

WHAT IS INTERESTING?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I consider what it is that makes certain topics or questions epistemically interesting. Getting clear about this issue, I argue, is not only interesting in its own right, but also helps to shed light on increasingly important and perplexing questions in the epistemological literature: e.g., questions concerning how to think about 'the epistemic point of view,' as well as questions concerning what is most worthy of our intellectual attention and why.

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Finding out the truth with respect to certain topics clearly seems to matter more than finding out the truth with respect to other topics – at least, when we consider things from 'a practical point of view.' Thus finding out the truth with respect to whether North Korea has nuclear weapons clearly seems to matter more, from a practical point of view, than finding out the truth with respect to how many grains of sand are in some random patch of the Sahara. Or again, finding out whether human beings are contributing to global warming clearly seems more significant, from a practical point of view, than finding out how many times the word 'the' appears throughout this paper.

Does the same hold, however, when we look at things not from a practical point of view but rather from a 'purely epistemic point of view?'¹ That is, does it again seem that finding out the truth with respect to certain subjects matters more than others? It would appear so. Take the question about the grains of sand again, and compare it to the sorts of 'pure' scientific questions that are being pursued by the researchers at CERN in Switzerland: for instance, the question of whether corresponding particles of dark matter exist for every known particle of matter. By most lights, finding out whether this thesis about dark matter is true would seem to be of vastly greater epistemic or intellectual importance than finding out the truth about the sand, even if no practical benefit were to emerge from either true

¹ At this point in the paper I am assuming for the sake of argument that a clear distinction between the 'epistemic point of view' and the 'practical point of view' can be maintained, or at least that there is some important difference between the 'points of view' appealed to here. One point that will emerge later on is that this distinction is not as viable as many have supposed.

belief.² Indeed, it is tempting to think that finding out the truth about the grains of sand is not only vastly less important but that it matters not at all – again, at least if we are considering things from an epistemic point of view.

But what is it that accounts for the greater epistemic interest or importance of some topics over others – of the topics addressed at CERN, for instance, as opposed to topics concerning the grains of sand? What is it, in other words, that makes the one sort of topic more epistemically interesting or important than the other?

These questions seem worth asking for a number of reasons. For one thing, and self-reflexively, they seem worthwhile in their own right: figuring out what is interesting or important, from an epistemic point of view, itself seems interesting or important, from an epistemic point of view. For another, the questions seem relevant to the disputed issue of what it even means to evaluate beliefs ‘from an epistemic point of view’ (an issue I will return to in the following section).

But the questions also seem worth asking because of their relevance to wider issues concerning what is worthy of our intellectual attention and why.³ Notice, for instance, that when as professors we try to stimulate a love of our subjects in our students (a love of philosophy, or of history, or of physics), it looks like what we are doing is trying to get our students to appreciate what it is that is interesting or even fascinating about these subjects. The idea is therefore not that these subjects are worth studying only because of their relationship to other goods – of acquiring a job, perhaps, or of impressing people at cocktail parties. Rather, the idea is that these subjects are interesting or important ‘in their own right’ – jobs and cocktail parties aside.

I take it that it would therefore be good to be able to articulate just what it is about certain subjects that makes them interesting or important in this way, and I will try to take a first step in that direction in this paper. Although I will try to

² For some advocates of this claim see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 100; Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 199-203; Michael DePaul, “Value Monism in Epistemology,” in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty*, ed. Matthias Steup (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 173; Philip Kitcher, “Veritistic Value and the Project of Social Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 191; Michael Bishop and J. D. Trout, *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment* (New York: Oxford, 2005) 93; and Robert Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: an Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 2.

³ As Dennis Whitcomb, “Curiosity was Framed,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), and “The Problem of Epistemic Significance” (Manuscript); and Roy Sorenson, “Interestingly Dull Numbers,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming), note, these issues are especially significant for universities and governments trying to decide how to allocate scarce resources.

make the case that ‘interestingness’ is an objective property of certain topics or questions, towards the end of the paper I will also note some of the ways in which interestingness seems to be subjective or person-relative.

I. Alston and Goldman

I suggested a moment ago that this set of issues was relevant to the question of what it means to evaluate beliefs from an epistemic point of view. Exploring this connection further should help to highlight its relevance to contemporary controversies in epistemology, as well as to distinguish our questions from a few different ones in the neighborhood.

What does it mean, then, to evaluate a belief from an epistemic point of view? One natural response here, and the one influentially endorsed by both William Alston and Alvin Goldman, is that to evaluate a belief from an epistemic point of view (or, more briefly, just to evaluate it ‘epistemically’) is to evaluate the belief from the point of view of our epistemic goals and concerns.⁴ Consider for instance the belief of the hospital patient who manages to convince himself, in the teeth of the evidence, that he will recover from his illness. Although this belief might well earn high marks from a practical or prudential point of view (the belief might, for example, help to keep his spirits up in his final days), since it goes against his evidence it will presumably not score well from an epistemic point of view, where it is only our epistemic goals and concerns that matter.

But while this line of thinking is obviously appealing, it naturally invites us to ask just what our epistemic goals and concerns are, exactly, and this is a question that is harder to answer than it might first appear.⁵ Thus while it might seem that the primary thing that matters to us from an epistemic point of view is simply to acquire the truth – that is, to acquire the truth with respect to any and every topic – Alston and Goldman are both quick to argue that this cannot be quite right, because there are countless topics, what we might think of as ‘trivial’ topics, that do not seem worth caring about at all, from a purely epistemic point of view. Thus as Alston notes, if acquiring the truth were all that mattered, then it looks like it would be at least *prima facie* worthwhile, from an epistemic point of

⁴ See, for example, William Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” in his *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 83-84; and Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 3.

⁵ Again, later in the paper I will raise further doubts about whether a distinction between the ‘practical’ points of view, as opposed to the ‘epistemic’ point of view, can really be sustained.

view, to spend our time memorizing phone books – which he takes to be absurd.⁶ And Goldman too offers a long list of topics that seem to be altogether lacking in epistemic significance.⁷ Given that our interest in acquiring the truth does not seem unrestricted, both therefore agree that (in Goldman’s words), “We can no longer suggest that higher degrees of truth possession are all that count in matters of inquiry.”⁸ Instead, both claim that what matters from an epistemic point of view is not just finding out the truth with respect to just any topic but rather finding the truth with respect to “topics of interest or importance to us.”⁹ Once our epistemic goals and concerns are relativized in this way – to topics of interest or importance to us – it might then seem that we have a principled way of ruling out the phone book truths (and the like) from the list of our epistemic goals and concerns, and ruling in the things that really are of interest or importance to us.¹⁰

But something about this refinement is not quite right; more exactly, it looks like the concern about trivial truths that Alston and Goldman were trying to sidestep has not really been sidestepped at all. After all, acquiring the truth with respect to even the most trivial of topics might well be *of* interest or *of* importance to me. Thus finding out the truth with respect to the 323rd number in the Wichita, KS phone directory¹¹ might well be *of* interest or *of* importance to me – most likely, if I wanted to phone that person up, or perhaps if I were a fact checker for the phone book. Closer to home, virtually all of the topics that occupy my mind throughout the day (sans pure daydreaming, perhaps) are presumably *of* interest or *of* importance to me, even though it would be bizarre to call finding out the truth with respect to most of these topics something I care about from a ‘purely epistemic point of view.’ Thus finding out the truth with respect to topics like

⁶ William Alston, *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 32.

