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Curiosity as an Epistemic Virtue

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Introduction

Introduction

The desire to know, or curiosity or inquisitiveness, has been for more than two millennia discussed in philosophical literature, under various, not completely synonymous, names. Curiosity is thus an old topic in classical philosophy; however, it is a new area of research in contemporary epistemology. It had almost disappeared from the twentieth-century philosophical scene, in particular from analytic debates, which have concentrated on the definition of knowledge rather than on its goals and its motivating sources. Fortunately, it is back: in the recent virtue epistemology there is a kind of upsurge of interest in it. On the descriptive epistemological side Ilhan Inan has published a book (2012) on the semantics of curiosity. There is an excellent recent (2018) edited volume on the moral psychology of curiosity, as its title goes. The present book will probably be the first book on curiosity from the strictly epistemological viewpoint, but also taking into account the recent developments in psychology of curiosity and in the research on the nature and motivation of inquiry in science.

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The viewpoint taken here will be broadly the one of virtue epistemology (VE for short). In short, in the present book we want to bring curiosity where it belongs, according to our opinion, namely in the very center of epistemology. We shall treat is as the central epistemic virtue, and we shall say more about it in a moment.

The chapter you are reading is a topical introduction; the next chapter will offer a sketchy historical introduction (sketchy and short because of the demands of space, with apologies).

Let us start with terminology**.** We shall be using the word "curiosity" as our central term; sometimes we shall also use "inquisitiveness", to stress its active side.[1] We shall take it to be the interest in how things are, theoretically and practically, the desire for knowledge and understanding (for this meaning see, for instance, Baehr 2011); this will be the main curiosity concept to be used here. Sometimes the word "curiosity" is used in a negative sense, of meddlesomeness; this is not the sense to be used here. (For more on this, see Chap. 4.)

As we noted, not much has been written on epistemology of curiosity recently. The excellent monograph written by Inan (2012) combines semantic and epistemological approach, with a bit more stress being laid on semantics. The (2018) collection we mentioned offers an impressive range of approaches, from some of the best philosophers in the field; we shall be referring to both books in the sequel.

There is more to be found in the related areas. First, the history of curiosity and of approaches to it is quite rich; the ancient and early Christian philosophy is discussed in detail (e.g. Zuss 2012; Walsh 1988; Zurn 2019), and the further development has been masterly analyzed by Hans Blumenberg (1988; the English version appears as Part III, "The 'Trial' of Theoretical Curiosity", of Hans Blumenberg (1966), *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, MIT Press). Neil Kenny (2004) offers a detailed account of the "rapprochement" between the curious and the useful in early modern times. There are also a lot of interesting studies about the role of curiosity in science, and in particular in scientific revolution (see Chap. 9 on science). Second, equally importantly, a lot of

[1] With thanks to Safiye Yiğit, who has, in the discussion, insisted on the importance of the term (see also her 2018 paper).

work on curiosity has been done in cognitive psychology, by authors like Berlyne, Silvia and Engel; see Chap. 8 on cognitive psychology of curiosity.

Understanding Curiosity

What is curiosity? Let us start with delineating a conception of curiosity in the most general sense of motivation for acquiring knowledge and understanding, and by noting some important distinctions, often overlooked by friends and foes of curiosity alike. One usually distinguishes between the related disposition, sometimes called "interest", especially by psychologists (see Silvia 2006), and the manifestation of the disposition (more like inquisitiveness, or active curiosity, perhaps), going from the less known to the better known (see Inan 2012). In fact, one should distinguish between the general interest in things, the capacity and readiness cognitively to react to features of the environment, curiosity proper and the disposition to ask questions and inquire. Psychologists are interested in the issue whether curiosity is mere desire or emotion; the latter view seems dominant (see Silvia 2006). However, here the simpler, desire-like aspect will be sufficient. When I have active curiosity in mind, I shall sometimes talk of "inquisitiveness-curiosity", to remind the reader that we are dealing with curiosity in one of its varieties, not with some other, related phenomenon.

