

PURELY COGNITIVE BENEFITS AS AN AIM OF RESEARCH?

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Abstract: JOHN DEWEY coined the imperative that what we do in philosophy «must take effects in conduct» if it is not to be a sentimental indulgence for a few. This article asks whether it suffices when an insight only makes a difference *in someone's mind*, to make it a legitimate aim of research. Four kinds of insights are distinguished: metaphysical insights, ethical insights, practical insights, and trivial insights. Metaphysical insights are those that bring us purely cognitive benefits – no other benefits than a change in our thoughts. This article argues that metaphysical insights, properly demarcated, entail a particular kind of significance, which makes them worthy of pursuit, despite only yielding cognitive benefits. The article also points out, however, that we need to think carefully about how these cognitive benefits are socially distributed, and how we make the decision about which metaphysical inquiries are to be pursued.

INTRODUCTION

What are the gains of thinking? Sometimes we get straightforward insight into how to act from it. At other times, there is no practical guidance we get from our thoughts – we just feel like we understand certain matters better than before.¹ What kind of gain is the latter? And can this kind of gain be a legitimate aim of scientific² effort, that is, of research?

JOHN DEWEY coined the imperative that what we do in philosophy “must take effects in conduct”³ if it is not to be a sentimental indulgence for a few. There has been discussion on what would count as “taking effects in conduct”, or as “making a difference”, as some have paraphrased it.⁴ One of the difficulties in this discussion is that it is not clear whether “making a difference” is the case if the difference *only takes place in someone's mind*.⁵ That is, does it count as ‘making a difference’ if the only effect of an insight is that I changed my mind about something (and that change of mind does not affect my actions)? And if so, is this difference enough to make it a legitimate aim of science?

In this way, I want to ask whether insights that ‘only’ benefit us cognitively (in a to be specified way) but do not have an effect on our conduct, can be a legitimate aim of scientific effort. In order to tackle this question, I will in the first section specify what it means for an insight to have an effect on our conduct, and what it means for an insight to benefit us cognitively. This will allow me to systematize our potential insights into four categories: practical insights, metaphysical insights, ethical insights, and trivial insights. On the basis of this distinction I will in the second section focus on metaphysical insights, and argue that any insight that has a cognitive benefit in the specified sense without having an effect on conduct is ultimately a metaphysical insight. In the third section I will confront an objection, where I will argue that metaphysical insights do not lose their significance even if no one is currently interested in metaphysical

¹ And at yet other times, of course, we do not even get that, but instead get more confused through thinking.

² I use the notions ‘scientific’ and ‘science’ to include the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, with no primacy for the methodologies of the natural sciences.

³ DEWEY, JOHN (1915/2004): *Democracy and Education*. Delhi: Aakar Books, p. 354.

⁴ Cf. KITCHER, PHILIP (2012): *Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, building on WILLIAM JAMES's claim that philosophical questions are significant only if answers to them would make a difference to “somebody, somehow, somewhere and somewhen.” (JAMES, WILLIAM (1996): “Pragmatism”, In: *Writings 1902-1910*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, p. 508).

⁵ KITCHER, in *Preludes to Pragmatism*, argues that to interpret DEWEY's imperative in this way would make it too weak.

insights. This suggests that there is a certain value in metaphysical insights independently of interest. But, as I argue, this does not yet establish that we should pursue metaphysical inquiries in our scientific efforts. That is why I turn in the fourth section to a proposal about which conditions must be satisfied for it to be legitimate to pursue such metaphysical inquiries. I will point out a specific danger about pursuing metaphysical insights. But, I will argue, if we follow certain principles of how access to these insights is socially distributed, then pursuing insights that only bring cognitive benefit in this way is a legitimate aim of scientific effort.

VARIOUS KINDS OF INSIGHTS, TWO KINDS OF GAINS

Let us consider a few examples of insights one could have.

- (1) The morning star is the evening star.
- (2) Bromine has an atomic mass of 79.904u.
- (3) The *Leaning Tower of Pisa* was never straight (the foundation began to sink when they were building the second floor).
- (4) The exact current distance between Trump's nose and the northernmost tip of the UK is (x) kilometers.
- (5) Human beings are mortal.
- (6) The concepts of space, time, and unity are always presupposed in human thinking.
- (7) Every object has a form and matter, and it is its form by which we recognize it as that what it is.
- (8) All chemical elements can be systematized in a unified periodic table. Each element has a unique atomic number according to the number of its protons which determines its place in the periodic table, which says something essential about its properties.

Considering these examples, we would say that they are different, among other things, in *what kinds of gains* come with having these insights. The following two potential gains seem the most important:

- The insight has effects on one's conduct. That is: when having the insight, something in one's actions potentially changes.
- The insight brings cognitive benefit. That is: when having the insight, one feels enlightened, cognitively satisfied, found meaning, or it resolved a lack of understanding.

It seems that these two potential gains of insights are not dependent on each other. That is, an insight can have the potential to bring cognitive benefit without the potential of having any effects on one's conduct. And an insight can potentially have effects on one's conduct without bringing any cognitive benefit.⁶ For example:

- (6) The concepts of space, time, and unity are always presupposed in human thinking.