⁷ Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, 88; see also Alvin Goldman, “The Unity of the Epistemic Virtues,” in his *Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 61.

⁸ Goldman, *Pathways to Knowledge*, 61; cf. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, 89.

⁹ Alston’s words; Goldman just says “matters of interest.” It is also worth noting that Alston’s way of putting things here (*Beyond Justification*) represents something of a change from his earlier essay “Concepts of Epistemic Justification.” There he characterizes the epistemic goal in terms of “maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs,” 83-84, and does not relativize this goal to topics of interest or importance.

¹⁰ For more on restricted vs. unrestricted truth goals, see Stephen Grimm, “Epistemic Goals and Epistemic Values,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77 (2008): 725-744; and Stephen Grimm, “Epistemic Normativity,” in *Epistemic Value*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Allan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹ An example from Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, 88.

whether my train to work is delayed or on time, or where my dentist's office is located, or what is on sale at the super market, etc., are all (at a given time) clearly of interest or importance to me, but the interest or importance of these topics would seem to be wholly practical. It should be clear, indeed, that finding out the truth with respect to virtually any topic might come to be of interest or of importance to me, provided I had the right incentive.¹²

It seems that what Alston and Goldman need, then, in their characterization of our purely epistemic goals and concerns, is a notion along the following lines: perhaps, of topics that are not just of interest or importance to us in any old way, but rather that are of interest or importance to us, from a purely epistemic point of view; alternatively, what they need is a notion of topics that are simply interesting, given that when we call a topic interesting we already seem to have an epistemic focus in mind.¹³ As far as I can tell, however, Alston and Goldman nowhere offer an account of what such a notion might look like, so as things stand their analysis of the 'epistemic point of view' is significantly incomplete.

A few further distinctions are worth bearing in mind, as we try to zero in on our topic. First, it seems entirely possible to acknowledge that some topic is interesting, and yet not be particularly interested in it. For one thing, there might be so many draws on our time that we simply can't focus our interest – our attention or mindpower – on the interesting thing. More significantly, there might also be occasions where we find a topic interesting and yet 'lose interest' in the topic, not because we come to think that we are mistaken about its 'interestingness,' but rather because we come to think that we don't have the ability to grasp or comprehend the truth about the topic. The fact that Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* was on *The New York Times* best sellers list for several years, for instance, suggests that most people found the main topic of the book – roughly,

¹² Even memorizing a phone book might be of interest or of importance to me, if some maniac were threatening my life unless I got the numbers right.

¹³ Michael Brady argues, relatedly, that what we need is a notion of "interesting truths" (rather than interesting questions) to make sense of the notion of our "epistemic aims or goals" (Michael Brady, "Curiosity and the Value of Truth," in *Epistemic Value*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Allan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 281-82). And Marian David claims that our interest in the truth is most plausibly restricted to "important and interesting propositions" (Marian David, "Truth as the Primary Epistemic Goal: a Working Hypothesis," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, eds. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 299). For further appeals to the notion of interesting truths, see Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues*, 157-59; and Jason Baehr, "Credit Theories and the Value of Knowledge," *Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

cosmology – extraordinarily interesting.¹⁴ But from anecdotal evidence at least it seems clear that after reading a few pages most people put the book down in disappointment. Why? Not because, I submit, they came to think that the topic was uninteresting, but rather because they came to think that they did not have the cognitive wherewithal to tackle it.

A second point is that even though several philosophers have recently attempted to explain the notion of the epistemically interesting or important in terms of the notion of curiosity, this seems like a mistake.¹⁵ For while it is true that we sometimes gesture towards the intrinsic epistemic interest of a topic by saying that we are ‘just curious’ about it, there are many topics that we are ‘just curious’ about which nonetheless do not seem, on the face of it, to be interesting. Suppose you hear a familiar song, but you can’t for the life of you remember who sang it. You might then be intensely curious about this topic – you might then, indeed, drop everything to try to figure it out – but it would seem like a mistake to call the question of who sang a certain song an interesting one. Oftentimes, when we are ‘just curious’ about a certain topic, this is simply because we are sensitive to a gap in our information about the topic.¹⁶ But not all of the topics that fall within those gaps are interesting ones.

As we begin, then, we need to keep in mind not just that a topic (the location of my dentist’s office, say) might be *of* interest to us and yet we might not

¹⁴ This nice example is from Michael Brady, “Curiosity and Intellectual Virtue,” (manuscript).

¹⁵ See especially Whitcomb, “Curiosity was Framed,” and “The Problem of Epistemic Significance.” For other attempts to explain the notion of epistemic importance by appeal to curiosity, see Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*; Gilbert Harman, *Change in View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); Philip Kitcher, *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Nenad Miscevic, “Virtue-Based Epistemology and the Centrality of Truth: Towards a Strong Virtue Epistemology,” *Acta Analytica* 22 (2007). For insightful criticism of this move, see Brady, “Curiosity and the Value of Truth,” and “Curiosity and Intellectual Virtue.” Thanks to Dennis Whitcomb for drawing some of these sources to my attention.

¹⁶ For an early advocate of the ‘gap’ model of curiosity, see William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 429, and for a more recent, detailed defense George Loewenstein, “The Psychology of Curiosity: a Review and Reinterpretation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116 (1994). In response, some psychologists – e.g. J. A. Litman, “Curiosity and the Pleasures of Learning: Wanting and Liking New Information,” *Cognition and Emotion* 19 (2005), and J. A. Litman and Paul Silvia, “The Latent Structure of Trait Curiosity: Evidence for Interest and Deprivation Curiosity Dimensions,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 86 (2006) – have suggested that there are really two distinct kinds of curiosity: curiosity as a feeling of interest, and curiosity as a feeling of deprivation. If this is right, then it would be curiosity as a feeling of interest (or as a response to the interesting) that we are trying to track here.

take it to be interesting, but also that we might take a topic to be interesting, and yet (in some sense) not be particularly interested in it, perhaps because we think we lack the ability to grasp the truth about the topic. In both of these cases, however, there seems to be some underlying sense of topics that ‘are interesting in their own right,’ or perhaps, of topics that are worthy of our interest, from an epistemic point of view. That is what I would like to focus on here.