"All man by nature desire to know", Aristotle famously claimed in *Metaphysics, A. 1* (Ross' translation), and, of course, the core element in knowledge is true belief. Why do we want to have true beliefs about very diverse matters that interest us in life? Because we are curious about things, inquisitive and alert, and inquisitiveness-curiosity regarding p is the wish to have true beliefs and to know whether p (and to understand why p, etc.). This sounds quite banal and uncontroversial to many. However, Ernest Sosa, who otherwise keeps stressing the importance of truth in epistemology, has argued that the wish to have answers to questions we are curious about cannot be put in terms of "desire for truths per se" (2002, 158). He takes the desire-for-truths theorist to make a fallacy,

which he illustrates by the analogy with the desire for savory food. He invites us to imagine a character claiming:

P1 I want savory food.

and

P2 I want that *if* I have savory food, it be also nutritious.

and then concluding from this:

C Therefore, I want nutritious food.

The desire-for-truths theorist allegedly makes the same mistake by arguing:

F1 I want beliefs that answer my questions.
F2 I want that *if* I have an answer to a question of mine, it be true!
C Therefore, I want true beliefs. (2002: 158)

Next, Sosa admonishes us:

> We may want true beliefs, in this sense: that *if* for whatever reason. we are interested in a certain question. we would prefer to believe a correct rather than an incorrect answer to that question: but this does not mean that we want, in itself and independently of our wanting our questions answered, that we have true answers to them simply for the truth this would give us. (Ibid.)

For my part, this is not how I see my own curiosity. It is not that when I ask you, say for time, I want *an* answer and then, in addition, I want the true one, like wanting savory food and in addition wanting it to be nutritious. I don't want you just to say "It's five p.m." and then have an additional wish that your sentence come out true; I want it to be true in the first place. A sign that I am not being idiosyncratic is that in the movies, police investigators, when given an answer by the suspect, never say "O

thanks that you answered, but it would be nice if your answer were also true"; they typically shout "I want the truth!" I can't believe that they are all into committing the desire-for-truths theorist's alleged mistake. I conclude that there is nothing abnormal about desiring only true answers if one desires any answers at all. Inquisitiveness in general is the disposition to have such desires and wishes and to pursue their fulfillment.

So, why are we inquisitive? Our inquisitiveness-curiosity is either pure or practical or mixed. Sometimes, one is just curious, with no further practical goal. This can be called "intrinsic curiosity". But one is often motivated extrinsically, by practical curiosity, searching the means for practical ends. Classics did think about the issue. La Rochefoucauld distinguishes two kinds of practical goals:

> There are various sorts of curiosity; one is from interest, which makes us desire to know that which may be useful to us; and the other, from pride which comes from the wish to know what others are ignorant of. (*Maxims*)

Here we shall concentrate upon the pure variety. A human being devoid of curiosity would have little motivation to arrive to true belief and knowledge.[2] In normal cases it is inquisitiveness-curiosity that motivates us to gain true belief and knowledge. On the usual view of motivating virtues, this would seem to make it a virtue; since it is the main spring of motivation, we should take it as *the motivating epistemic virtue. After all, wanting to know whether p* it gives cognizers particular instances of *p* (or of its negation) as particular goals and the truth as the general epistemic goal. So, we have a truth-focused motivating virtue: *inquisitiveness or curiosity* having as its general goal reliable arriving at truth. This is, I submit, the *core motivating epistemic virtue.* There is a multitude of questions of all sorts that we ask, whether, why, when and how, and inquisitiveness-curiosity caters to all of them.

I have just mentioned being curious and alert. I propose to take the notion of inquisitiveness-curiosity in the widest sense so as to encompass

[2] We are here considering the cognizer in isolation from social structures of inquiry. If I am part of a research institution, I might, „be motivated at arriving at true belief, because otherwise I will be fired", if I am a private eye, I might have to investigate other people's marital infidelities that I find personally very boring and uninterested. Here the curiosity is simply institutionalized.

primitive alertness to the features of the environment. (If this doesn't fit your semantic intuitions, then take it, please, as a stipulation, not as analysis of the commonsense notion). Alertness is biologically based, as shown by the existence and functioning of early warning perceptual mechanisms that alert the organism to potentially threatening changes in its surrounding, by the mechanism of habituation, that makes it "lose interest" in repeated stimuli. The importance of this wide sense of inquisitiveness is that it helps us address the problem of "brute" or "passive" knowledge, as Jason Baehr calls it (Baehr 2011). The answer is to take alertness as proto-curiosity, and in this sense, a proto-virtue that makes us open to the world and sensitive to it.[3]