⁶ Of course, there can be insights that have both, cognitive benefit *and* effects on one's conduct (see further down for more on this). And in such instances, there might be some *interaction* between the cognitive benefit and the effect on one's conduct. For example, in the ethical insight that human beings are mortal, one could say that the cognitive benefit from this insight motivates one to take one's life projects seriously, and that has an effect on one's conduct. So, in this instance, there is an interaction between cognitive benefit and effect on conduct.

However, it is still true that the two kinds of gains are not *dependent* on each other. Most insights only have one of the gains – either cognitive benefit or effect on one's conduct. So, each of the gains mostly arises without the other. This shows that cognitive benefit is not *required* for effect on conduct, and that effect on conduct is not *required* for cognitive benefit.

This brings me a cognitive benefit – I understand something about the necessary structure of my own thinking – but it cannot change anything about my conduct.

(2) Bromine has an atomic mass of 79.904u.

If I am a chemist, having this insight helps me dose bromine correctly in my next experiment. However, to say that I ‘cognitively benefitted’ from this insight – beyond its practical usefulness – would be an exaggeration.⁷

Let us thus clarify the criteria for the two potential gains – having effects on conduct and cognitive benefit. What does it mean for an insight to have effects on conduct? Using the example from above: With my insight into the atomic mass of bromine, I adjust my conduct (in that I use a more appropriate dosage of bromine in my next experiment). Hence, ‘effects on conduct’ can mean a *changed* conduct (I dose differently). It might also mean that, as an effect of the insight, I do *not* act at all anymore (e.g. if I decide that it is dangerous or futile to do experiments with a chemical of that atomic mass). Or, as a limiting case, it could also mean that I *continue* with the same conduct as before, when I feel confirmed by the new insight that it was the right conduct. In that case, the insight had an effect on my conduct because otherwise I might have stopped using bromine – hence, a change of conduct has been averted by the insight, which itself is an effect on my conduct.

And what are the criteria for an insight to bring cognitive benefit? Using the example from above: Having the insight that the concepts of space, time, and unity are always presupposed in human thinking brings me cognitive benefit. Why? Let me introduce the notion of ‘significance’. It seems that an insight of this kind is *significant* in a way that knowing the atomic mass of bromine isn’t. What are the criteria for this significance? Let me suggest a few phenomenological and a few structural criteria. Under what circumstances does it *seem to me* that an insight has this significance (the phenomenological criteria)? This significance arises when I:

- feel enlightened
- feel cognitively satisfied
- found meaning
- filled a lack of understanding

And what structural criteria could we give for insights with this special kind of significance? Let us say that significant insights usually have at least one of the following structures. It is an insight about:

- the conditions of our own thinking (e.g. space, time, unity are always presupposed)
- the structure of our material world (e.g. every object has form and matter, e.g. all chemical elements can be systematized in a unified periodic table)

⁷ The idea that not all instances of knowledge are valuable is not new. WARD JONES argues that “the value of knowledge (...) lies in its contingent properties, in properties which are not present in all cases of knowledge.” (JONES, WARD E. (1997): “Why Do We Value Knowledge?” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 423-439, p. 433). That is, whether or not an instance of knowledge is valuable is independent of its status as knowledge. JONES does not distinguish the value of instances of knowledge according to *the kind of insights* they are, like I do in this article. Rather, he thinks that an instance of knowledge is valuable if it is based on the testimony of a reliable informant, or if the subject of knowledge knows the reasons why she believes it (the internalist criterion). Another difference is that my point above is not about the *value* of the insight, as it is for JONES, but about the question whether the insight brought a cognitive benefit (in a sense which I specify in more detail further down). However, we share the common thought that just because something is an insight or knowledge does not necessarily mean that it brings cognitive benefit or that it is valuable. That is, just as value is not a necessary property for knowledge according to JONES, cognitive benefit is not a necessary property for an insight in my account.

- our own nature (e.g. human beings are mortal, e.g. space, time, unity are always presupposed in our thinking)
- the conditions of our existence (e.g. human beings are mortal)

Thus, that which significant insights *structurally* share is that they are insights of existential and general import, as specified above. And *because of* that structure, we feel enlightened, cognitively satisfied, found meaning or filled a lack of understanding when we have these insights (the phenomenological criteria).

There is an important distinction to be clarified here between the phenomenological criteria to detect this significance, and what we might call ‘mere interest’. We can have interest in just about anything. We can be interested in solving a mathematical theorem, while we know that solving this will not have effects on anyone’s conduct, and that the theorem does not give us insight about our conditions of existence, our own nature, the structure of our material world, or the conditions of our thinking.⁸ We can also be interested in the current exact distance between Trump’s nose and the northernmost tip of the UK. There is nothing unusual or improper about having interest in trivia, for example. But this free, idiosyncratic kind of interest is different from the phenomenological criteria mentioned above – feeling enlightened, cognitively satisfied, like one has found meaning or filled a lack of understanding, because of having a certain kind of insight. One feels enlightened in this way not because one has had a particular prior interest in a question, but simply because one has come upon a significant insight. That is, if one comes upon an insight that fulfills the structural criteria – shows us something about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, our conditions of existence – and really has understood the insight, so my claim goes, then one cannot help but feel enlightened. And conversely, one cannot have this feeling of enlightenment from any other insight than from one that fulfills these structural criteria. That is, whether or not an insight has this phenomenological effect on one is dependent on the kind of insight one has come upon *only*, independently of one’s interests. So, the phenomenological criteria can be used as a heuristic to determine whether one has come upon an insight with this special significance or not. This is so exactly because these phenomenological criteria have nothing to do with prior, idiosyncratic interest.