II. The strategy

So where should we begin? Since there is very little literature on this topic, the answer to this question is not entirely clear, but I think any account of the interesting should at least try to respect our judgments about the following cases:

Uninteresting	Interesting
location of my dentist’s office	fundamental scientific laws
number of grains of sand in a random patch of the Sahara	the existence of God
323 rd number in Wichita, KS phone directory	[?]
number of redheads in Beiseker, Alberta ¹⁷	

Topics on the left-hand side seem easy to multiply; I have just taken a few of the examples we have discussed so far and added a new one (from Thomas Hurka) to fill things out. For the right-hand side, it seems best to err on the conservative side, at least to begin with, and suppose that if any topics count as interesting surely topics having to do with the basic laws of science, or with whether God exists, should do so.

With these judgments in mind, one way to try to illuminate our notion of the interesting, and the strategy that I shall adopt in what follows, will be to try to identify what look like certain basic topics (or, perhaps better, questions) of epistemic interest, relative to which the items on the right could then be seen as

¹⁷ From Thomas Hurka: “Plainly some beliefs are more worth having than others. It is better to know a fundamental law of the universe than the number of redheads in Beiseker, Alberta, or the workings of a friend’s personality than the exact length of his forearm. On the most attractive view, the value of someone’s knowledge depends on two factors: how many truths she knows, and their quality or importance” Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 100.

instances – that is, basic topics that seem to underlie our interest in the topics that plausibly belong on the ‘interesting’ side of our ledger.

But which topics are plausibly of ‘basic’ epistemic interest? In the following sections I will make the case that three topics (or questions) underlie a great many – perhaps even all – of the topics that we take to be of basic epistemic interest. Namely:

What is there?

How does it work?

How did it get to be that way?¹⁸

After considering these questions in more detail in Sections 3-5, one issue will be whether this exhausts the list of basic topics of epistemic interest. Another will be whether these questions are all equally basic,¹⁹ or whether instead one most basic question explains the interest of the others. Although this last result would perhaps be particularly satisfying, at the outset we should be open to the possibility that there are simply a plurality of basic questions that are interesting in their own right.

3. Question #1: What is there?

At first glance, the basic epistemic interest of the “What is there?” question seems uncontroversial. What are the far reaches of the universe like, exactly? And what are its fundamental parts? Even if we could not clearly identify a practical benefit that came from exploring the universe’s limits, or from discovering its basic building blocks, it would still seem to be worth doing; it would still be interesting to find out what kind of world we lived in. This is an interest, moreover, that seems to be reflected in Aristotle’s famous claim at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* that we take a natural pleasure in looking around us – in seeing how things are, or in finding out what our world is like.

But even though the “What is there?” question might seem to be as good of a candidate for a basic topic of epistemic interest as one might find, it immediately invites the worry that it gets our list from a moment ago all wrong. After all, whether there are so-and-so many grains of sand in a certain patch of the Sahara is

¹⁸ Thanks to Karen Snetselaar for pointing me in the direction of these questions. She claims to have found them on the website of the Anthropology Department at Berkeley, as part of a description of the scientific method. I have not been able to find mention of them on the department’s current site, however.

¹⁹ Or, alternatively, whether they are in fact basic, if one is not happy with the idea of things being more or less basic.

presumably a question about what there is in the universe (or this patch of it). And similarly for questions about the number of redheads in Beiseker, Alberta, and so on. Should we suppose, then, that questions about the sand and the redheads really are interesting after all?²⁰ Or should we instead suppose that the “What is there?” question is not, in fact, a question of basic epistemic interest?

I think that the right answer lies between these two extremes, and that the way to see this is to notice that the “What is there?” question that plausibly drives people like the researchers at CERN is in fact more specific than its surface form might suggest. More exactly, I think that the interest fueling the “What is there?” question is best thought of not as an interest in cataloging every detail of the world but rather in figuring out what kinds of things there are in the world, or the sort of stuff that makes it up. If it is appropriate to think of the world as a beast, then what we have an intrinsic interest in doing, it seems, is identifying its joints – in accurately distinguishing, say, the various elementary particles from one another, or the various chemical elements, or the various biological species.²¹

How does this way of understanding the basic epistemic interest of the “What is there?” question help? By my lights, because it suggests that the reason why we think that finding out the truth about topics like the grains of sand in some random patch of the Sahara is not interesting is because we think there is no joint of nature there – there is no kind of thing ‘this patch of the Sahara,’ so we are not interested in the properties of this non-thing (such as how many grains comprise it). And the same thing, I think, holds for the redheads in Beiseker and

²⁰ Though perhaps just of such modest epistemic interest or importance that their interest typically gets swamped in favor of topics of greater interest and importance. This seems to be the line taken by Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and “Pointless Truth,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 32. Also Michael Lynch, *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), chap. 4, and “Values of Truth and Truth of Values,” in *Epistemic Value*, 227.

²¹ Indeed, understood in this way I think we get at a question that drives not just scientific inquiry but metaphysical inquiry as well. What both sorts of inquirers are interested in finding out, in their different ways, is what kinds of things constitute the world, or what it is made up of. Compare Ted Sider: “The goal of inquiry is having one’s belief state accurately reflect the world, which in addition to lack of error and lack of triviality requires one to think of the world in its terms. The ideal inquirer must therefore carve the world at its joints, otherwise her beliefs do not adequately conform the world,” (Ted Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*, manuscript, 50). Sider’s claim here assumes realism about structure rather than argues for it (52). Although I think this is a legitimate assumption, it is clear that anti-realists will want to get off the boat at this point (or perhaps, with respect to at least some of these joints, such as the biological joints, rather than others).

even more obviously for things like the 323rd number in the Wichita phone book. Since there is no joint of nature there, these topics do not inherent any interest from our interest in the “What is there?” question, given that this question is more accurately understood as an interest in the “What kinds of things are there?”

Further support for this way of thinking about the “What is there?” question can also be found by reflecting on some of the things that human beings as a matter of fact find particularly interesting, even particularly fascinating, in the world around them. Think, for example, of things like fireflies, or water bugs, or polar bears. One of the things that makes these creatures so fascinating, I suggest, is the way that they confound or blur the joints that we take the world to have. Thus fireflies for instance have a property – crudely, the ability to light up²² – that at least for many people animate things not only do not have but (in some sense) cannot or perhaps even should not have.²³ Similarly, water bugs do things that commonsensically look to be impossible for animate things – namely, glide across the surface of the water – and polar bears do something we think should be impossible for huge, ravenous, warm-blooded mammals – namely, survive in an environment where virtually all other animals would quickly die from exposure and lack of food.²⁴ On the view I am proposing here, the reason why these topics (or phenomena) stand out is because they seem to blur the joints that we commonsensically take nature to have; they seem to behave in a way that seems impossible for things that we are inclined to categorize alongside them. By hypothesis, then, since we are naturally interested in learning about the joints of nature – in the kinds of things there are in the world – we are even *more* interested in things which seem to violate these joints, or to blur them. Perhaps even: violations of these joints rivet our attention because of a nagging doubt that perhaps we have nature wrong.²⁵

²² Less crudely, bioluminescence.