We need one more widening. As various colleagues have noticed, a person, finite or infinite, who knows everything would not be curious, and would thus paradoxically lack the alleged main motivating epistemic virtue. One answer is that many human virtues are tailor-made for human agents in less-than-perfect but more-than-hellish human circumstances. We shall argue in Chap. 3 that curiosity is one such virtue, typical for finite and relatively ignorant beings, in need of constant updating of information in order to function successfully. But I prefer another line: I will just stipulate a slightly wider meaning of "inquisitiveness" that also includes cherishing the truth once found. It seems to me a natural extension of meaning: a person with bad memory but eager to get to know who subsequently doesn't care a bit for the knowledge acquired and is completely unworried about having forgotten everything she learned is not consistently inquisitive. So, the hypothetical omniscient person who keeps her virtue by cherishing what she knows is "curious" in this wider sense.

And finally, a slight narrowing of the goal. As my Bulgarian colleague Bakalova has reminded me, curiosity sometimes leads to insights, and some of the insights are not directed toward truth like hitting upon a great idea in poetry, or choreography. Of course the proposed account has no problem with curiosity sometimes aiming at items other than

[3] Alertness is beyond our control, one might object. Well, in many cases curiosity is beyond our control as well, and being under one's control is not essential for motivating virtue. But I agree that the automatism with which we do get alert makes alertness closer to the "sub-personal level" than inquisitiveness.

truth; it only claims that in epistemically relevant cases it does aim at truth. Note that there is a link with knowledge even in this case, since the insight sought would typically have to do with knowledge-how.[4] So much, or rather, and unfortunately, so little, about the very notion.[5]

The Preview of the Book

Overview

Since the very beginning of the book we put curiosity at the center of philosophical interest, combining the initial sketch of kinds of curiosity with deeper epistemological issues related to them. The book has three parts: a more introductory one (preparing the ground for the second, central one); the central part on curiosity as motivating and organizing virtue, possibly the central epistemic virtue tout court; and the third, dedicated to ramifications and applications. The central part also tentatively addresses the issue of epistemic value, proposing that a large part of it derives from our natural curiosity. The third part talks about cognitive psychology of curiosity, about curiosity in science and, finally, about Socratic self-inquisitiveness or self-curiosity and its possible role in wisdom. Let me pass through the main topics in order.

History: How It All Started

The historical chapter is a kind of "historical introduction" to the topic. It presents not the whole of history, since this would demand a book, but the beginnings of philosophical discussion of curiosity, noting how different evaluations of curiosity started and starting a story of good and bad times for curiosity as philosophical topic. So, it gives on overview of

[4] One might go even further in discussion and claim, with Stanley and Williamson (2001), that knowledge-how is a subspecies of knowledge-that, but I am not particularly enthusiastic about this line.

[5] Horwich (2006) discusses similar issues under the heading of truth goal; I find his remarks congenial, but it is remarkable that he never mentions inquisitiveness, nor the topic of intellectual virtues.

ancient admirers and critics of curiosity from Greek atomists, through Socrates and Plato, all the way to Stoics and to early Christian thinkers, culminating with the rich and refined account proposed by Saint Augustine. It very briefly turns to the early modern "revolution of curiosity", within general philosophy and in areas in which philosophy has been joining early modern science, with names such as Galileo, Descartes, Hume and Kant at the forefront.

Kinds of Curiosity

The ancient discussion has already offered a rich taxonomy of kinds of curiosity, often organized around the positive-negative contrast. Modern work has added more, and also changed the focus from value-centered divisions to more topical ones.

Curiosity as Virtue

A human being devoid of curiosity would have little motivation to arrive to true belief and knowledge. Scientists, from Darwin through Einstein to Hawking, have spoken about curiosity as their crucial motivation. On the usual view of motivating virtues, this would seem to make it a virtue; since it is the main spring of motivation, we should take it as the motivating epistemic virtue. Indeed, philosophers have traditionally recommended live interest in at least certain important areas: one should come to know oneself, one should study important features of nature, or of supernatural reality.