Now we have the criteria for the two potential gains of insights. To summarize, we call those insights ‘to have effects on one’s conduct’ which either change one’s conduct, or stop one’s conduct, or make us continue with our conduct where this was uncertain before. And we call those insights to ‘bring a cognitive benefit’ which have a certain *significance*, as described above with our structural and phenomenological criteria.

These two gains are independent of each other, as we said. This means that we can have insights that *only* have effects on conduct, insights that *only* bring cognitive benefit, insights that bring both, and insights that bring neither. This gives us a way of systematizing all possible insights into four categories. Let me call:

Practical Insights those that have effects on conduct but don’t bring cognitive benefit.

Metaphysical Insights those that bring cognitive benefit but don’t have effects on conduct.

Ethical Insights those that bring both.

⁸ This is just presumed here for the sake of the example. I do not want to make the claim that mathematical theorems cannot show us anything interesting about the conditions of our thinking or the like. On the contrary – as I show further down – mathematical insights can surely be the starting-point for significant insights, such as about the conditions of our thinking.

Trivia or *Trivial Insights* those that bring neither.

The insights which only bring cognitive benefits will be the main focus of this article. They are the ones for which we want to ask: Can scientific effort legitimately aim at this kind of insight? I will call them ‘insights with purely cognitive benefits’, or simply ‘metaphysical insights’. Their contrast to trivial insights and to practical insights, respectively, will help us make our claims more precise.

We can now systematize our eight examples from the beginning of this section:

Practical Insights	Metaphysical Insights “purely cognitive benefits”	Ethical Insights	Trivial Insights “trivia”
<p>(1) The morning star is the evening star, for a satellite engineer.</p> <p>(2) Bromine has an atomic mass of 79.904u, for a chemist.</p> <p>(3) The <i>Leaning Tower of Pisa</i> was never straight (the foundation began to sink when they were building the second floor), for someone who wants to build a house in the vicinity.</p>	<p>(6) The concepts of space, time, and unity are always presupposed in human thinking.</p> <p>(7) Every object has a form and matter, and it is its form by which we recognize it as that what it is.</p> <p>(8) All chemical elements can be systematized in a unified periodic table.</p>	<p>(5) Human beings are mortal.</p>	<p>(4) The exact current distance between Trump’s nose and the northernmost tip of the UK is (x) kilometers.</p> <p>(1) The morning star is the evening star.</p> <p>(2) Bromine has an atomic mass of 79.904u.</p> <p>(3) The <i>Leaning Tower of Pisa</i> was never straight (the foundation began to sink when they were building the second floor).</p>

Notice that examples 1-3 can all be either practical or trivial insights (i.e., either with or without effects on conduct), *depending on the subject of the insight*. For instance, for me, knowing that the morning star is the evening star is trivia. That is not so for a satellite engineer for whom this is useful information when calculating the satellite’s ideal orbit. Hence, whether or not an insight is practical or trivial is context-dependent.⁹ This is not so when deciding whether an insight is metaphysical or trivial (i.e., whether it is a significant insight or not). The significance of an insight is simply a fact about that insight, and so not

⁹ Perhaps “subject-dependent” would be more accurate. But I take subject-dependency to be a special case of context-dependency. That is, in my examples, to judge the practical effects of an insight depends on the situation of the subject who has the insight, such as, what tasks the subject is currently facing. Thus, I prefer the more general “context-dependent” rather than “subject-dependent”.

Note, also, that there are insights that are trivial, like the distance of Trump’s nose to northernmost tip of the UK, in a way that seems difficult to ever become practically relevant. Hence, I listed this example only on the trivia side. It is not conceptually impossible, though, that also this insight could become practically relevant in some circumstances, and thus, then, would amount to a practical insight.

dependent on the situation, including her interests, of the subject. In other words: whether or not a subject is interested in the insight, the insight itself is either significant or not. This leads to a natural objection, which I will consider in the third section.

Ethical insights are interesting, because they have the potential for both gains – they can have effects on our conduct, and they can benefit us cognitively. Take the example from above: Human beings are mortal. On the one hand, this is a significant insight. It is an insight about our own nature and about our conditions of existence. We feel enlightened (even if perhaps also frightened) by this insight. On the other hand, this insight can have effects on our conduct. It makes us prioritize certain projects over others because we know we don't have eternity to pursue everything. It gives a certain macro-structure to our decisions about our actions and general conduct.¹⁰

INSIGHTS WITH PURELY COGNITIVE BENEFITS

Metaphysical insights are thus those that bring cognitive benefits, but do not have effects on our conduct. Hence, if we pursue them, they cannot promise us anything more or less than 'purely cognitive benefits'¹¹. In the last section of the article we will ask in what sense this kind of gain can be a legitimate aim of scientific effort, that is, of research.