²³ If however bioluminescence were as common as non-bioluminescence actually is, then fireflies would arguably lose their special interest, because they would not be seen as joint-blurbers. I return to this idea in Section 10.

²⁴ This also, I think, accounts for why people since have perennially found ‘monsters’ or ‘freakish’ things so interesting: the five legged horse, the elephant man, the bearded lady, etc. On the theory on offer here, the interest or fascination with these topics derives from the interest we have in carving up nature in the right way – in getting some grasp of what things can and cannot do.

²⁵ I would argue that this is also the deeper explanation for why we find novelty so interesting, as psychologists beginning with Daniel Berlyne, *Conflict, Arousal, and Curiosity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), have noted.

One final benefit of thinking of the “What is there?” question in this way is that it helps to shed light on the passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* mentioned earlier. Although many have cited this passage – and in particular the claim that “All men by nature desire to know” – to support the idea that we have a natural interest in knowing anything and everything about the world (including grains of sand truths, redhead truths, and so on), reading a bit further suggests that Aristotle had something more specific in mind:

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. *The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things.*²⁶

The passage in italics is significant, because what it suggests is that on Aristotle’s view when we are looking at the world or taking it in, we are not just doing this in any random way: rather, what we are trying to do is to locate “the differences between things.” But what does it mean to locate the differences between things? Presumably, it means to mark out how one sort of thing differs from another – how they differ, for instance, in their properties, or in their causal powers. That is to say, it seems to be a search for joints (or perhaps, as I will suggest later, for structure).

In the following two sections I will now turn, though at less length, to the “How does it work?” and “How did it get to be that way?” questions, and begin to ask how (if at all) these three questions might be related.

IV. Question #2: How does it work?

Evidence for the basic interest in the “How does it work?” question seems easy to find. Young children, for instance, seem to have an instinctive interest in figuring out how things like zippers, buttons, or latches work – that is, in figuring out how the various elements of these things interact with one another. Zippers, buttons, and the like are thus working systems that naturally attract our interest, but our interest in figuring out how things work also seems to apply to much larger systems. Scientists for instance often speak of having a natural interest in figuring out how either the universe as a whole, or some particular part of it, works.²⁷

²⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I.

²⁷ See, for example, Richard Feynman, “The Pleasure of Finding Things Out,” in *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out*, ed. Jeffrey Robins (New York: Basic Books), 1999, and Sander Bais, *In Praise of Science: Curiosity, Understanding, and Progress* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010),

In all of these cases it would seem that when we are interested in how a system (large or small) works, the driving desire seems to consist in figuring out how the various elements of the system relate to, and depend upon, one another. One benefit of thinking in these terms, moreover, is that it helps to shed light on why the laws of science should be so universally regarded as interesting, for what these laws seem to tell us is precisely how different elements in the world are related. Thus a law such as Newton's $f=ma$ tells us how the world 'works' in the sense that it encodes information about how properties such as force, mass, and acceleration relate to, and depend upon, one another. That is, what a law of this sort encodes is information about how changes in the value of one of these parameters will lead (or fail to lead) to changes in the value of one of the other parameters, *ceteris paribus*. The basic interest of the "How does it work?" question therefore helps to explain why it is that we are so interested in identifying the fundamental laws of nature.

What's more, just as we suggested that the special interest of 'joint-blurbers' can be explained in terms of our more basic interest in getting the joints right, so too does the present understanding of the "How does it work?" question help to explain the special interest we have in phenomena that seem to violate our sense of how the world works. Why? Here again it is plausible to think that the violations attract our interest because of our concern that perhaps we do not have the relationships right; on this view, the 'interestingness' of the violations derives from our prior interest in identifying the relationships themselves.²⁸

chap. 1. Our natural interest in figuring out how things work, moreover, seems not just to apply to physical systems in the world (or in how the world as a whole works) but also to more abstract systems. Consider, for instance, the natural interest we often have in figuring out how a certain series of numbers "works" (e.g. 3, 8, 12, 42...). In this case, what we are interested in is identifying the rule that explains the series, or upon which the series depends. For more on this see Roy Sorenson, "Interestingly Dull Numbers," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).

²⁸ This view also helps to explain why certain topics that are apparently not interesting 'in themselves' might well become interesting when considered against the backdrop of our basic interest in identifying how the world works. Suppose, for instance, you were to tell me that the number of redheads in Beiseker is equal to the number of brunettes and blondes combined. Given that this violates the rule or pattern I have come to expect, I will naturally be interested in figuring out what it is that accounts for the difference. The important thing to note, however, is that the primary object of interest here is presumably the pattern (or its violation) rather the fact about the number of redheads in Beiseker considered in isolation. The fact that all sorts of things (topics, facts) might 'become interesting' when considered in light of a particular pattern should therefore not be confused with the thought that the things are interesting or worth learning about in themselves.

Although brief, these remarks about the “How does it work?” question also reveal ways in which it overlaps significantly with our earlier “What is there?” question. For instance, if the “What is there?” question is at bottom inspired by a desire to identify the joints of nature, then it might seem that among the joints of nature we will find precisely the sorts of dependency relations that codified in laws or law-like relationships. ‘Joints,’ on this broad understanding of the term, would not just be found at the boundary of one physical particle and another, or one biological species and another; rather, joints would also be found wherever we find relationships of nomological dependency.²⁹

Second, if we suppose that differences among kinds of things are due to differences in causal powers, then one compelling thought is that the reason why we are interested in carving nature at the joints is because of our even more basic interest in tracking the different causal powers that things have. If joints mark differences in causal powers (among other things), then our interest in joints could then be explained in terms of our interest in figuring out how the various parts of the world relate to one another – or perhaps better, in how they would relate to one another, were they to interact.

If this is right, then it would seem not just that there is a significant overlap between the “What is there?” and the “How does it work?” questions, but that the “How does it work?” question would have a fair claim to explanatory primacy. That is, a case can be made that the reason why we are interested in keeping track of joints is because we are interested in keeping track of differences in causal powers, and the reason we are interested in keeping track of differences in causal powers is because of our interest in grasping how the various parts of the world relate to one another (or would relate to one another, were they to interact). By contrast, taking the “What is there?” question as basic makes it a bit mysterious why we should be particularly interested in tracking joints in the first place, as opposed to counting grains of sand or redheads or what have you.