However, many philosophers thought curiosity is not a virtue. Plutarch describes it in completely negative terms, as an "unhealthy and injurious" state of mind which allows "winter and darkness to enter the soul". There are problems with bad curiosity: internal, epistemic problems (the temptation to study marginal, unimportant matters, stressed by Brady and Sosa) and the moral ones (interest in base matters, abuse of scientific curiosity for helping aggressive, cruel and otherwise immoral behavior). Can curiosity still be considered a virtue?

The temptation to study of superficial matters seems to be well documented in cognitive psychology, as Michael Brady has recently argued. I defend curiosity against the accusation and argue that he has proposed a needlessly pessimistic reading of the cognitive data. The morally bad aspects of curiosity cannot be denied. I argue that other mainstream virtues like courage (among the moral ones) and epistemic modesty (among the epistemic ones) are plagued by analogous problems. The range of possible solutions is well known; I propose as the two acceptable ones either limiting the virtue status to "good" curiosity (as it is often done with courage and the like, e.g., by Foot (2002)) or building into virtuous curiosity the ability to recognize the right objects to deal with, and admissible situations for the exercise of curiosity.

Why Is Curiosity Central: A Motivating Virtue Account?

It is epistemically very important to be i*ntrinsically* motivated to acquire knowledge and understanding. However, most of the character virtues apart from curiosity do not motivate such acquisition. Of course, virtues-abilities are not motivating in themselves; they help realize the goals we are independently motivated to achieve. The genuine curiosity is the central intrinsically motivating drive for achieving knowledge and understanding. We shall see an example in Chap. 5, the role of self-inquisitiveness in organizing the acquisition of self-knowledge. Curiosity is the core motivating epistemic virtue. There is a multitude of questions of all sorts that we ask, whether, why, when and how, and inquisitiveness-curiosity caters to all of them.

So, in the present chapter, a strong, strictly virtue-*based*, and at the same time truth-centered framework for virtue epistemology (VE) is proposed, It bases VE upon a clearly motivating epistemic virtue, inquisitiveness or curiosity in a very wide sense, characterizes the purely executive capacities-virtues as means for the truth-goal set by the former and, finally, situates the remaining, partly motivating and partly executive virtues in relation to this central stock of virtues. Character-traits epistemic virtues are presented as hybrids, partly moral, partly purely epistemic. In

order to make the approach virtue *based*, it is argued that the central virtue, inquisitiveness or curiosity, is responsible for the value of truth: truth is valuable to cognizers because they are inquisitive, and most other virtues are means for satisfying inquisitiveness. One can usefully combine this virtue-based account of the motivation for acquiring knowledge with an analysis of the concept "knowledge", which puts at the forefront virtues-capacities, in order to obtain a full-blooded, "strong" VE. We call the result "the motivating virtue account".

The Motivating Virtue Account: For and Against

The high valuation of curiosity has prompted strong contemporary criticisms, which focus upon possible deficiencies of curiosity. First, upon the cases of idle curiosity, and the second, upon volatility, irrelevance, superficiality and similar defects. Finally, there is an objection that targets the idea of epistemic high usefulness of curiosity: excellent epistemic results can be obtained without intrinsic, paradigmatic curiosity, so what is epistemically so special about it? The chapter offers the defense of the motivating virtue account against these.

Curiosity and the Origin of Epistemic Value

A separate chapter addresses the deep metaphysical problem of the origin of epistemic value. Instrumental value raises no problem: the practical goals give value to items of knowledge that serve as means for them. But what about intrinsic value? Does curiosity bestow such value upon truths and knowledge of them? Or, the other way around, the value of truth-cum-knowledge determines the value of curiosity? The chapter offers an overview of positions, with authors like Goldman, Zagzebski and Pritchard on the front-line. My own sympathies are response-dependentist: the genuine intrinsic curiosity bestows intrinsic value on knowledge and truth, and I propose the view as a tentative solution. The proposed account is thus response-dependentist and naturalist.

Cognitive Psychology

We next turn to interdisciplinary matters. First, to the contribution of cognitive psychology to the characterization of curiosity and to one author, Paul Silvia, and his book *Exploring the Psychology of Interest* (2006). We show how the cognitive research goes well with philosophical interest, and how the role of understanding, central in the former, gets reaffirmed in the latter. We conclude with a lot of optimism about descriptive naturalization of virtue-epistemological approach to curiosity, which would, as against pure concept-analyzers, include natural, psychological conditions of possibility of epistemically virtuous activities.

