

## *Studiositas* and *Curiositas*: Matters for Self-Examination

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by *Alice Ramos*

**T**eachers will generally agree that curiosity is a good thing that needs to be fostered: that the student who is curious is more desirous of knowledge, more attentive, and more interested in learning than the student who is less inquisitive. However, there may be instances of curiosity which harbor a blamable desire for knowledge. Is it possible then that curiosity might be a vice?

Before answering this question, which may leave some of us a little perplexed, I would like to briefly consider what two twentieth-century French philosophers have said about the development of the student's mind. Jacques Maritain speaks of teaching as an art, an art subservient to the nature of human intelligence. The source of the mind's knowledge is sense-perception, although it must be noted that our knowledge does not end there and so can rise above the things of sense, above material things, to know what is immaterial and spiritual. The teacher thus needs to offer to the student's mind examples from experience or particular statements that are already known to the student and from which the student will then go on to discover new truths. Maritain further states that the teacher has to "comfort" the mind of the student by making the logical connection between ideas when the power of the student's mind is still not able to establish the connection by itself.<sup>1</sup> The principal factor in teaching as an art is the inner dynamism of the student's mind; the educator or teacher guides the student, awakening the attention of the student to things already known and to those yet to be known.

Like Maritain, Simone Weil also writes about the development of the mind's power of attention through school studies and exercises. Along with contemporary educators, Weil realizes that attention demands a great effort and that twenty minutes of concentrated attention is already an accomplishment. The mind's attentiveness to whatever school task is presented to it is not, however, according to Weil, due to an exercise of willpower, understood as a kind of muscular effort which only tires and

is entirely barren no matter how academically successful the student may be. There is rather an affective and appetitive component to the life of the mind, which makes possible the sort of attention that Weil considers necessary for all academic work. Her concern is thus for the whole student.<sup>2</sup> As she puts it:

The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will never have a trade.<sup>3</sup>

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, like Weil, also attributes joy to intelligence, speaking of the life of the mind as the pleasantest and best.<sup>4</sup> A person cannot live without joy, and when he is deprived of spiritual joy, that which the mind experiences in knowing and in learning, he will pursue lower types of pleasure.<sup>5</sup> The pursuit of such pleasures is no doubt prevalent in our society today. Our desires and our loves should be ordered through virtue because a person's mind is attentive and drawn toward the things for which it has an affection.<sup>6</sup>

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The medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas is particularly helpful in distinguishing between the virtue of *studiositas* (or studiousness) and the vice opposed to it, namely, *curiositas* (or curiosity).<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this paper will be to see what exactly is meant by the virtue of *studiositas* and the vice of *curiositas*, and how we might be able to foster this virtue and notice the manifestations of *curiositas* both in our students and in ourselves.

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Aristotle defines the human person as a rational animal; like other animals, the person has a material body, but unlike those animals whose soul or principle of life is totally dependent on matter, the person by virtue of his rational soul is capable of reasoning and understanding and thus capable of transcending particularity and materiality. When Thomas Aquinas speaks of man's pursuit of knowledge, it is evident that he takes into consideration the whole person—that is, both body and soul; although on the part of his soul the person is inclined to desire knowledge of things, on the part of his body the person tends to avoid what Aquinas calls “the trouble of seeking knowledge.”<sup>8</sup>

Since the desire of knowing can be disordered or immoderate, as the bodily desires of eating and drinking can also be unmeasured, the virtue of *studiositas* exercises restraint on the desire to know so that we not seek knowledge immoderately. As a virtue of restraint and moderation, *studiositas* is part of the cardinal virtue of temperance, which is intimately related to the inner order of the self.<sup>9</sup> While *studiositas* is directly concerned with the ordered pursuit of knowledge, it is also directed toward the removal of obstacles to knowledge such as the trouble of learning, the bodily resistance encountered in learning which is so often experienced as tiredness. When *studiositas* is exercised so as to remove the obstacles on the part of the person's bodily nature, Aquinas calls the virtue "a certain keenness of interest in seeking knowledge of things."<sup>10</sup> The more the mind keenly applies itself to something by knowing the thing, the more ordinarily is fostered the desire to learn and to know. The mind's steady application to knowledge is comparable to Weil's notion of attention, which, like the virtue of *studiositas*, grows with practice; the desire to know thus overcomes the desire to comfort, or simply laziness.