V. Question #3: “How did it get to be that way?”

We can turn now to our last candidate for a basic topic or question, the “How did it get to be that way?” question. The thought here is that with respect to almost any X, finding out ‘the story of X,’ or the causal history of X, is interesting to at least some extent: the story of the cotton gin, the story of the finches on Galapagos, the story of Rutherford B. Hayes, and so on. Again, even when nothing

²⁹ Looked at in this way, the search for joints could also be profitably taken to be a search for structure, where ‘structure’ perhaps better picks out the factors that mark the various parts of the world off from one another, but that also links them. For more on this, see the next footnote.

of practical importance seems to hang on finding out how things came to be a certain way, the topic seems to naturally spark our interest.

Of course one salient question here is whether this formula really holds for just any X, or even for most Xs (is the story of this saucer of mud really interesting? or the story of the unknown person next to you on the subway?), but rather than try to flesh out this question in more detail in this section I will mainly focus – even more briefly than before, in order to round out this part of the discussion – on asking how if at all the “How did it come to be that way?” question relates to our two previous questions.

Here again, I take there to be significant overlaps. For instance, when I am interested in how a person came to be a certain way, what I am presumably interested in is identifying the factors from the person’s past that helped to shape her: the overbearing father, the inspirational book, and so on. That is to say, what I am looking for are the factors in virtue of which she is the way she is, or the factors upon which her current character depends. But if that is right, then it would seem that in asking the “How did it get to be that way?” question I am once again interested in identifying dependencies – not dependencies that hold at the present moment, but rather dependencies that hold between the current character of a thing and some aspects of the past. If we think of ‘joints’ in the broad sense mentioned above, so that there are joints in nature wherever there are relationships of dependency, then one might think that our interest in joints that fuels the “What is there?” question applies to these cross-temporal dependencies as well.

Perhaps a more natural overlap can be found, however, between the “How does it work?” question and the “How did it get to be that way?” question. After all, in asking how something came to be a certain way, I seem again to be interested in identifying factors from the past that helped to shape its present state. Suppose, for example, it makes sense to think of a person such as Rutherford B. Hayes as a system stretching through time, a system with elements that depend upon one another across slices of time. In figuring out how the Hayes system ‘works,’ I would therefore be figuring out how the later slices of the system depend upon the earlier slices – that is to say, I would be figuring out how the later slices of the system “got to be that way.”

I realize that these remarks – here and in the previous two sections – about the three candidates for basic questions I originally proposed are quite broad-brush,³⁰ I think our discussion so far nonetheless points to a few significant

³⁰ I have, for example, claimed that in a broad sense ‘joints’ can be found not just between (say) different elementary particles but also wherever there are real dependency relations in the

conclusions. First, that what ties together the three basic questions we have considered so far is a common interest in dependence – in particular, an interest in figuring how the various elements of a system relate to, or depend upon, one another. Second, and perhaps more controversially, that this interest in dependencies seems to be best expressed, at its most basic level, in the “How does it work?” question. In other words, that we are not interested in identifying joints or structure in nature ‘for their own sakes,’ but rather because we are interested in grasping or figuring out how the variously elements of the world are structurally connected—that is, in grasping how they relate to, or depend upon, one another.

In the remainder of the paper, in any case, I will adopt these claims as working hypotheses and now turn to ask: Are there other good candidates for questions of basic epistemic interest that we have so far left out?

VI. Is That It?

In this section I will suggest that any list of questions of basic interest that stopped with our previous three questions would be essentially incomplete, for two reasons.

First, arguably the most interesting, the most fascinating, question has not yet been considered. This is the “How should I live?” question – the question that virtually every human being confronts at some point in their lives, and that Socrates for one took to be of greater interest than any other. Any account of the interesting that left this off the list would have very little to say for it, it seems to me.

Second, there are certain topics that are so universally regarded as interesting that we should try to make sense of them in some way. Here I have in mind topics involving the lives of others, and the rich and famous in particular. As George Loewenstein notes, it is a conspicuous fact about human beings that,

After one consumes a large restaurant meal, any additional food seems unappealing; however, even after a dinner companion has regaled us with the

world, both synchronically and diachronically. But it is not obvious that even a broad understanding of ‘joint’ is broad enough to cover all these roles. Indeed, perhaps it would be better here to speak not of ‘joints’ but of ‘structure.’ Sider, for one, seems to use these terms more or less interchangeably: “Discerning ‘structure’ means discerning patterns. It means figuring out the right categories for describing the world. It means ‘carving reality at its joints,’ to paraphrase Plato. It means inquiring into how the world fundamentally is, as opposed to how we ordinarily speak of or conceive of it as being” (Sider, *Writing the Book of the World*, 9).

If topics of this sort belong on the right, it would be good if we could explain why they belong on the right – what it is that makes these topics legitimately interesting. If they belong on the left, we should be able to explain why people are so systematically misguided about this: that is, why they take these topics to be so interesting when in fact they are not.

VII. The right

At the risk of glorifying *People* magazine, in this section I want to make a case that these topics do in fact belong on the right: that topics like the trials and triumphs of other people, and perhaps of the rich and famous in particular, deserve to be counted as interesting, and worthy of our attention.³⁴ Why? I want to say: because of how importantly they bear on the question of “How should I live?” which I mentioned a moment ago, and which seems to be an undeniably interesting topic. Let me explain.

Although presumably everyone wants to live well (or to flourish, or to be happy), it is not at all obvious how to live well, or what constitutes living well. Many people think, for example, that living well involves acquiring a great deal of money, or being famous, or enjoying sustained sensual pleasure. Others think that living well involves being virtuous, or exercising one’s highest abilities. And so on. Moreover, even after one comes to think that a particular sort of life is the best, it seems clear that the other lives still hold their appeal. Thus even the person who comes to think that (say) the moderate, virtuous life is the best will still (or so it seems) often be tempted by the lives of fame or power or sensual pleasure – and vice versa. Alternative lives often retain their attractiveness even when we think we know better.

With that in mind, I want to suggest that one reason why the rich and famous are so (legitimately) interesting is because they provide actual examples of people who have managed to achieve certain goods that virtually everyone finds attractive. And what we are plausibly interested in, when we consider their lives, is how the possession of these goods bears on their happiness. Does the money, for instance, lead to more misery than contentment? Does the fame interfere with their ability to form relationships, or to have a stable marriage, or well-adjusted children? The rich and famous are interesting, then, because they are something like experiments in living. Suppose one actually achieved these goods – what else would one have to give up? And is it worth it? These are questions that cannot be

³⁴ Notice that I am not saying that an obsession with celebrities is healthy, just an interest.

answered from the armchair, but which we can make some progress on learning about the lives of others.³⁵

Once one appreciates this point, moreover, it is clear that the rich and famous are not the only people who can shed light on what it takes to live well. Since presumably everyone is trying to live a good life, it is not surprising that we take a natural interest in how their lives are faring – in whether they seem happy or satisfied – because we ourselves have the same goal. Moreover, even once we have come to think that a certain life is best, since it is often not clear what that life requires of us from day to day we look to other people for examples: not just examples of successes, but examples of failures, of people who had the same goal that we did and yet were unable to realize it for one reason or another. By hypothesis, at least part of the reason why we find these stories of success and failure of such interest – at least part of the reason why we find them so interesting – is because they help to guide our own project of living well.³⁶

So (no surprise) other people are interesting, and especially their stories of success and failure. On the theory here, moreover, the reason why they are interesting is because they help to shed light on the basic question of how to live well.³⁷ We are now in a position, finally, to try to connect up these various thoughts about the nature of the interesting.