Scientific Curiosity

Curiosity is the motivating force in science, we claim, engaged in deploying, focusing and helping organize our knowledge-capacities. A good classification of kinds of curiosity might turn out to be quite important for understanding scientific research: compare theoretical curiosity that leads to understanding and practical curiosity directly motivating laboratory work. The chapter investigates the ways the two interact, and the link between the desire to understand and the desire to learn how to apply the understanding reached.

We also briefly look at the cognitive structure of scientific revolutions, since it finely illustrates the roles that different kinds of curiosity have actually played in historical development.

Know Thyself: The Importance of Self-inquisitiveness for Wisdom

We next turn to the role of curiosity as epistemic virtue, taking into account the traditionally central kind of interest, namely the interest in knowing oneself and in examined life. Authors writing about the meaning of life, like Nozick, have continued the tradition, but virtue epistemologists have stayed away from it; I suggest that we take the "know

thyself" drive as an important example of epistemic imperative, and turn to the topic from the standpoint of mainstream virtue epistemology.

Of course, self-inquisitiveness is a motivating epistemic virtue. If successful, it deploys, organizes and motivates other epistemic virtues, both virtues-abilities and character virtues. Self-inquisitiveness thus points to a possible general paradigm of curiosity organizing. And probably the intrinsic self-inquisitiveness is also responsible for the intrinsic value of self-knowledge.

Toward a Bigger Picture

We hope that in the book we succeed in bringing together two lines of inquiry. First, the virtue epistemological one, with curiosity as the central item, and second, the issue of the moral worth of curiosity, with the problems about bad curiosity and with curiosity about oneself, and its role in a meaningful life, as a paradigmatic positive case.

In the concluding chapter we list three further topics, worthy of investigating, which we leave for some later occasion.

First, philosophical curiosity; a topic that is sometimes mentioned, but rarely developed in a more systematic fashion. We hope to apply our ideas about the desire to understand, guiding the work of science, and to connect it to the work in philosophy. So the issue of what is central for philosophical curiosity, the desire for philosophical understanding, will be briefly sketched.

Second, the social framework of normal exercises of curiosity. There, the division of labor, in science, law and media, increases efficiency and creates now possibilities, but it also adds to existing inequalities and creates new ones, from economical through legal to political ones. The topic of epistemic justice in relation to inquiry and inquisitiveness is therefore a burning topic, and we briefly point out its importance for social epistemology. Also, we remind the reader about problems in social epistemology and philosophy of science having to do with social organization of curiosity, and its theoretical and moral consequences.

Third, we return to the topic of naturalism and widen our sketchy presentation from various previous chapters in the book.

We thus hope to show again that curiosity merits to become a very hot topic in epistemology and ethics, as it has been historically for centuries.

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2

History: How It All Started

We now pass to a brief historical introduction to the problematics—not the whole of history, since that would demand a book, but a historical overview of the beginnings of philosophical discussion of curiosity, ending with a brief note on the apotheosis of curiosity in early modern philosophy. Our main interest will be in how philosophy of curiosity or "love of knowledge" started, and in particular, how different evaluations of curiosity started, since this connects to the central topic of the book—the issue of the virtuous versus vicious nature of curiosity.[1]

I shall be very brief about the most famous authors whose contributions are well known, and present at more length the views of Seneca,

[1] There are a lot of detailed studies, but little general literature on the question; the most important exceptions are the classical work by Blumenberg, Part III "The 'Trial' of Theoretical Curiosity", in Hans Blumenberg (1966), *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, MIT Press (our quotations will be from the 1999 edition) and then the relatively recent book by Mark Zuss (2012), *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*, Springer. (See also the review and discussion by Gene Fellner, Wesley Pitts, and Mark Zuss (2012), "Beyond the Sensible World: A Discussion of Mark Zuss", *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*, *Cult Stud of Sci Educ*, online publication without page numbers.)

