The reader of this guide, *The Art of Inquiry*, is the individual seeking to gain clarity about the shape of his life or the member of an organization who wishes to learn how he fits into the organization. Its chief aim is to acquaint him with how to inquire into the things that matter most.
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1. Inquiry Illuminated

1.1. Preliminary Definition

An inquiry is an unrehearsed genre whose principal aims are, first, to reveal to us what we don’t know but thought we did and, second, to bring us a greater sense of clarity than we could have possibly imagined.

Most discourses are rehearsed: professors read out lectures, politicians give speeches, businesspeople present PowerPoint presentations, know-it-alls quote what they have heard, doctors cite important studies, journalists conduct interviews with prescribed questions, experts work off theoretical knowledge, and so on. Most personal conversations are scripted, with each party asking questions with which the other is familiar and the other, in turn, offering replies that are instantly intelligible.

Doubtless, these discourses serve many purposes: conveying information, airing opinions, expressing emotions, making exclamations, discussing opportunities, reassuring participants, evoking common images, confirming common sense. However, to a large degree, these discourses also cordon us off from our vulnerabilities, making it impossible for us to learn something new about ourselves and our fellows. What is staked in telling me that you’re from a small town in the US? And what do I learn, in any substantive way, about myself when I read about fluctuating exchange rates?
Perhaps the goal of many discourses is to assure us in our received understandings and to reassure us that we know what we are doing.

One end of a philosophical inquiry, by contrast, is to draw our life into question. There is no sense in which this drawing into question can take place unless we are able to lose our footing, come to stutter, get muddied by what we mean, flail about in confusion—unless, in short, we come to know that we do not know what we thought we did, that we do not grasp what we had for so long taken for granted. Considered, sincere utterances (note, here, the first condition—an utterance being considered—as well as the second—the supreme virtue of sincerity) such as 'I don’t know,' ‘I’m not sure,’ and ‘I couldn’t say’ illustrate how far we have come from firm ground, how befuddled and turned about we are.

Inquiry does not leave us forever in a state of ignorance; it also allows us to arrive at greater mutual understanding. This clarity could be likened to finally saying what is on the tip of our tongues, with the caveat that this something be novel. There is something we want to say but do not know yet; there is somewhere we want to head but this somewhere remains elusive; there is something missing we want to find but the discovery has, as of yet, remain hidden. The conclusion to an inquiry, accordingly, is like poetic naming: a new destination, a novel discovery, a long-sought—after homeland. ‘This,’ we say, ‘is it.’

1.2. Inquiry is not Theory
A theory can either provide a general explanation for particular phenomena or offer principles for action. In physics, the search for the Theory of Everything implies that the scientist wishes to arrive at a total explanation of all physical phenomena. His desire is a desire for totality and certainty.

The other kind of theory I mentioned seeks to be action-guiding. Management theories aim to provide managers not just with character types and reductive explanations of work motivation but also to direct their actions in specific directions. If, Theory X runs, all employees are inherently lazy, then the manager can motivate each employee best by threatening to punish her if she fails to meet expectations for productivity or efficiency.

Unlike theory understood in the first sense, inquiry does not make invariant and final claims about ‘how things are’; always underway, it longs to bring us to a better, albeit always provisional, understanding of ourselves and others. And unlike theory in the second sense, inquiry does not derive an Ought (you ought to do this) from a theory of human nature. Inquiry has no time for Briggs Meyers personality tests, Human Resource assessments, blank statements (All X are Y), or pat labels (narcissist, neurotic, etc.).

Inquiry is concerned with self–understanding first (pace theory in the first sense) and with nuanced, considered, situation–specific actions second (pace theory in the second sense).

1.3. Inquiry is not Method
Method, from the Greek, is a ‘rational procedure’ or a ‘mode of proceeding.’ Methods are, by their very nature, teachable, repeatable, step-by-step processes by which one arrives at the stated goal or, in some cases, at a novel discovery. Inquiry, however, does not follow set steps (first, then second, then third…) and even though it is teachable it is not repeatable.

An inquirer may ask of the methodical person whether he fears getting lost, fears not knowing his way about. For the methodical man may not need to know the answer straightaway, but he certainly has to know from the very beginning what exact route to take. Method, in the theoretical realm, is comparable to ‘rigid planning’ in the practical realm: there is no room for getting lost and thus no reason for searching.

An individual or organization that speaks frequently of theories (e.g., quant people in investment banking) or methods (e.g., 5 steps to financial success) is arrogant on the one hand (believing he knows or must know when he knows not) and fearful on the other (afraid of uncertainty, blind to ignorance). It is as if, so long as we abide by theories and methods, it would be impossible for us to stray off the prescribed path or admit to the possibility of being in error.

1.4. Significance; or, Direct vs. Indirect Speech

In a word, inquiry matters because it teaches us direct speech. Most of our lives have been spent partaking in indirect speech. We have become well-versed in grandiloquence, circumlocution, subterfuge, deception, evasion, omission, ellipses, hyperbole, self-deception, avoidance,
insincerity, flattery, cunning, politeness, complaints, offenses... Direct speech partakes of none of these locutions. In direct speech, I say what is the case; I speak in good faith; I care for truth.

Inquiry, as a carrier of direct speech, teaches us directness, simplicity, parsimoniousness (love of the fewest words necessary), and awareness. We speak to, not around; we speak with, not over; we speak about, not away from. As inquirers, we have nothing to hide, so we speak plainly to and with each other.

1.5. Readiness

How do we know when an individual or organization is ready to inquire in earnest? Perhaps we can follow three rules of thumb.

a) Persistence: Can the person to which a question has been put ‘stay with’ the question? Or, on the contrary, does he ‘turn away’, saying that he is ‘uncomfortable’ or that ‘it’s too hard’? If he cannot persist with the question, then he is not ready to inquire about himself. (We will learn later what it means to pose the right question at the right time.)

Vice: Cowardice

b) Disinterestedness: Can the person who has been put to the question stand back, as it were, and grasp that the inquiry is not about him or this or that but rather about something more general? It may not be about whether this is a good friend but about what makes for a good friend. Or it
could be not about the question of this organization’s hiring this employee but about what makes for a virtuous employee. If a person becomes ‘fixated’ on this, that, or—and this especially—on herself and hence cannot stand back from the particular, then he is not ready for inquiry.

Vice: Interestedness or ‘fixation’

c) Receptiveness: Is the person who has been put to the question receptive to different possibilities, or is he stubbornly saying that ‘This is the only way,’ ‘It must go like this,’ ‘Everyone is a fool,’ ‘I am right,’ ‘I am, and will always be, stuck,’ etc.? The stubborn person may have considered possibilities, but we are asking after his general disposition. Open to something new? Receptive to instruction? Curious about where her life may go if it doesn’t have to go like this? If she is not receptive, then she is not ready for inquiry.

Vice: Stubbornness