³⁵ Indeed, one reason why I think the divorces and rehab stints of celebrities is of more interest to us than their occasional long-lasting celebrity marriage is because they show in a dramatic way not only that these goods are not sufficient for happiness, but even that they interfere with it.

³⁶ Again, I emphasize the ‘at least part.’ For of course, our interest in the trials of the rich and famous might have other sources as well: e.g., it might be motivated by the perverse pleasure we feel in seeing others fail, and especially the powerful. In the usual case, I suspect our motives are mixed.

³⁷ As C. A. J. Coady notes: “Most people are curious to know the truth not just about the physical world or mathematics but also about the deeds and misdeeds of other people. Sometimes this curiosity has a functional point in orienting us towards the people with whom we are going to interact: this is the idea that social psychologists are getting at with their somewhat simplified talk of norm reinforcement and the like. But sometimes the satisfaction of the curiosity is simply fascinating in itself, even if it can also be useful. We are interactive social beings who spend a great deal of our lives in conversation, much of it about other people. News about their journey through life with its pitfalls and triumphs is intrinsically interesting to most people, and it is often even more interesting when we know or believe that we are not going to hear it from them.” (C. A. J. Coady, “Pathologies of Testimony,” in *The Epistemology of Testimony*, eds. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259.)

VIII. The bottom

Added together, we have now considered a few different kinds of topics, or questions, that are *prima facie* of basic interest. There were our original three:

What is there?

How does it work?

How did it come to be that way?

And to that list we added one more:

How should I live?

The first three topics or questions, I have suggested, are broadly motivated by an interest in how the world hangs together or ‘works’: in the sorts of causal powers things have, or in the various ways in which things depend upon, or relate to, one another. And the last question is something like an ethical or existential one, the timeless question of how we should live our lives.

It might be thought, moreover, that the final question bears no deep relationship to the other three; that maybe they are both ‘interesting’ in their own way, and that’s all that can be said. But there is a different story that one could tell about how these various topics are related, and one that seems to have a lot going for it: namely, a story on which our interest in these dependence relations is not intrinsic – not something we are interested in ‘for its own sake’ – but rather derives from our more basic practical interest in prediction and control. James Woodward puts this idea in the following way:

I suggest... that the distinguishing feature of causal explanations... is that they are explanations that furnish information that is potentially relevant to manipulation and control: they tell us how, if we were to change the value of one or more variables, we could change the value of the other variables.... [This] has the advantage of exhibiting an intuitively appealing underlying rationale or goal for explanation and the discovery of causal relationships: if these are relationships that are potentially exploitable for purposes of manipulation, there is no mystery about why we should care about them.³⁸

Woodward speaks here of “causal explanations,” but his point would seem to apply to explanations that appeal to dependence relations more broadly. After all, what causal explanation affords, if Woodward is right, is information about how the various parameters in question relate to, or depend upon, one another. But then this general thought scheme would seem to apply to relations of

³⁸ James Woodward, *Making Things Happen: a Theory of Causal Explanation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6-7.

dependence that go beyond what we normally think of as causal relations: e.g., mereological explanations, relations between the past and the present, and so on. In any case, if Woodward is right, then our interest in figuring out how the world hangs together or works in this way is again not intrinsic but arguably instrumental. That is, it is an interest that derives from our still more basic interest in predicting and possibly controlling how the around us world will unfold. And it is no mystery why we would want that: if we can predict and possibly control how the world will unfold then we can try to steer it in a way that promotes our well-being.

So how do these thoughts bear on the ‘interestingness’ of the question of how we should live? My proposal is as follows: what we are primarily interested in is figuring out how to live well – in figuring out what it takes to flourish, or what constitutes happiness. This is why we find the lives of others so interesting, because they help us to work out both what sort of life is the best or most fulfilling as well as what it takes to live out that life on a daily basis. But the crucial point to appreciate, and the point that helps to draw together all of the questions that we have considered so far, is that coming to a conclusion about what life is best is really only half the battle, for we still have to try to bring that life about. That is, we still have to take steps to make ourselves famous, or rich, or powerful (or what have you).³⁹ Yet notice that we can’t do any of this unless we know how the world works; that is, unless we know how to bring these conditions about. Put another way, we cannot take steps towards living well unless we know the sorts of effects our choices will have, or how the world will respond to our choices. The reason why topics having to do with how the world works are interesting, I submit, is because of their deep and essential connection to our interest in living well.

In short, to the question of why we find the affairs of other people so interesting, my answer is: because of the light they shed on living well. And to the question of why we find figuring out how the world works so interesting, I want to say: because coming to some conclusion about the best life to live is only half the battle. We still need to bring that life into existence, and that requires worldly know how. Finally, to the question of why we find “How should I live?” so interesting, my view is: we just do. The “How should I live?” question is the most

³⁹ It might be thought that one can take steps to make oneself more virtuous, say, without knowing much about the world, if one thinks that whether one is virtuous is primarily an internal affair (a disposition of the will, say). But even if that picture of virtue is accurate, one still needs to provide for the external conditions necessarily to remain alive, and that would require knowing how the world works.

interesting question on offer, and the one that on this account explains the interestingness of all the rest.

IX. Further issues

That is my attempt to illuminate the nature of the interesting. Essentially, topics are interesting because they bear some sort of special, or perhaps necessary, relationship to our well-being. In this section I will consider a few different objections to the account.

The first is that if this way of thinking about the interesting is on the right track, then it threatens to erase one of the most popular distinctions in the epistemological literature, and one which I myself appealed to right at the beginning of this article: namely, the distinction between what matters to us ‘from a purely epistemic point of view’ as against what matters to us ‘from a practical point of view.’ For if things matter to us from a practical point of view just in case they impact our well-being, and if it turns out the underlying reason why topics are of epistemic significance or interest to us – that is, are interesting to us – is because of their special relationship to our well-being, then it begins to look like our ‘purely epistemic interests’ will in fact be practical at heart.

Rather than think of this as an objection to the account, however, I would suggest instead that we take it as a kind of discovery or clarification. After all, and as we saw with Alston and Goldman, although appeals are often made to something like ‘our purely epistemic goals and concerns,’ the way this idea is typically developed leaves us with no good sense of what counts as one of our purely epistemic goals or concerns. Worse, given the way the notion of the ‘purely epistemic’ has been relativized to topics ‘of interest’ to us, it looks like things like finding out where my dentist’s office is located might count as one of my ‘purely epistemic concerns’ – again, not an appealing result.

