and other practices: belief, assertion, and action generally) is a **constitutive aim**: it's a **necessary** feature of the practice.

(B) We can understand what it means having a constitutive aim by way of an **analogy with games**, in two ways: (i) via some structural properties of games, and (ii) via some necessary conditions for being a player of a game.

- i. What's the point of the card game War? To get all the cards. The "point" of the game is plausibly essential to the game and can be thought of as its aim.

This way of understanding the analogy is NOT helpful for understanding the structure of inquiry: games are human artifacts, intentionally constructed and designed practices.

Inquiring is a natural phenomenon; it is not a human construction or invention. (p. 509)

- ii. In thinking about the aim of game, we should look to the personal goals:

"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." Katsafanas 2018, p. 368

Any genuine player of game  $g$  with constitutive aim  $\alpha$  has  $\alpha$  as their own personal aim. This seems false: if competitive games have winning as a constitutive aim, then playing those games non-competitively is impossible or conceptually incoherent.

## 2. Language: aspect and telicity

Discussions of the aspectual properties of verbal predicates bring out a way in which some activities are essentially teleologically structured.

**Vendler** (1957) proposes four types of verbal predicates: state VPs, activity VPs, accomplishment VPs, and achievements VPs.

Activities are open-ended processes, doings, or happenings that unfold over some period of time with no obvious endpoints: 'run', 'push a cart', 'celebrate' – **atelic** VPs.

VS. Accomplishment are also activities in the ordinary sense, but they have endpoints built in it: 'run a mile', 'paint a picture', 'pick two oranges' – **telic** VPs.

Achievements are happenings, but they mark just the very end of some process – they are entirely endpoint: 'win', 'reach the top', 'recognize.'

**Vendler's linguistic tests** for telicity (pp. 513-514) indicate that 'inquire' is **atelic**: it picks out an open-ended activity and not a telos-having accomplishment.

My activity of running a mile has a terminus that's out of my hands: 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 (p. 514).

Inquiry does NOT have this teleological structure: even if inquiry has a telos and a sort of directionality towards a terminus, reaching that terminus does not guarantee the end of inquiry.

Example: Assume knowledge is inquiry's terminus. I'm investigating why my computer won't charge. The reason is that there's a software bug that is preventing charging and I know about this bug and what it does. But imagine I don't know or realize I know this or that I think absolute certainty is the relevant terminus. So, I keep investigating.

If inquiring were like running a mile, then my knowing the software bug would make continued investigation impossible. My continued inquiring would have to amount to my inquiring into something else or not count as inquiring at all. This does not seem right.

### **3. Personal aims and the *Specific Question***

While it is difficult to make sense of exactly what it means to say that inquiry itself has an aim, it is not so difficult to make sense of the claim that inquirers have aims.

Inquiring is an intentional action. All intentional action is teleological or goal-directed or is done with some aim. Inquiring seems necessarily intentional (no accidental inquiry) (p. 516).

*Personalized* version of SQ: what goals do all inquirers qua inquirers have?

Inquirers are trying to acquire mental states or attitudes: knowledge, true belief, justified belief, settled opinion, understanding, certainty and so on.

Are inquirers' necessarily trying to acquire new attitudes?

It seems not. When I'm trying to win at tennis or chess, I don't need to have acquisitive ends or goals – what I'm trying to do is win.

“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.” (p. 518)

Case of DNA discovery: It simply doesn't matter 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.

Watson and Crick were thinking about DNA, not knowledge or belief or understanding. The activity they were engaged in was world-directed in an important sense.

#### **4. Beyond the aim of inquiry**

Rather than beginning at the very end of inquiry and focusing on how that endpoint casts its shadow back over the activity, Friedman proposes to focus on the activity and its participants directly — on the *aiming* rather than what is aimed at. Starting by taking seriously inquiry's close relationship to questions and questioning. (p. 520)

All inquirers qua inquirers have particular kinds of **question-directed attitudes**, like curiosity and wondering, which motivate and guide inquiry.

**Jaakko Hintikka** (1981, 1988): scientific inquiry should be conceived of as a series of 'questions put to nature.'

Notion of **question-asking** that goes beyond the illocutionary: in asking questions we try to remake our informational environments in ways that align with 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 resemble illocutionary asking in epistemically important ways.

**Conclusion:** We have a better chance of understanding inquiry – its structure, norms and the mental lives of its participants – if we stop worrying about 'the aim of inquiry'.

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.