For a recent discussion, see the excellent paper by Safiye Yigit (2019), "The Curious Case of Curiosity: A virtue or a Vice?" in Marianna Papastephanou (ed.), *Toward New Philosophical Explorations of the Epistemic Desire to Know: Just Curious about Curiosity,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 150–165.

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Cicero and Plutarch, who are being less discussed in the general literature. Apologies for the extreme brevity: the usual approach is to separate the topical from the historical approach and then give a lot of space to each, a separate book, normally. However, with the topic of curiosity, the history has not been discussed in the topical analytic literature, so I think that even a very short introduction might be very useful to the contemporary reader!

The Classical Period

Let us start with a few words about the Pre-Socratics. With them the search for knowledge becomes a central aim of human endeavors. The alleged vast knowledge of gods is admired, and the question of comparison with human abilities raised. The knowledge in question concerns cosmos, but also humans.

Let me illustrate this by reference to Xenophanes of Colophon, who was a philosophically minded poet who lived in various parts of the ancient Greek world during the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE. Xenophanes' most extended comment on knowledge is B34:

> [A]nd of course the clear and certain truth no man has seen nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and what I say about all things. For even if, in the best case, one happened to speak just of what has been brought to pass, still he himself would not know. But opinion is allotted to all.

The commenters (e.g. Zuss 2012: 11) note that Xenophanes claimed that our knowledge will always remain incomplete and obscure. While wisdom remains always the ultimate goal of human aspiration, our ability to know the ways of the world are only developed by constant search. Zuss ascribes to Xenophanes a positive attitude to rational inquiry:

> He asserts the right to rational inquiry through observation, debate, and a discourse that, perhaps for the first time in the classical context, bridges the gulf between the gods and humanity. (Ibid.)

Other thinkers, like Hecateus, join the positive project (Zuss 2012). We should equally not forget the genuinely curious philosopher Leucippus, from fifth century BCE, who allegedly said that "he would rather discover a single explanation (aitiologian), than acquire the kingdom of the Persians" (from Eusebius). So, much about Pre-Socratics, again with apologies for brevity.

Now, with Socrates a contrast appears that will become canonical for a large part of ancient philosophy: the one between an interest in nature and cosmos, and an interest in human matters, including interest in one's own character, goals and so on, the one that we called self-inquisitiveness. Indeed, self-examination plays for him the central role in human life: "The unexamined life is not worth living", he famously claimed in the *Apology* (38a5–6).[2] The self-examination goes together with ethical inquiry.[3]

Here is Richard Kraut commenting on Socrates:

> [H]e holds that ethical inquiry is a process that one should undertake throughout one's life, not merely for some brief period. One cannot live up to his demand by spending a half year asking the questions he asks, then turning to other matters, and never revisiting such issues. For the call to the examined life is linked to the thesis that the greatest good for a human being is "to have discussions every day about virtue" and other ethical matters (*Apology* 38a3). We should recognize how audacious a claim this is. We should expect Socrates to give us reasons to accept it. (2006: 229)

And Kraut points to the way from Socrates to Plato. He notes a point common to the major moral philosophers of antiquity:

> Above all, they think, one must arrive at an understanding, far beyond that of a child, of what is good. That is the principal concept of Greek ethics, and the Socratic dialogues lay the groundwork for its centrality […] The

[2] See, for example, the comments of Christopher Rowe in his 2011 study of self-examination in *Apology*.

[3] For the contemporary perspective on self-examination see Chap. 10 of the present book.

> highest kind of knowledge, Plato holds in the *Republic*, is knowledge of the Form of the good—and it takes many years of scientific training to acquire it. (2006: 241)

Plato has indeed managed to bring together the two main lines of inquiry, and, in our terminology, two main targets of curiosity. On the one hand, he continues the Socratic line of importance of examination of humanly relevant matters, including self-examination and search for principles of good human life; on the other, he combines it ingeniously with the second line, inquiry into cosmos and its transcendent ground. He adds new elements to both lines, prominently the connection of inquiry with love (*agape*) for its target, including considerations of Eros and the like (see, for instance, *Phaedrus*, 256).

In the *Republic* Plato talks about "the real lover of knowledge" (*philomathes*), ready "to strive emulously for true being" (*pros to on*) ([490a]).[4] The discussion of the desire for knowledge thus gets combined with metaphysical considerations of its target. The final target cannot be the multiplicity of individuals but must be the true nature (*physis*) of each thing ([490b 3]).