Let me here first consider an objection to this construction of purely cognitive benefits. One could argue that there are also other insights than metaphysical ones that a) do not have effects on conduct, and b) enlighten us and make us cognitively satisfied. Thus, they also seem to bring purely cognitive benefits. So, not all purely cognitive benefits come from metaphysical insights. For example, there might be cases from history. Don't we sometimes just want to know what happened and how it occurred? Let's take the insight "The first wheeled vehicles appear in Mesopotamia, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus, around 3500 BCE." It can be cognitively satisfying and feel enlightening to learn that, and it does not have effects on our conduct. It is a historical insight, not a metaphysical one, so the objection goes.

But consider the following. The statement about the first wheeled vehicles alone is rather trivial. I doubt that we feel cognitively satisfied or enlightened by that statement alone. We might find it 'interesting', but not enlightening. What makes for the appearance of enlightenment in such a statement is that we often already *think further* when hearing such a statement. When we hear about the time in history when the first wheeled vehicles were built, we perhaps make implicit inferences along the lines of: "That is shortly after the time in history when the first cities appeared. So perhaps it is in human's nature to start experimenting with new tools of mobility only once a city-structure is around." Hence, what we do when we hear 'interesting' historical statements is to think about *what this means about human nature*. And then, of course, as a composite insight, it is a metaphysical insight. I am not saying that we always do this when we hear 'interesting' historical facts. What I say is that *if* we do this, it is *we* who make this mere historical insight into a metaphysical one.¹² And then this insight also exhibits the significance which is the criterion I suggested

¹⁰ See VOGT, KATJA (2017): *Desiring the Good*, New York: Oxford University Press, for the idea that all our decisions, even the small-scaled ones, are to be understood as structured by the overarching aim of a well-lived human life, as an example for such a macro-structure.

¹¹ I use 'gains' and 'benefits' interchangeably. The contrast term for 'purely cognitive benefits' would be the benefit of practical insights: they bring 'purely practical benefits'.

¹² So, a subject that is interested in a trivial insight can take the trivial insight as a starting point *to develop it into* a metaphysical insight.

It is important to note that this dependence *on someone's interest* to get to a metaphysical insight from a trivial one does not make the metaphysical insights context-dependent like the practical ones. Remember, the same insight can be practical or trivial, depending on whether it is a satellite engineer asking whether the morning star is the evening star, or someone who has no

for cognitive benefit. Whenever we have a historical insight and merely think ‘interesting’, and don’t go further with that thought, it is and stays a trivial insight. And this goes for all non-historical trivial insights, too. They might be the starting point for metaphysical insights, but they do not by themselves already contain the required significance. There is nothing bad at all about trivial insights. They are just not the same as metaphysical ones, which have a special significance from which the kind of cognitive benefit arises that we’re interested in.

The objection stated at the beginning of this section, that there are also other insights than metaphysical ones that a) do not have effects on conduct, and b) enlighten us and make us cognitively satisfied, might not yet be fully responded to with the above considerations. It might still be unclear whether metaphysical insights are *any* insights that are non-trivial and that have no effects on conduct, or whether they are only a *subset* of all the insights that fit this description. One might say that if metaphysical insights are characterized by the significance they have – e.g., they show us something about the conditions of our existence – then the correct contrast class cannot be insights that are trivial, as there are many insights that are neither trivial, nor have that significance.

I am arguing that yes, trivial insights are the correct contrast class to metaphysical ones; metaphysical insights are *any* insights that are non-trivial and have no effects on conduct, not just a subset of all the insights that fit this description. What might make this seem implausible is that I am using here a specific, narrow notion of non-triviality. Non-trivial are *only* those insights that fulfill the structural (and phenomenological) criteria of significance presented in the first section: They are insights about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, or the conditions of our existence. Now, that leaves the question: What about all the insights we would call non-trivial in a less narrow sense, but are not metaphysical insights? If there is no space between trivial and metaphysical insights, then we’re leaving out many insights that would fall somewhere between.

Take as an example a mathematical or logical insight. We would usually not call an insight that arises from solving a mathematical theorem or logical problem ‘trivial’. It is by all means a non-trivial task to solve these. Yet, in my categorization of insights, these would count as trivial, because a) they have no effects on conduct, and b) they do not fulfill the criteria for significance (non-triviality). But shouldn’t there be a way to distinguish such complex mathematical and logical insights from insights such as ‘the exact current distance of Trump’s nose to the northernmost tip of the UK’?

practical need involved in the question. That’s what we called context-dependency for practical insights. So, now that we see that there is a way of making trivial insights into metaphysical ones, why aren’t the metaphysical ones also context-dependent? Here are a few reasons:

1. Just because we can take trivial insights (like historical facts) and develop them into metaphysical ones, does not mean that all metaphysical insights started out as trivial ones.
2. What is relevant for something to be a metaphysical insight is whether it has significance – the structural and phenomenological criteria. Whether or not an insight fulfills these has nothing to do with interest, and nothing to do with the genesis of the metaphysical insight. Developing a trivial insight into a metaphysical one, out of interest, makes the composite insight a metaphysical one only if it fulfills these criteria, in virtue of fulfilling these criteria. Whether or not an interest played a role in getting to that insight is irrelevant.
3. What is dependent on someone’s interest is *whether* one develops a trivial insight into a metaphysical one or not. But that has no influence on the significance of the insight.
4. Context-dependency as we encountered it for practical insights is not the same as dependence-on-someone’s-interest. Context-dependency is, rather, dependency on someone’s *practical needs*. A satellite engineer might have a practical need to know whether the morning star is the evening star (which makes this a practical insight for her). That is not the same as having an interest in the question. Conversely, one can have an interest in a question without having a practical need for it to be resolved. E.g., a mathematician can be interested in solving a theorem, but there’s no practical need for her to solve the theorem. Hence, her interest in solving the theorem does not make it into a *practical* insight.

Of course, it makes sense to introduce more distinctions among the insights that I have called trivial. For sure, a mathematical insight is not structurally the same as the insight about Trump's nose. However, no matter what distinctions we introduce among the trivial-in-this-wide-sense insights, it still makes sense to distinguish them *as a group* from those insights that have significance-in-this-narrow-sense – from the metaphysical insights. For the purposes of asking whether metaphysical insights can be a legitimate aim of research, *their significance* is the property that essentially distinguishes them from all the insights that do not have that kind of cognitive benefit. And no matter how different the insights without this kind of cognitive benefit are among each other, none of these differences will overcome the fact that they do not have this kind of significance.

Being called trivial, that is, not cognitively benefitting in the sense used here, does not mean that an insight is not cognitively benefitting in other ways. E.g., trivial mathematical insights (in the sense used here) can have all kinds of other cognitive benefits, such as improving the cognitive skills for dissecting a complex intellectual riddle. And so, it might sound harsh to put mathematical insights into the same category as 'the exact distance between Trump's nose and the northernmost tip of the UK', because the latter probably has few other cognitive benefits, while solving a mathematical theorem has many. But in this article, we are not interested in these other cognitive benefits. What the mathematical and the Trump-insight both share is that, in the sense used here, they do not have that (metaphysical) significance, and thus are trivial in the sense used here (if not developed further into a metaphysical insight, like in the historical example above)¹³.

There is one more kind of insight that might seem left out in my categorization of insights: insights that are only accessible with a lot of prior knowledge, or with a lot of technical knowledge. Again, consider the mathematical or computational case. For simplicity, let us assume they have no effects on conduct. Now, where does an insight into a theorem that only a few experts can understand fall in my categorization? The options that are left (with no effects on conduct) are metaphysical or trivial. Assuming that a mathematical theorem or computationally reached insight will not by itself give us insight into the conditions of our thinking or the structure of our material world, they will have to count as trivial insights. Perhaps here it becomes most obvious what a narrow notion of triviality I apply for the purposes of this article. An insight can be so complex as to only be accessible to a few experts, and yet still be called trivial in the sense used here.

Hence, expert knowledge of the kind above most often falls into the trivia section of my categorization. Only once someone develops such expert knowledge into a significant insight in the sense used here (e.g. by showing how the technical insight tells us something about the limits of our thinking) does it become metaphysical. The resultant insight – now, e.g., one about the limits of our thinking based on the prior technical insight – will most likely be accessible to non-experts too. That is, once an insight has been developed into a metaphysical one, i.e. showing us something about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, or the conditions of our existence, it is usually also comprehensible for non-experts.

Perhaps there is a limiting case of metaphysical insights that is so complex so as to be hardly comprehensible for non-experts. Explaining conclusively to a non-expert why we cannot make any judgments that are not based on Kant's categories might prove difficult. Hence, despite being a metaphysical insight, it might remain inaccessible for most people. However, this does not pose a problem for the categorization of insights I propose, either. A metaphysical insight can have the mentioned significance, even if it is hard

¹³ Mathematical insights seem to be especially well suited for the kind of development into a metaphysical insight that I described for the historical case. Solving a theorem in itself might generate trivial insights (in the wide sense used here). But often, such mathematical insights are the starting point for insights about the conditions of our thinking (e.g. can we think infinity, let alone multiple infinities), or the structure of our material world (when related to axioms in physics).

to reach the insight. It is still right that whoever has the insight will benefit cognitively from this in the narrow, metaphysical sense used here. Hence, even hard-to-reach insights can be metaphysical insights.¹⁴ Pursuing hard-to-reach metaphysical insights might pose a difficulty for the principle of equal access which I present in the last section of the article. I will respond to that difficulty in that section.

AN OBJECTION: THE WRONG KIND OF SIGNIFICANCE

One could be dissatisfied with my demarcation of ‘significance’ above. One could say: “Well, this is a rather useless notion of ‘significance’. For, this notion of significance already identifies significance with insights that have a metaphysical structure. But who cares about this kind of significance. The common understanding of a ‘significant’ insight is rather whether something is significant *to me*, as a function of my interests.”