Since the moderation of the desire for knowledge is essential to the virtue which concerns us here, we will consider by contrast what is immoderate in seeking knowledge so as to better appreciate the virtue. *Curiositas* is presented by Aquinas as intemperance in striving for both intellectual and sense knowledge. While knowledge of the truth is, strictly speaking, good, it would not be good when the knowledge acquired simply makes us proud—as is said, "Knowledge puffeth up" (1 Cor. 8:1)—or when the knowledge of truth is used for ill. Aquinas emphasizes that a person may desire or study to know the truth only to take pride in that knowledge; such a person forsakes virtue and is led rather by vainglory,



by vanity. There are those also whose desire to know and to learn is not directed to the good, for their study results in lies and in iniquity.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Aquinas distinguishes four ways by which the appetite or desire for knowledge may be inordinate and thus wrong. First, a man may abandon a study which constitutes for him an obligation and undertake “a less profitable study.”<sup>12</sup> Here Aquinas gives examples, but educators can certainly supply their own: when rather than attentively plan a lesson, the teacher may arrive to class unprepared, as may the student who has preferred to put his attention elsewhere. The virtue of *studiositas*, unlike *curiositas*, helps us to focus our attention on our obligations and thus to prioritize.

Second, Aquinas counsels against “superstitious curiosity,” which would lead one to acquire knowledge from dubious sources: “[W]hen a [person] studies to learn of one, by whom it is unlawful to be taught, as in the case of those who seek to know the future through the demons.”<sup>13</sup> While talk of demons may unnerve people, there is no doubt that we can often waste time and de-center our attention by consulting horoscopes in newspapers and magazines. Such a practice generally leads people to become overly concerned about the future and thus distracted from the present moment. We could thus forsake true wisdom for the “wisdom of the stars.” By true wisdom I mean the insight and experience of virtuous men and women, the transmission of timeless truths through a well-ordered tradition and community: that we not think the newest theory, the “buzz” word among the intellectual elite, is necessarily a substitute for the wisdom of the ancients. As Aquinas says, “[Man] must carefully, frequently and reverently apply his mind to the teachings of the learned, neither neglecting them through laziness, nor despising them through pride.”<sup>14</sup>

(On another but related note here, in recognizing the value of different cultures, their art and literature, it would be unfortunate in the name of multiculturalism to forget the great classics of Western literature and to cease to draw inspiration from them. The “roots” movement with its concern for ethnic differences and particularity should not supplant the great tradition of literature and philosophy which has long made us aware of the order of nature and of the human person’s place within it. Transcending all differences, there is a fundamental commonality. We should not want to “uproot” our students and ourselves from what unites us: a common human nature which provides our reason with the grammar of a common moral logic.<sup>15</sup> And regarding Aquinas’s advice against the use of knowledge from dubious sources, one might also think of the Nazi physicians who performed experiments on innocent victims in the name of scientific advancement. The Nazi doctors justified their acts of inhumanity as attempts to improve medicine. This example, certainly

indicative of the dark side of the unmeasured acquisition of knowledge, clearly shows that the end does not justify the means.)

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Third, the desire to know the truth about creatures should, according to Aquinas, be referred to the knowledge of God, without whom creatures would have neither existence nor direction. Here Aquinas quotes Augustine: “[I]n studying creatures, we must not be moved by empty and perishable curiosity; but we should ever mount towards immortal and abiding things.”<sup>16</sup> The consideration or contemplation of the highest cause, namely God, belongs to wisdom, as does also the direction of human acts according to divine rules. While it is true that since the Renaissance, study of creatures and of the universe has severed its ties to God, thus leading us into a secularized and disenchanted world, there are nevertheless contemporary attempts in science and in the humanities to foster a consideration of “immortal and abiding things.” From the order and rationality of the universe, respected scientists, including the Templeton Prize winners John Polkinghorne and Stanley Jaki, see the possibility of arguing for a mind or orderer responsible for the origin of the universe and for the beginning of human life.<sup>17</sup> Should not those scientific findings be pondered on and brought to the classroom? In the humanities also, a concern for the beauty of literature and the fine arts has resurfaced, even as in evolutionary biology there is talk of the beauty of living tissue and in psychology of how we are affected by the beauty of the human face. A consideration of finite beauty can certainly lead to the consideration of infinite beauty, which all men and women long for, as they also long for ultimate truth, for wisdom.<sup>18</sup> Just as the artist leaves his impression on the work of art and we can thus say, “That painting looks like a Corot, or a Vermeer,” so also the beauty of the universe evokes the presence of a divine artist, of an infinite mind or orderer.