Interestingly, the historians of the notion of curiosity, like, prominently Zuss, seem to be at pains with the terminology Plato uses: his "love of knowledge" does not fit all the connotations of the word "curiosity", so Zuss and others seem not to appreciate properly the impressive task of unification of the two lines of interest, the one in human and the other in cosmic-metaphysical matters, achieved by him.

Aristotle continues in building up the happy synthesis, of course with less romantic connections than his teacher. We have already quoted his famous line from *Metaphysics* I, to the effect that all human beings by nature desire to know. Here is the wider context:

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[4] Here is the reading due to Martha Nussbaum:

> *The Republic* argues that the best life for a human being is the life of the philosopher, a life devoted to learning and the contemplation of truth.

> All men naturally desire knowledge (*tou eidenai oregontai physei*). An indication of this is our esteem for the senses; for apart from their use we esteem them for their own sake, and most of all the sense of sight. Not only with a view to action, but even when no action is contemplated, we prefer sight, generally speaking, to all the other senses. The reason of this is that of all the senses sight best helps us to know things, and reveals many distinctions. ([980a] [21])

Note the terminological richness of characterizations the drive for knowledge and truth in both philosophers. Here it is *orexis*, in Plato it was *agape* and also *philomathia,* and other names could also be found. Let me also mention the connection between desire to know and wonder. The latter is a manifestation of the former, and often its first phase (*Met.* 980a21); Aristotle here continues considerations on wonder started by Plato in *Theaetetus* where he notes that wonder is the "beginning of philosophy" (155d2–5). Now, in *Metaphysics* and in *Posterior Analytics* it is the metaphysical line that is prominent; however, an analogous approach is present in his works on ethics. Let me quote Kraut again:

> The student of ethics, Aristotle says, is embarked on the project of trying to become a better person, and in order to do so, he must come to a better understanding of the chief good of human life. Like an archer aiming at a target, he will be better able to hit his mark—living and making choices as he should—after having come to see, through philosophical argument, what his mark really is (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.2). (241)

Let me note a point that will become important later in the book, namely the fact that the meaning of Aristotle's word for "knowing (*epistasthai*) comes close to "understanding". We "know" something in this sense, he writes in Chapter 2 of his *Posterior Analytic* (71 b 10–18) when we have an explanation of it, and when we are aware that things cannot be otherwise.[5] For Aristotle, this "understanding" is the highest kind of knowledge, and it is natural to assume that the natural desire of human beings for knowledge also, and very importantly, encompasses the desire to understand. We shall return to this point when talking about kinds of

[5] The translation is from J. Barnes (1975). See also M. F. Burnyeat (1981, 2011).

curiosity and their psychology and about the desire to understand in science (Chap. 9).

To conclude, with Plato and Aristotle curiosity, the desire for truth, knowledge and understanding, under its various names, becomes recognized as a general driving force behind human effort and the center of human cognitive life.

Hellenistic Thought

Let us now pass to the Hellenistic period. Here, several crucial innovations take place. After Plato and Aristotle, the authors turn to more human concerns, and to the role of curiosity in daily life. They distinguish in detail various kinds of curiosity, use specific names for some of them, and evaluate the kinds in a strong moral manner. The typical contrasts are high (good) versus low (bad) curiosity, virtue-directed versus virtue-indifferent curiosity and the like. It is really a curiosity for-and-against debate, sometimes marked with extreme attitudes in either direction.

We shall follow chronological order, starting with Pyrrho (365/60–275/70 BC), passing to Cicero, (106–43 BC), Seneca (BC–65 CE), and then to Plutarch (45–120 CE), and conclude in the next section with Saint Augustine (354–430 CE). Our authors don't insist on metaphysical grounding of the desire for knowledge and are, for this reason, closer to the contemporary, purely epistemological and ethical approaches to curiosity. Interestingly, we shall be moving from the views very friendly to curiosity to those quite inimical to it.