I explicitly defined significance as independent of personal interest. I said that, as a contrast, whether or not an insight is trivial or *practical* depends on the subject and on her circumstances, e.g. whether she is a satellite engineer or not. But whether or not an insight is trivial or *metaphysical*, that is, whether it brings cognitive benefit, is independent of the subject’s goals and interests. I said that insights that bring cognitive benefit are those that are of general and existential import as characterized above. And as that, they are already significant for *any* being that is part of this world, no matter what they happen to be interested in. In short, being significant or not is a feature of the insight alone, independently of anything else.

Such a definition of significance might sound counterintuitive because it could be understood as leading to such statements as “whether or not you want to hear this, having that insight will be significant for you”, which seems absurd. This does not follow from my suggestion, however. The significance of metaphysical insights does not constitute any kind of requirement for anyone to actually have these insights. What it does, however, is to give these insights a certain value that is independent of subjects’ interests. And that might be the core of where the objection comes from. That is, the core of the objection might be the idea that no insight that does not serve an actual question or interest of someone can just by itself be valuable.

In contrast to that, it seems to me that both notions of significance make sense – the one that I use in this article, which entails that purely cognitive insights have significance in virtue of fulfilling the structural criteria for significance, whether or not someone is interested in them. And the one that is a function of someone’s interest: it is *because* I am interested in this question that it is significant. For the purposes of this article, we have to be aware that I always use ‘significance’ in the former sense, not in the latter. Significance in the sense of this article has nothing to do with interest.

Rather than debating which notion of significance makes more sense, we need to ask the question of how much value we put on the various kinds of inquiries we can pursue. That is, even if it is accepted that there is a kind of significance to purely cognitive benefits that is not dependent on the interest of anyone, this does not yet establish that we should pursue these inquiries. Thus, in the next section, I will make a proposal under which conditions it is valuable to pursue these metaphysical inquiries.

¹⁴ One might go even further and ask whether an insight that no one has so far been able to reach can be a metaphysical insight. The question might arise because in such a case we have to wonder in what sense the insight ‘brings cognitive benefit’. But even in such a case, it would be true that whoever will have the insight will reap that kind of cognitive benefit from it, otherwise it simply wouldn’t be a metaphysical insight. The empirical fact that no one has (so far) reached the insight is irrelevant for that conditional.

While we can imagine that such not-yet-discovered insights exist, it is of course impossible for us to identify an insight before someone has reached it. So, for any not-yet-reached insights it is impossible for us to determine whether it is metaphysical, trivial, practical, or ethical.

THE VALUE OF INSIGHTS WITH PURELY COGNITIVE BENEFITS

Scientific activity, like many other cultural achievements, is in its essence a tool for human beings to master their lives. If scientific activity is ‘merely’ a tool, then not all of its potential products are equally valuable. That is, then we have to ask which questions are worth asking and worth resolving.¹⁵ To approach this question in this article, we first had to get clearer about what the potential gains from the various kinds of insights would be. We arrived at a four-fold distinction of different kinds of insights we can produce: practical insights, metaphysical insights, ethical insights, and trivial insights. Because these four kinds of insights are exactly differentiated by the kinds of gain one can get from them, one would expect them to be differently valued as an outcome of research.

Rather than asking the all-encompassing question of how each of the four kinds of insights should be valued in research, in this article we focus on those insights that ‘only’ promise to bring cognitive benefit in the previously specified sense. Our question is: Can scientific effort legitimately aim at this kind of insight? To remind the reader, these are insights about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, and our conditions of existence. They make us feel enlightened, cognitively satisfied, like we found meaning, or filled a lack of understanding. They do not have effects on our conduct. So, nothing about how we act changes as a result of having these insights. DEWEY would need to reject the value of such insights. They are, in a way ‘all about us’ (which is why DEWEY coined it a “sentimental indulgence”).

My suggestion is that such insights can be the legitimate aim of research, but that for them it is of even more paramount importance to carefully think about how these insights will be socially distributed. That is, every insight produced by research is supposed to benefit more people than just the researchers themselves. And how a fair distribution of the benefits from scientific insights is achieved is in no way clear. This is true also of practical insights; for instance, just because a researcher has figured out a way to cure a disease does not guarantee that this insight will be fairly distributed across society.

But, as I argue, insights with purely cognitive benefits are especially in danger of only benefitting the researchers themselves. That’s the case because, as we worked out in the first section of the article, a metaphysical insight only makes a difference *in the mind* of someone. A consequence of this is that for a metaphysical insight to benefit someone, this person must *herself* have had that insight. This is not the case for practical insights, for example. If you have a practical insight that allows you to cure a disease, I can benefit from that without myself having had that insight. In other words, metaphysical insights are *distinctively non-delegable* if one wants to reap their benefits. And this puts them in increased danger of only benefitting the researchers themselves.¹⁶ So, we can conclude from this that a form of ‘science communication’ would play

¹⁵ KITCHER, PHILIP (2001): *Science, Truth, and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, explores this further for science in general. One important question he asks is: who is ‘we,’ that is, who are the ones who have the task (and the privilege) to decide what is worth asking? This is not the place to explore this question in detail; for the purposes of this article I assume that it is most often the researchers themselves who ultimately decide which questions are worth asking and resolving in their respective fields. But see also the considerations at the end of this article, where I argue that an interactive form of science communication might also have to include asking interested subjects which (metaphysical) questions we should pursue, before we pursue them.