Fourth, a person who studies to know the truth beyond the ability of his intelligence may easily fall into error.<sup>19</sup> Aquinas cautions us against seeking the type of knowledge that is above the power of our understanding. He no doubt has in mind the pride of the person who aims higher than he is.<sup>20</sup> The desire to know more than one needs to or is able to understand may be likened to the unhealthy craving for more material goods which so characterizes our consumeristic society. Just as there is a marked intemperance in our society with respect to food—60 percent of Americans are said to be obese—we can also fall prey to intemperance in matters of knowledge and thus become, as it were, intellectual gluttons. This anxious tendency toward what is more than necessary for leading a good life is called covetousness or avarice: a desire not only for money, for

material gain and acquisition, but also for knowledge and high places, because with them we may immoderately seek our own prominence and excellence, and thus fall into pride.<sup>21</sup> We all need to detect the instances in which we can be proud, “puffed up,” about our own knowledge, where “having” it and thus “shining” before others seems of more importance than sharing it. Such an attitude will also be found in those whom we teach: perhaps we can promote exercises in the classroom where students can share what they know with others, or organize sessions in which older students help younger ones with their lessons.

Aquinas gives good advice about how to avoid thus slipping into error and to make progress in one’s studies: in order to get to the bottom of difficult truths, we must first master the easy ones; he also advises that we clear up all doubts about the subjects we are studying.<sup>22</sup> The undeniable importance here is that of a well-structured curriculum, whereby the students’ understanding is gradually developed from the simple to the more complex; otherwise, we do violence to the students’ powers—what we teach will go over their heads, and they will lose interest in learning.

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Now Aquinas considers another aspect of *curiositas*, one besides intellectual knowledge and how the desire or study in the pursuit of knowledge may be right or wrong, as we have just examined; this further aspect treats the vice of *curiositas* in its relationship to sense knowledge. Since all our knowledge begins in sensation but does not end there, it seems appropriate that Aquinas should consider the role that our senses play in acquiring knowledge: the sense that is targeted is that of sight, which may desire to see things that are useless, harmful, or unlawful. Aquinas thus speaks of an immoderate desire to see. He quotes from the writings of wise men in order to confirm that the vice of *curiositas* is indeed about the knowledge of sensible things:

Augustine says (*De Vera Religione* 38) that “concupiscence of the eyes makes men curious.” Now according to Bede (loc. cit.) concupiscence of the eyes refers not only to the learning of magic arts, but also to sight-seeing, and to the discovery and dispraise of our neighbor’s faults.<sup>23</sup>

As long as we apply ourselves in an ordered or measured way to the knowledge of sensible things, that is, to maintain or sustain our bodies, or for the sake of intellectual knowledge, whether speculative or practical, Aquinas says that this attention to the knowledge of sensible things is virtuous. When, however, sense knowledge is not directed toward what is useful, it is an obstacle to useful considerations. Sense knowledge can thus distract us from speculative knowledge, from the contemplation of wisdom, and we can in this way “become foolishly dull.”<sup>24</sup> As pertinent,

present-day examples of what Aquinas means here, we might refer to the use of the Internet or the television; while it is true that the Internet provides us with much useful information and that the television also promotes beneficial and restful programs, they are sometimes used in ways that can be harmful for children, teenagers, and also adults.

