CHAPTER 5

Curiosity and Novelties

One of the major intellectual vices mentioned by Johann Gottfried Büchner was curiosity, which in his view had become particularly common in seventeenth-century Germany, where men were accused of despising all knowledge that was felt somehow to be vulgar or common, and intellectual curiosity characterised the mental state in many disciplines, from politics to theology.¹ From antiquity (Seneca, Plutarch, the patristic tradition) to the seventeenth century curiosity was often perceived as a vice or a negative passion.² In his Confessiones (10.35), Augustine famously condemned curiosity as “the lust of the eyes,” which sought new experiences through a passion for knowledge. For him, curiosity meant men’s desire to know merely for the sake of knowing. Following in the footsteps of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas devoted one entire question in his Summa theologiae to curiosity as a sub-type of intemperance. This Augustinian influence was also a major reason that religious-minded critics condemned curiosity in the early modern period. In Germany, vicious curiosity was discussed by such major authors and Lutheran theologians as Johann Franz Budde, Johann Jacob Lehmann, Adam Rechenberg and Jacob Thomasius.³

¹ Büchner (1718, Cap. II, Sect. I, §VI). On the commonness of curiosity, see also Lüdecke (1677/1690, Praefatio): “Ad curiosum reservati sumus seculum, in quo ea, quae curiositatem non redolent, aut curantur parum, aut plane negliguntur; Flocci habentur vulgaria, nec cogitatione quadam reputantur digna illa, quae omnibus nova sunt . . . Curiositas cuncta aestimat, atque sua rebus destinat pretia.”
² On Augustine and curiosity, see Bös (1995, 91–129), and also Blumenberg (1973, 103–121); Newhauser (1982); Walsh (1988); Harrison (2001, 268); Manson (2012, 242). For Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, pride, curiosity and sexual lust formed the three main categories of sin (Bös 1995, 100–101; on Aquinas, see ibid., 176–225). For curiosity in the patristic and medieval tradition in general, see Blumenberg (1973, esp. 65–102); Bös (1995); Harrison (2001, 267–270), and Newhauser (1982, with emphasis on the complexity of medieval notions of curiosity). Newhauser notes that curiosity was never mentioned among the seven capital sins, and in fact there also existed a bona curiositas already in the Middle Ages. On the curious man, see also Koppelfels (1987). Curiosity has been widely discussed, for example, in Hans Blumenberg’s Die Legitimität der Neuzeit (1966) and Der Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde (1973) and in Heiko Oberman’s Contra vanam curiositatem (1974). These profound works also provide references for further reading.
³ For example, Friedrich Philipp Schlosser noted in his dissertation on curiosity (1724, §II) that according to these authors, curiosity was primarily a vicious passion. On curiosity as a passion and a vice of excess, see Kenny (2004, 41–47).
But early modern authors also learned to distinguish between good and bad curiosity. Neutral or positive evaluations of curiosity emerged, especially outside church and university contexts. Good curiosity constituted an innate and healthy desire for knowledge, which helped men learn new skills, whereas bad curiosity was a reprehensible vice of excess, which urged men to transgress certain boundaries of proper knowledge. Not only was excessive desire suspect, but also there was uncertainty about its licit and illicit objects. Curiosity was identified with speculative interests and frivolities that seemed to offer no practical benefit. Good curiosity became the object of attention in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, whereas the notion of bad curiosity as a passion and vice of excess was maintained, especially in religious and university discourses and in the castigation of scholarly vices. Good curiosity was justified on the grounds that it produced knowledge, which served the happiness of all humans, whereas bad curiosity had negative effects and caused misery. As Neil Kenny has shown in his profound studies on curiosity in early modern Germany, it was precisely the differing notions of curiosity that created “a battle-ground for efforts to distinguish good knowledge or behaviour from bad.”

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the changing notions of ideal scholarship and the limits of knowledge, especially in those cases in which the debates were conducted with reference to old and new learning. Neil C. Manson has recently pointed out that curiosity has been largely ignored by modern virtue epistemologists, because for them epistemic virtues usually

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4 Kenny (2004, 25, 234). My understanding of the complexity of early modern views on curiosity is heavily indebted to Kenny’s thorough discussion. On the positive value of early modern curiosity, see Blumenberg (1973); Harrison (2001), and Kivistö (2007, with further references especially to the medical senses of curiosity). For a positive sense of curiosity as a remedy for ignorance in Locke’s thinking, see Schlosser (1724, §XI); and on Hume and curiosity, see Gelfert (2013). On the positive notion of curiosity in seventeenth-century England, see Harrison (2001), who emphasises that “Francis Bacon’s proposals for the instauration of knowledge were an integral part of a process by which curiosity underwent a remarkable transformation from vice to virtue over the course of the seventeenth century” (265). On Bacon, see Harrison (2001, 279–282); Newhauser (1982, 564–565); Blumenberg (1973, 192–200).


6 Schlosser (1724, §IX): “Itaque & desiderium scientiæ ea, sine quorum cognitione vere felices esse non concessum est, omnino bonum erit, pravum vero, si ea nosse cupimus, quorum scientia malis nostris propensionibus, ceu miseriae nostrae fontibus, irritandis vel nutriendis inserviunt.”

7 Kenny (2004, 5).