Our first topics are the skeptics. In the long tradition of skepticism we shall be interested in two authors, Pyrrho (365/60–275/70 BC) and Sextus (ca. 160–210 CE) who, in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (or *Skepticism*) claims he is presenting to the reader what are basically Pyrrho's views.[6]

His is perhaps the most puzzling discussion of investigativeness-curiosity, perhaps in the whole history of philosophy. He begins it by

[6] See Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (2000), *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy), Cambridge University Press, second edition.

duties], Bk 1, Sect. 13, where Cicero lists specific qualities of human beings that distinguish them from beasts. One of them is that it "sees the causes of things, understands the rise and progress of events, compares similar objects, and connects and associates the future with the present—easily takes into view the whole course of life, and provides things necessary for it". The next one is: "/T/he research and investigation of truth/".

Cicero wisely adds: "/T/o this desire for seeing the truth (*veri videndi cupiditati*) is annexed a certain craving for precedence, insomuch that the man well endowed by nature is willing to render obedience to no one, unless to a preceptor, or a teacher, or one who holds a just and legitimate sway for the general good." We shall see in later chapters, in particular Chap. 9 on curiosity in science, that this combination is typical for many great scientists, from Newton through Darwin to Hawking: Cicero was indeed quite insightful in his description. His wider hunch is less persuasive: "Hence are derived greatness of mind and contempt for the vicissitudes of human fortune."

Here is another interesting point, presented as the advice he gives to us, his readers:

> In this quest of knowledge, both natural and right, there are two faults to be shunned,—one, the taking of unknown things for known, and giving our assent to them too hastily, which fault he who wishes to escape (and all ought so to wish) will give time and diligence to reflect on the subjects proposed for his consideration. The other fault is that some bestow too great zeal and too much labor on things obscure and difficult, and at the same time useless. (Sect. 18)

The contrast between two extremes characterizing desire for knowledge, hastiness versus too much labor, appears, in various guises, throughout the literature on curiosity.

In his *De Finibus*, Cicero gives fine examples of positive curiosity, fictional and historical. He interprets the offers given by Sirens in the *Odyssey* as offers of knowledge. And he contrasts passion for

encouraging them to engage in Academic philosophy. So for Cicero, the road to wisdom is paved with cautious opinion. (201: 134)


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he then prefer Zizek to Kripke?) The same for the study of literature and music:

> Why try to discover whether Penelope was a pattern of purity, or whether she had the laugh on her contemporaries? Or whether she suspected that the man in her presence was Ulysses, before she knew it was he? Teach me rather what purity is, and how great a good we have in it, and whether it is situated in the body or in the soul.

So much about Seneca.

When we turn to Plutarch, the picture is completely different. First, we encounter a linguistic difficulty. His essay commonly translated as "On Curiosity" is titled "Peri polypragmosynes", and the word *polypragmosyne* has strong connotations of intrusiveness and of meddling into affairs of others.[10] Still, respectable interpreters, see, for instance, Van Hof, normally translate the title as "On Curiosity". Latin "curiositas" is sometimes used in the fully negative sense; for instance, Plautus writes that *curiosi sunt hic complures mali* (Stichus 198), "masses of evil people are curious"; see also Leigh (2013: 62). We shall be dealing with this problem in a moment, after we quote some Plutarch's typical opinions about the topic.

Plutarch is extremely critical of his object. The proper object of "curiosity" he talks about are evils, vices and misfortunes of other people, and the interest here is the desire to learn (*filomatheia*) about evils of others (*allotrion kakon*) (p. 335). The deaths of men, the shuffling off of life, "seductions of women, assaults of slaves, slanders of friends, compounding of poisons, envies, jealousies, shipwrecks of households, overthrow of empires are his typical examples" (p. 485).

What is the cure for such an evil? "Be less curious about people and more curious about ideas", proposed Marie Curie, indeed completely in line with what Plutarch would have said.[11] According to Plutarch, it

[10] For the wider epistemological context of Seneca's reflections see Jula Wildberger (2006). For an interesting connection with the idea of self-knowledge elsewhere in Letters, see Margaret R. Graver (2014). See also the excellent study by Matthew Leigh (2013).

[11] Maria Curie's anecdotal response to a reporter's inquiry. As quoted in Clifton Fadiman and André Bernard, *Bartlett's Book of Anecdotes* (2000), 150.

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N. Miščević, *Curiosity as an Epistemic Virtue*, Palgrave Innovations in Philosophy,
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