

## Schooling and a “Blamable Desire for Knowledge”

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by Gary K. Clabaugh

“Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

As a teacher I often wish that my students were more curious. Yet in this issue, Alice Ramos proposes that curiosity can be a vice. There are times, writes Ramos, when a student might be motivated by a “blamable desire for knowledge.”

Ramos bases this claim on a distinction made by Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century Aristotelian philosopher and theologian. Aquinas splits the desire to learn into two types: *curiositas* (or curiosity)—which he describes as a vice; and *studiositas* (or studiousness)—which he regards as a virtue. Here is how Ramos defines this distinction: *Curiositas* (or curiosity) is a vice because it occurs when the desire for knowing is “disordered or immoderate”; intellectual obligations are abandoned in favor of unprofitable study; or knowledge is sought from “dubious” or “unlawful” sources. *Studiositas* (or studiousness) is a virtue because it is ordered and limited; it occurs within a framework of moderation during the fulfillment of obligations; dubious or unlawful knowledge is avoided.

Should educators accept this dichotomy? Perhaps, but first there are two related questions we should ask: Who decides what is “trivial,” “disordered,” or “immoderate”? Who decides what sources of knowledge are “dubious” or “unlawful”?

Whoever decides these matters has the power to put an end to inquiry whenever it suits their purposes or threatens their convictions. They can stifle any curiosity merely by declaring that it represents a “blamable desire for knowledge.” Who among us is sufficiently wise, honest, and well informed to be entrusted with such responsibility?

Galileo's "criminality" illustrates this point. In 1615 "His Holiness and the Most Eminent Lords, Cardinals of this supreme and universal Inquisition" declared that Galileo had "rendered [himself] vehemently suspected by this Holy Office of heresy" and commanded him "to abjure, curse and detest the said error and heresies in our presence." His "crimes"? "Making the proposition that the sun is in the center of the world and immovable from its place" and "[m]aking the proposition that the earth is not the center of the world, nor immovable, but that it moves, and also with a diurnal action."<sup>1</sup> The Pope and the Lords of the Inquisition decided, in essence, that Galileo had strayed from the virtue of *studiositas* into the vice of *curiositas* when he abandoned the scriptures and instead heeded his own observations and calculations. Of course, his *curiositas* also led him to the truth.

This is no isolated instance. History is stuffed with example after example of authorities declaring highly creative curiosity "disordered or immoderate" whenever it frightened them or threatened their interests. Consider a few vital medical interests that were originally regarded as disordered or immoderate: curiosity about the structure and function of the human body and the related dissection of cadavers;<sup>2</sup> curiosity about the effects of inoculation to forestall disease; inquisitiveness about the effectiveness of vaccination;<sup>3</sup> interest in the germ theory of disease; and curiosity concerning effective anesthesia.

Of course there are many more examples of this same sort of thing outside medicine. Is there much doubt, for example, that Benjamin Franklin's interest in electricity was widely regarded as either trivial or immoderate in his day? The point is that serious misjudgments are commonly made regarding the desirability of a particular curiosity.

Ramos employs Aquinas's distinction as a springboard for making much broader assertions. She advises that educators should favor the "transmission of timeless truths through a well-ordered tradition and community." Recommending the "wisdom of the ancients" over the "newest theory," she also cautions against the sort of multiculturalism that causes us to discard the "great classics of Western literature," which have "long made us aware of the order of nature and of the human person's place within it."

Recall that Ramos is a woman, and then savor the paradox here. She favors the "wisdom of the ancients." Yet those very ancients commonly regarded women as little more than mutilated males who, when restraints were removed, were inclined to evil. Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher, astronomer, and mathematician (c. 50 B.C.), typified that attitude when he wrote, "There is a good principle which created order, light and man, and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness and women."<sup>4</sup> One can readily imagine how these "wise" ancients regarded

intellectual curiosity in a woman. A whole raft of quotations, beginning with the playwright Euripides' lines ("I hate a clever woman—God forbid that I should ever have a wife at home with more than a woman's wits!") proves the point.<sup>5</sup>

Most of those ancients that Ramos admires would not have cared to hear anything whatsoever from her, or any other woman, concerning the world of ideas. In fact, they would have regarded such intellectual curiosity as an aberration, an abnormality, a freak of nature—in short, as "disordered." The practical ramifications of this come into clearer focus if we consider the schooling of females. Remember that girls were excluded from formal schooling for centuries on the grounds that they were unsuited for it. Even after they were finally admitted into basic education, they were excluded from higher education for the very Aquinian reason that intellectual curiosity on the part of a female was unnatural and even dangerous to the woman herself. As recently as 1874, for example, the influential Harvard professor Edward H. Clarke proclaimed that women who attended college would develop "monstrous brains and puny bodies . . . [and] abnormally weak digestion."<sup>6</sup>

All this points to how easily Ramos's prescription can be abused. George Orwell's *1984* describes such abuse with utter clarity. "Big Brother" and "The Party" use the "Thought Police" and the "Ministry of Truth" to wipe out all unwelcome curiosity. What is the consequence? Ultimately, we are left with

a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting—three hundred million people all with the same face.<sup>7</sup>

What the Ramos thesis comes down to in the end is the essential tension between the longing to know and the comfort of ignorance. Any search for knowledge ultimately threatens unquestioning ignorance. The ignorant intuit that the false glue holding their world together is soluble when immersed in inquiry. So, given half a chance, they act to wipe out that threat by stifling the search and condemning the searcher.

Some members of the Kansas State School Board, for example, their biblical convictions threatened by scientific findings about the origins of life, recently sought to distort science teaching for their own ends. What else should we expect when the ignorant have the power to decide what is "disordered" or "immoderate," much less when they can declare sources of knowledge either "dubious" or "unlawful"? Here again, we see the central importance of who decides.

Generally, it is better to grit our teeth and resist the temptation to stifle curiosity, even when it seems frightening, and that applies to the

curiosity of children as well as adults. Children old enough to ask serious questions are old enough (and developmentally ready enough) for an honest answer. Politically, that can be a dangerous policy for teachers to follow, but the alternative is lies and evasions. Besides, the honest answer might be “I don’t know.”

In the final analysis, educators should prefer even frighteningly curious students to those who have no interest, no sense of wonder. Why? Because, as Joseph Heller explains in the novel *Catch 22*, “. . . it is neither possible nor necessary to educate people who never question anything.”<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

1. “The Crime of Galileo: Indictment and Abjuration of 1633,” *Modern History Sourcebook*, <<http://www.Fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1630galileo.html>>.
2. Henry Fountain, “Does Science Trump All?” *New York Times Week in Review*, 29 May 2005.
3. Ibid.
4. Generally attributed to Pythagoras by scholars.
5. Euripides, c. 484–406 B.C., in *Andromache*. See also “He who teaches letters to a woman feeds more poison to the frightful asp” (Menander, Greek dramatist, c. 343–291 B.C., *Fragments*); “She can’t have a mind, no woman has one” (Titus Plautus, c. 254–184 B.C., Roman dramatist and poet, *Miles Gloriosus*); and “When a woman thinks . . . she thinks evil” (Lucius Seneca, c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65, Roman dramatist, essayist, and statesman, *Hippolytus*).
6. Eliza Chin, “Looking Back,” *Mom MD: Connecting Women in Medicine*, <<http://www.mommd.com/lookingback.shtml>>.
7. George Orwell, *1984*, <<http://www.online-literature.com/orwell/1984>>, Chapter 7.
8. Joseph Heller, *Catch 22* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1955), 36.