In this context Aquinas refers to “sight-seeing,” a term which may seem odd to contemporary readers within the context of knowing: “Sight-seeing becomes sinful, when it renders a man prone to the vices of lust and cruelty on account of things he sees represented.”<sup>25</sup> We can no doubt be reminded here of anyone who wastes his or her time “flipping” channels on television, viewing one sensuous or violent scene after another, or engaging in readings of, for example, cheap magazines on newsstands which promote gawking and excite the imagination without promoting any aesthetic and moral values. It is no wonder that persons habituated to such sorts of diversion commit crimes in our schools and victimize innocent people with random acts of violence.

It is interesting to note that Aquinas refers to the *curiositas* of this type as the “roaming unrest of the spirit.”<sup>26</sup> It is the first manifestation of *acedia*, a sadness of heart, a heaviness of the human spirit, which is unwilling to accept the nobility and dignity of the human person, intimately related to the God from whom he owes his existence and to whom he is destined. This “roaming unrest of the spirit” manifests itself in the insatiableness of curiosity, in restlessness of the body, and in instability of place and of resoluteness.<sup>27</sup> It thus gives way to faint-hearted and pusillanimous individuals; one might ask if the high rates of teen-age suicides are not perhaps due in part to the effects of an unbridled *curiositas*.

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In addition to “sight-seeing,” Aquinas also refers to what may be termed “people-watching,” whereby we observe the actions and faults of others in order to belittle them or speak ill of them. We have probably witnessed such behavior among our students and also among ourselves, in the corridors of our schools, or perhaps in the teachers’ lounge. However, “people-watching” is not always negative. Aquinas points out that we may watch other people’s actions or even inquire into them with a good intention, which may be of two types: “either for one’s own good,—that is in order to be encouraged to better deeds by the deeds of our neighbor,—or for our neighbor’s good,—that is in order to correct him, if he do anything wrong, according to the rule of charity and the duty of one’s position.”<sup>28</sup> In the same way that we might observe others teaching in order to evaluate them and to propose helpful suggestions for their improvement as teachers, we should observe and “watch” our

students to help them improve both academically and personally. There is much that teachers can do to enable their students to flourish, but this requires attention. And so the virtue of *studiositas*, unlike *curiositas*, enables us not only to attend to our specific academic disciplines, but also to be attentive to others and their needs because this, too, requires study, in the sense of which Aquinas speaks.

Apart from correcting others, “people-watching” can also be for one’s own good, when, as Aquinas puts it, we are encouraged by the deeds or simply by the good example that others put before us. Perhaps one of the most critical factors for the education of young people today is the experience of role models: to foster in them a sensitivity, a knowledge of what it means for a person to function at his or her best, to give them a vision of a person of character formed through a constant and persevering exercise of the virtues. We transmit to others not only what we know but also the type of person that we are. I wonder if our students always see in us the virtue of *studiositas*, that keen application of our mind to our academic subjects and to the human subjects before us, or if what they perceive rather is the dispersion of *curiositas*. If the latter, then of course we cannot transmit the “joy of learning” of which Simone Weil speaks. Hopefully, the education of character which has received so much attention in our day will give us pause to think of our own character and its impact on our students.

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In a book entitled *The Art of Loving*, from which educators can learn much about the discipline, concentration, and patience needed for study, Erich Fromm sees the development of culture as intimately united to the transmission of certain kinds of human traits which make for an attentive, caring, responsible, and respectful person. Despite the length of the passage, I will quote it almost in its entirety. Fromm says:

While we teach knowledge, we are losing that teaching which is the most important one for human development: the teaching which can only be given by the simple presence of a mature, loving person. In previous epochs of our own culture, . . . the man most highly valued was the person with outstanding spiritual qualities. Even the teacher was not only, or even primarily, a source of information, but his function was to convey certain human attitudes. In contemporary capitalistic society . . . the men suggested for admiration and emulation are everything but bearers of significant spiritual qualities. Those are essentially in the public eye who give the average man a sense of vicarious satisfaction. Movie stars, radio entertainers, columnists, important business or government figures—these are the models for emulation. Their main qualification for this function is often that they have succeeded in making



the news. Yet, the situation does not seem to be altogether hopeless. If one considers the fact that a man like Albert Schweitzer could become famous in the United States, if one visualizes the many possibilities to make our youth familiar with living and historical personalities who show what human beings can achieve as human beings, and not as entertainers (in the broad sense of the word), if one thinks of the great works of literature and art of all ages, there seems to be a chance of creating a vision of good human functioning, and hence of sensitivity to malfunctioning.<sup>29</sup>

What Fromm says here is as pertinent today as it was fifty years ago. In the classroom we transmit much more than just knowledge. If we are not struggling to be better ourselves, then we are depriving our students of a great treasure—the encouragement that they can receive from our good deeds and example.