That said, I do not want to claim that there is no way to preserve the distinction between things that matter from a purely epistemic point of view as opposed to from some other point of view (practical, moral, etc.) – indeed, in a moment I will explore one such suggestion. If the discussion so far has been accurate, however, then one conclusion I do want to draw is that such a distinction is more complicated than has often been supposed.

A second objection is that in many cases the connection between the ‘interestingness’ of a topic and our well-being seems implausibly remote; put another way, the objection is that a connection to our well-being is not a necessary condition on interestingness. Suppose for instance that my son comes to learn about solar eclipses in school, and wants to know everything about them; by

his lights, they simply could not be more interesting. But since it is implausible to suppose that his interest in eclipses derives from a desire to predict or control his environment in a way that favors his well-being, then it seems more straightforward to suppose his interest here is in some way basic or intrinsic, or in any case, not just of instrumental significance.

There are two ways one might respond to this concern. The first would be to say, again with Woodward, that even though the ‘interestingness’ of figuring out how the world works might originally have been fueled by a desire to predict and possibly control one’s immediate environment, it should come as no surprise that over time interestingness would attach to systems beyond our immediate environment, or outside of our control. As he writes:

On this view, our interest in causal explanation represents a sort of generalization or extension of our interest in manipulation and control from cases in which manipulation is possible to cases in which it is not, but in which we nonetheless retain a concern with what would or might happen to the outcome being explained if various possible changes were to occur in the factors cited in the explanans. If we had been unable to manipulate nature – if we had been, in Michael Dummett’s example, intelligent trees capable only of passive observation – then it is a reasonable conjecture that we would never have developed the notions of causation and explanation and the practices associated with them that we presently possess.⁴⁰

On this view, we should not suppose that the interest of things outside of our control is in some sense intrinsic; instead, it is best thought of as a kind of offshoot or hangover of our original instrumental interest, now applied outside its original domain. Along the same lines, Peter Lipton suggests that even though our interest in figuring out how the world works “has gone far beyond our practical concerns, this overshooting is not particularly surprising.... [for] we know that activities and traits originally caused by practical considerations may run way beyond the reasons for which they were originally selected, rather as an inclination to save potentially useful objects may lead to philately.”⁴¹

A second way to respond to this objection does not deny that these topics are genuinely worth pursuing for their own sake – it does try to explain away, say, my son’s implicit sense that finding out how eclipses work is intrinsically worthwhile – but it claims that this view only makes sense in light of a particular conception of how we should live, or of what constitutes the best sort of life. For notice that even though we earlier focused on accounts of well-being that focused

⁴⁰ Woodward, *Making Things Happen*, 11.

⁴¹ Peter Lipton, “What Good is an Explanation?” in *Explanations: Styles of Explanation in Science*, ed. John Cornwell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

on attaining fame or wealth or pleasure, we should not lose sight of the fact that among the traditional list of contenders for the best sort of life has always been the life of contemplation – or, perhaps, more broadly, a life of intellectual endeavor. On this view, the best life is precisely the life that exercises the highest or noblest thing in us – our minds or our reason or our intellect – strictly for its own sake, or because it is good for creatures like us to exercise our highest powers.

But if the life of contemplation or intellectual endeavor is indeed the best sort of life, then grasping how the world works would then be worthwhile not just instrumentally but intrinsically as well – or, better, because figuring out how the world works would partly constitute living well, or achieving the best sort of life. The picture would then be as follows: although at one level interestingness attaches to topics because of their deep though nonetheless instrumental connection to our well-being, at another level certain topics are indeed worth pursuing for their own sake, or because doing so constitutes living well. Moreover, finding out the truth with respect to certain topics – topics in fundamental physics, for example – might be worthwhile for more than one reason: on the one hand because of our instrumental need to figure out how the world works (if we are to bring about a life that we take to be good), and on the other hand because living well (on this view) is constituted by exercising one's intellectual talents in grasping the deep structure of the world.

In this section I have focused on just two objections (again, the objection that it wipes away the distinction between the epistemic point of view and other points of view, and the objection that it cannot make sense of the intrinsic, non-instrumental interest or importance that many topics seem to possess), but obviously there are more issues to be considered. For instance, I do not have a good answer to the question of why certain topics that are essentially related to our well-being nonetheless do not seem interesting. To wit, topics like where I can find food or drink or shelter seem essentially related to my well-being, and are obviously of real interest to me – but intuitively, a topic like where my next meal is coming from is not an interesting one. It is of great interest, no doubt; but as we noted at the outset, topics can be of interest, even great interest, without (apparently) being interesting.

Another question that needs to be explored is why certain topics might shift from being interesting to uninteresting over time. Suppose *People* magazine, for instance, were to chronicle some celebrity's eighth stint at a rehab clinic. Rather than judge this topic to be interesting, we might well think of it as tiresome. This is a problem for the theory proposed above, because it seems like the travails of others should be abidingly interesting to us, but perhaps (by way of response) there

simply comes a point where we ‘learn our lesson’ from someone’s behavior – we have the relevant data about what this sort of life is like – and we do not continually have to relearn it. Then again, perhaps there are other reasons why a topic might shift from interesting to tiresome for one person, reasons that have to do with the relativity of the interesting. I will consider that way of looking at things in the following, penultimate section.

X. Subjective or objective?

We can begin to draw our discussion to a close by addressing a question that I have touched on in passing a few times but have yet to consider adequately: namely, the question of whether interestingness is an objective property of a thing, a subjective property, or some sort of mix. For instance, although we spoke earlier as if interestingness was an objective property that some things possessed (especially, certain questions or topics), this has seemed to some psychologists to be patently mistaken:

The central flaw of this model is that there is no evidence that some things are interesting to nearly everyone – variability is clearly the norm. In our research on interest and curiosity, we see huge variability in the extent to which people find pictures, poems, text, random images, classical paintings, and social encounters to be interesting... [N]ovelty and complexity are subjectively appraised, not objectively discerned. Nothing is necessarily novel or complex to everyone, so it is unrealistic to assume that some things are interesting to everyone.⁴²

Something about this claim clearly seems right, I think: some event that I take to be extremely interesting you might find quite dull. Moreover, it seems right that whether we take the thing at issue to be interesting will often depend not just on (a) whether the thing is unexpected or unusual (as Silvia and Kashdan note), but also on (b) whether the truth with respect to whatever topic is at issue is in some sense ‘open’ or undecided. It is worth exploring for a moment just how these variables make our judgments about the interesting person-relative, before we return to the question of how these subjective elements of the interesting might be squared with our earlier claims about its objectivity.