¹⁶ Even if it benefits more people than just the researchers themselves, a *fair* distribution is of course not yet guaranteed. Insights with purely cognitive benefits are also in greater danger of only benefitting, for example, educationally privileged people. Here, I imagine similar dynamics at play that also lead to hermeneutical injustice as described by FRICKER, MIRANDA (2007). *Epistemic Injustice. Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. It is not only that for many insights one needs a certain level of education to even understand the conversation, but also that one usually needs to be in a certain social-professional position in order to have a say about which topics and experiences are worthy of investigation. And if only educationally

an especially central role for insights with purely cognitive benefits to be a legitimate aim of research. And science communication would have to mean something different in this case than to just ‘communicate the results’ of the inquiry to non-specialists. It would have to be a facilitating of metaphysical insights for non-specialists, so that they can work their way through fully having the insight themselves.

It is important to emphasize that as we determine that metaphysical insights can be a legitimate aim of scientific effort if we carefully think about how these insights will be socially distributed, that does not mean that anyone of the non-specialists *has to* have an interest in these insights (although it is unlikely that *no one* has such an interest). They are significant insights independently of interest. And perhaps we can as a society determine that it is valuable to produce them no matter whether someone will actually ask about them or not. What needs to be fairly distributed across society in regard to metaphysical insights, then, is not that everyone, or anyone in particular, needs to have these insights. Rather, we need a fair distribution of *access* to these insights. That is, we need to make sure that *if* someone is interested in having these metaphysical insights, she must have equal access to them no matter whether she is a researcher or not. With this principle in place, I think insights with purely cognitive benefits are a legitimate aim of scientific effort.

A clarification is needed for what I mean with *equal* access here. The claim that ‘everyone needs to have equal access’ is stronger than that ‘everyone needs to have access’. Here is what I mean by “equal” access, and the reason why I argue for the stronger claim: *It should not be harder* for anyone to have access to these metaphysical insights in virtue of the social classes or professions they belong to. MIRANDA FRICKER points out that there are some professions in which hermeneutic work is primarily done – academia, law, politics, and journalism.¹⁷ “Equal” access would mean that someone who is not working in these professions, and who does not have relationships to people in these professions, should nevertheless *just as easily* have access to such metaphysical insights.

A special difficulty arises for the principle of equal access if we consider the earlier mentioned hard-to-reach metaphysical insights. That is, what if we pursue metaphysical insights in our research that are so complex so that it is unlikely that non-experts will be able to benefit from them?

First, it is dubitable that such insights exist. For insights about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, and the conditions of our existence it should be possible to find formulations that are comprehensible to non-experts. After all, these insights are ultimately based in everyone’s experience – try to imagine infinity, try to picture something in your mind that is not three-dimensional, and so on – and so there is always a comprehensible starting-point.

Second, as long as these insights are accessible to *someone* other than the researcher, they are worthy of pursuit to some degree. It is already a service done by research to a wider population, even if it only helps one person to have an insight they would otherwise not have had. But of course, in such a limiting case, one would have to ask whether the resources should rather be spent for a different inquiry. What this limiting case shows, to be sure, is that the principle of equal access cannot mean that everyone must have equal access to *every* insight produced, at *any* given point in time. That would not be possible, simply because not everyone possesses the same kinds of prior knowledge and ability to have each of the insights, at a given point in time. However, the principle does entail that differences in education of the subjects interested in these insights should not result in differences in access. As a consequence, this means that efforts should be made to give people the additional knowledge they need to have the metaphysical insights they desire.

privileged people go into research, then experiences of people from less educated backgrounds are in danger of perpetually being left out.

¹⁷ Cf. FRICKER, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 152.

The above assumes that there is a general interest or desire by non-experts to have such insights. But what if that interest is not there? Or perhaps an interest is there, but not if it involves as much work as an interactive form of science communication would require? In other words, as science communication requires a more interactive form in the case of metaphysical insights – a facilitating so that the non-specialists can *themselves* work their way through having the insights – the question of whether non-specialists *have interest* in these insights at all is even more pressing. If research that brings purely cognitive benefits is only legitimate when combined with an interactive form of science communication, then that requires a certain amount of willingness by non-researchers to learn about these insights – more so than in regular forms of science communication, where non-researchers only have to listen to the results.

Imagine if we pursued research with purely cognitive benefits, and as a measure to make this legitimate, we provided equal access for everyone to a facilitating of these insights. But then no one would take up the offer. Even though in this case we could tell ourselves ‘well, as long as we provide access to everyone, we’re fine’, this does not sound much different to researchers pursuing a sentimental indulgence for a few (with the added bonus of having reassured themselves that it is legitimate). So how does the principle of equal access solve this problem?

First, the problem is less acute if one thinks in more detail about what ‘access’ could mean in such a situation. Real access would mean that non-specialists can also be involved in the process of *deciding what questions are asked* in the first place.¹⁸ That is, if we imagine that we only pursue inquiries that promise purely cognitive benefits under the condition that this can also benefit non-researchers, then we might first have to find out *in which* inquiries the non-researchers are interested, before we start the research. In this way, *some* interest by non-researchers in the question would be guaranteed. And in this way, we could ensure that we do not pursue these questions as a sentimental indulgence for a few.