In distinguishing the virtue of *studiositas*—the application and attention of our mind to our studies, to our work, and to the persons at hand—from the vice of *curiositas*, we can reflect not only on our students but also on ourselves and on how we work, on how we exercise our profession: whether our work and the persons entrusted to us through our work really do receive our heightened attention. If they do, then they can probably see in us models of *studiositas*, a virtue much needed in our culture today.<sup>30</sup>

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## Notes

1. Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 30–31.

2. Maritain also considers the education of the whole child. He makes an important distinction between individuality, which emphasizes the bodily or material aspects of a man or a woman, and personality, which refers to the rational nature of the human person, to the powers of intelligence and will that enable the person to understand and love. Maritain says, “I may develop along the lines of personality, that is, toward the mastery and independence of my spiritual self. Or I may develop along the lines of individuality, that is, toward the letting loose of the tendencies which are present in me by virtue of matter and heredity” (*Education at the Crossroads*, 34). According to Maritain the goal of education is the true freeing of personality.

3. Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, intro. Leslie Fiedler, 110 (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1951).

4. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book X, where Aristotle speaks of contemplative activity or the life of the mind as the final end of man. See also his *Metaphysics*, Book I, where he immediately begins by saying, “All men by nature desire to know.”

An extremely helpful and readable book regarding this is Jonathan Lear's *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 2. Hereafter cited as *ST*. See also Jacques Maritain, *The Education of Man*, ed. and intro. Donald and Idella Gallagher, 102 (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

6. See *ST* II-II, q. 166, a. 1, ad 2.

7. I will use the Latin terms throughout the paper, since the virtue of *studiositas*, as the vice of *curiositas*, cannot be rendered simply through the English terms, as will become evident in what follows.

8. *ST* II-II, q. 166, a. 2, ad 3.

9. For an excellent treatment of the cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—which are the foundation for the moral life, see Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966). The section on temperance includes a brief but penetrating account of *studiositas* and *curiositas*, under the heading of “Disciplining the Eyes,” 198–202.

10. *ST* II-II, q. 166, a. 2, ad 3.

11. *ST* II-II, q. 167, a. 1, resp.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, q. 49, a. 3, ad 2. See also the response to this question.

15. See the Vatican website for Pope John Paul II's address to the United Nations on October 5, 1995, where he speaks about cultural differences but also of a fundamental commonality. Of interest also is the chapter on “Culture” in Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), especially 192–93.

16. *De Vera Religione* 4, quoted in *ST* II-II, q. 167, a. 1 resp.

17. John Polkinghorne, “So Finely Tuned a Universe,” *Commonweal*, 16 August 1996, quoted in my article, “Beauty, Mind, and the Universe,” in *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, ed. Alice Ramos, 70–84 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press/American Maritain Association, 2000).

18. See C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Essential C. S. Lewis*, ed. and intro. Lyle W. Dorset, 361–77 (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

19. *ST* II-II, q. 167, a. 1, resp.

20. *Ibid.*, q. 162, a. 1, resp.

21. *Ibid.*, q. 118, a. 2, resp.

22. *Opusculum* 61 is a letter written by Aquinas to a young man who desires to be “a good student.”

23. *ST* II-II, q. 167, a. 2, s.c.

24. *Ibid.*, q. 167, a. 2, resp.

25. *Ibid.*, q. 167, a. 2, ad 2.

26. *De Malo*, q. 11, a. 4, quoted in Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 200.

27. *ST* II-II, q. 35, a. 4, ad 3. See also Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 200–201.

28. *Ibid.*, q. 167, a. 2, ad 3.

29. Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1957), 117–18.

30. I would like to thank Wade Carpenter and Jeanne Murray for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.