To get a better sense of the subjectivity of the ‘unexpected’ consider again our example of the fireflies, but now imagine them in a world where virtually all creatures are bioluminescent (an Avatar-like world, perhaps), and where only a

⁴² Paul Silvia and Todd Kashdan, “Interesting Things and Curious People: Exploration and Engagement as Transient States and Enduring Strengths,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 3/5 (2009): 787.

few rare things – our common houseflies perhaps – are not. In that world, it seems fair to say that the interesting things would be the houseflies, and that things like fireflies would be taken for granted. Or again, consider phenomena that seem to violate commonly accepted laws or principles – perhaps, a phenomenon such as Brownian motion at the turn of the 20th Century. Although this phenomenon will strike those who have a misguided sense of what the laws allow as extremely interesting (as, indeed, it struck the physics community at the time as extremely interesting), it is not hard to imagine a community that had the laws right from the outset, which would fail to find motion interesting. For them, this is just what one would expect, given how the world works.

The interestingness of a particular question or topic can also depend, as just suggested, on whether we take the question to be suitably ‘open.’ Take for instance one of our earlier paradigm examples of an interesting question, the question of whether God exists. If our earlier list of questions of interest (or, of interesting questions) was even roughly correct, it is not hard to see why this question should be so universally regarded as interesting. If God exists, after all, then any account of the kinds of things there are would be massively incomplete without such a being.⁴³ Again, if God exists then he would presumably be intimately responsible not just for the universe ‘working’ one way rather than another but also for it ‘getting to be’ one way rather than another. And of course, if God exists then this would have an enormous impact on our views about how we should live, or about what sort of life is best.

That said, suppose you die and come face to face with God, making it abundantly clear that he exists. It would then seem that the question of whether God exists would no longer be an interesting one, for you, and the reason seems to be that the question is no longer suitably ‘open.’ You now have a definitive answer to your question. Or suppose you are an atheist who is fully convinced that God does not exist. In that case, the question of whether God exists would then presumably be no more interesting to you than the question of whether leprechauns exist. Even though you realize that many people are extremely interested in this question, you will think they are misguided. Judgments about interestingness therefore seem to depend, in certain cases, on one’s current stock of beliefs.

Apart from these influences on our judgments of interestingness, it is noteworthy, finally, that sometimes our judgments of interestingness result from a subtle interplay of subjective and objective elements. Suppose you are learning

⁴³ Even though, traditionally, God is no kind of thing – no species. He is, rather, the being that brings species into existence and sustains them.

about special relativity as a teenager and you are told that clocks rocketing through space move more slowly than clocks here on earth. That clocks behave in this way, we can imagine, will strike you as interesting primarily because it seems so (subjectively) unexpected; broadly speaking, that this happens violates your commonsense picture of what the world is like, or of how it works. But now suppose you grow up to become a leading expert in special relativity. It does not seem a stretch to suppose that this clock behavior will still strike you as quite interesting, even perhaps as still fascinating. If that was indeed the case, the reason why would seem to be that despite the fact that the behavior was entirely expected, based on your knowledge of how the world works, the commonsense view of the world would still have enough of a grip on you to make it seem continue to seem unexpected, still a bit startling, at another level.

Suppose that the commonsense grip went so deep, moreover, that virtually everyone naturally regarded the clock behavior as interesting, even fascinating – even after they came to see that it was to be expected given relativity. Would it make sense to think of the behavior as objectively interesting, given that it was wedded to a particular (optional) picture of the world? Here I think it is not clear what to say, but it nonetheless helps to bring out how contingent factors can bear on our judgments of interestingness.

How, then, can we square these two aspects of the interesting? On the one hand, that we take certain topics or questions to be objectively interesting – so that people who fail to be moved by, say, the “What is there?” question, and thus claim not to care what the far reaches of the universe are like, are objectively failing to track an interesting question. And, on the other hand, that whether we take certain phenomena to be interesting – such as fireflies, or Brownian motion, or what have you – might legitimately vary from person to person, in accordance with the person’s background beliefs?

Now, one tempting way to try to resolve this conflict is to notice the subtle difference in the way I just presented the alternatives in the last paragraph: on the one hand, as a claim about interesting topics or questions and on the one hand a claim about interesting phenomena.⁴⁴ Taking a cue from this difference, one natural thought is that the two claims can be reconciled by supposing that objective interestingness is a property only of questions or topics, rather than phenomena (taking the notion of phenomena broadly, so that it encompasses concrete things as well as events). When it comes to phenomena, by contrast,

⁴⁴ Notice again, for example, that when Silvia and Kashdan point to the variability of the interesting they point to things such as “pictures, poems, text, random images, classical paintings, and social encounters” – in other words, to concrete things or phenomena, rather than to particular questions.

whether one finds a given thing or event legitimately interesting will depend almost entirely on one's expectations and background beliefs. Thus someone who failed to find the question of how he or she should live interesting would thereby be deficient – that is, be failing to appreciate a question or topic that really is interesting – whereas someone who failed to find fireflies interesting would not necessarily be deficient at all.

Although I think this way of squaring the two ideas is very attractive, and probably in broad outline correct (it is where I would put my money, in any case), it brings to light some significant difficulties with the categories we have been using so far. For example, suppose someone claimed not to find the Big Bang interesting. It would then seem that, just as with someone who failed to find the “What is there?” question interesting, the failure would lie more with the person than with the Big Bang (as it were). But how exactly should we think about the Big Bang? If it is an event, then it looks like events (as concrete phenomena), and not just questions or topics, can indeed be objectively interesting. But it also does not seem like too much of a stretch to think of the Big Bang as not just an event but also a topic – moreover, a topic that is intimately connected to what looks like the intrinsically interesting question, “How did we get to be this way?” So is the Big Bang only interesting because of how importantly it bears on the question of how we got to be this way? Or is it interesting in its own right (as an interesting event, e.g.)? Rather than attempt to answer these questions (I am not sure how to), I will simply flag them, and note that they present a problem for the proposal above, that only questions or topics might be the bearers of objective interestingness.

In any case, and despite the problems for this way of marking the difference between objective and subjective interestingness, unlike Silvia and Kashdan I do think that there is a difference here to be marked, and that the most promising route appeals to this distinction between questions or topics, on the one hand, and concrete phenomena, on the other.

XI. Conclusion

Summing up, I hope to have shed light on questions of increasing significance and perplexity in the epistemological literature – questions, for example, concerning how to think about ‘the epistemic point of view,’ as well as how to think about what makes a topic epistemically interesting (or important or significant). If am right, then at least one influential way of approaching these questions (e.g., of the sort we see in Alston and Goldman) is fraught with problems. Moreover, if I am right then in order to make sense of the claim that certain topics or questions are

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intrinsically (rather than just instrumentally) worthy of inquiry, then we need to make appeal to a particular substantive, and controversial, conception of the good life – one on which contemplation, or intellectual endeavor, helps to constitute the best sort of life. Finally, and if nothing else, I hope to have opened up ways of thinking about the interesting, and revealed outstanding questions, that will help to guide further research in this important area.⁴⁵

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