Second, it could also be that non-researchers do not mind having to work more in order to benefit from this kind of research – ultimately acquiring the metaphysical insights themselves. It could very well be the other way around, namely that it is more satisfying for them to be involved in the process of inquiry itself, rather than just being told by some scientists how things are. This is ultimately an empirical question. There is, of course, no guarantee that anyone will be interested in the inquiries of this kind of research, no matter whether they can decide on which questions are asked or not.

In terms of empirical evidence, it is at least plausible to assume that there is some public interest in this kind of philosophical research. In recent years many public philosophy podcasts, festivals, TV shows, blogs, and more have come into existence and have had their steady followers. Metaphysical questions have done just as well in this environment as others.

The point of the principle of equal access for research with purely cognitive benefits is not that such research *must* be pursued, and then be distributed equally. It is also not that a set contingent of time and money should be spent for science communication. The point is rather: *To the extent to which* we pursue purely cognitive benefits in research, we have to make sure everyone who wants to has access to these insights. This might include involving them in determining the questions to be pursued beforehand. So, the more we pursue research with purely cognitive benefits, the more interactive science communication we have to do.

¹⁸ ZEYNEP PAMUK explores the option of “science courts”. The idea involves regular citizens collectively working out in a court-like procedure how certain scientific findings should influence public policy. (cf. PAMUK, ZEYNEP (forthcoming): *Politics and Expertise. How to Use Science in a Democratic Society*. Princeton University Press.) A similar idea could be pursued for the decision which inquiries we are supposed to pursue. Citizens could come together in a court-like setting to controversially discuss which research questions are currently to be pursued. This could work not only for metaphysical, but also for practical and ethical inquiries.

CONCLUSION

We started out with JOHN DEWEY's imperative that what we do in philosophy "must take effects in conduct"¹⁹ if it is not to be a sentimental indulgence for a few. On the basis of this we have asked whether insights that bring cognitive benefit – they change something in our minds – but do not make a difference in our actions, can be a legitimate aim of scientific research. I have argued that they can be a legitimate aim of research if we follow the principle of equal access for everyone to these insights.

But is this enough to conclude that, according to DEWEY, pursuing such questions wouldn't be a sentimental indulgence? As already pointed out in the introduction, PHILIP KITCHER argues that to interpret DEWEY's imperative in this way would make it too weak.²⁰

The considerations in this article bring out an interesting observation about DEWEY's imperative, however. Notice that with this imperative, DEWEY actually warns us of *two* pitfalls we should avoid, not one. What we do in philosophy, first, should not be a sentimental indulgence, and second, it should not be done only for a few. We can avoid both, according to DEWEY, if what we do takes effects in conduct. Now, in this article we focused on insights that explicitly do not take effects in conduct. How are they nevertheless doing in avoiding the two pitfalls DEWEY warns us of?

Let us start with the 'should not be done for a few' pitfall. Here, we have provided a way how to steer clear of the pitfall: The principle of equal access demands of us that if we pursue inquiries aimed at purely cognitive benefits, we have to pursue interactive forms of science communication in order to make sure that anyone who is interested in the insights has equal access (independently of their educational and professional backgrounds, and so on) to them. This includes that we might have to involve interested subjects in the decision of what inquiries we pursue at all, in order to ensure that our inquiries with purely cognitive benefits meet a broader interest than just ours. In other words, the principle of equal access ensures that what we pursue is not an indulgence *for a few*.

But it could still be a sentimental indulgence *for many*. That is, just because we make sure that others also benefit from our inquiries does not prevent our inquiries from being a sentimental indulgence, the second pitfall. We have said above that metaphysical inquiries probably do qualify as a sentimental indulgence for DEWEY, as they are 'all about us'. They are, specifically, about the conditions of our own thinking, the structure of our material world, our own nature, and the conditions of our existence, and explicitly without having effects on our conduct.

Here, the spirit of the article departs from DEWEY. I have defended a position that argues that a so-called sentimental indulgence – pursuing purely cognitive benefits – should indeed be pursued in science, if it is done for the many as opposed to for the few. DEWEY would hardly have been impressed by the arguments in this article. Perhaps one could convince him that there are pragmatic reasons to pursue some metaphysical questions, like WILLIAM JAMES believed.²¹ In such a case, pursuing metaphysical inquiries would not necessarily be a sentimental indulgence, as it would satisfy a human need. But it is more likely that DEWEY would wish for human beings to get rid of such sentimental desires, and rather use their intellectual resources to work toward democracy and justice.

¹⁹ DEWEY, *Democracy and Education*, p. 354.

²⁰ cf. KITCHER, *Preludes to Pragmatism*.

²¹ According to SAMI PIHLSTRÖM, there is a "constant pragmatic need for the ethical evaluation of metaphysical concepts, problems, disputes, and theories [at] the heart of James's pragmatic method (...)." PIHLSTRÖM, SAMI (2007): "Metaphysics with a Human Face." *William James Studies*, 2:1-28, p. 6.

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