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THE EPISTEMIC VICE OF CURIOSITY

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Introduction

Curiosity is *the* epistemic desire, *libido sciendi*. It is presented in the tradition both as a good thing, a passion for learning which can become a virtue (*studiositas*) – without it could science exist? – and, most of the time, as a bad thing – a kind of akratic desire to know, a major vice, at best a form of intellectual and ethical illness. As the large literature on curiosity through the centuries testifies¹, it is not easy to assess where the topic belongs. This is largely due to the fact that we do not know exactly what curiosity is, but also it is hard to dissociate an investigation into the nature of curiosity from an investigation about its value or disvalue for learning, and for life in general. My objective here is not to give a definition, which perhaps cannot be given without developing a full theory of knowledge, of learning, and of the ethics of intellectual research. I shall just here try to locate curiosity on a map of the mind, and on this part of the map where knowledge is located. *Prima facie*, if one examines the question of curiosity from the epistemological point of view of epistemology, the most relevant framework is the tradition of the analysis of intellectual virtues and vices. On the contemporary scene, virtue epistemology is heir to this tradition, and it is itself represented by various trends. In what follows I am more interested in curiosity as a vice than as a virtue. But the two cannot be separated. You learn much about virtue by attending to vices, and it may be one of the reason why the literature on curiosity has been so rich over the centuries. My strategy here will be to understand curiosity as a certain kind of desire to be evaluated against the goal of cognition, or the epistemic goal, which also determines the value of belief and of knowledge. The approach which is proposed here is more normative than descriptive: curiosity is a virtue or a vice relatively to its distance or proximity with respect to the epistemic goal². I first set out what this goal might be, then try to draw a taxonomy of the varieties of curiosities.

¹ See e.g. on the historical side Leigh 2013, Harrison 2001, Kivisto 2014, Kennedy 2004, Manguel 2015. On the philosophical side Inan 2012, Brady 2009.

² In that respect this approach differs from that of Inan 2012, which develops a full account of curiosity as involving the conceptualization of an object under a description which may, or may not become an “ostensible”

1. *The epistemic goal*

Curiosity is a desire to know, present in a number of animals. It can be good, when it provides the animal with what helps its survival, and it can be bad if the animal fails to survive. Curiosity can feed, but also can kill, the cat. But this notion of the good is purely instrumental: certain states are good with respect to a further goal. The question is: is curiosity good in itself, as a knowledge-yielding state? In order to be able to classify it as a vice or as a virtue, as the tradition does, it is necessary to assess it against a conception of what is epistemically good or bad. So let us start from the familiar idea that there is an epistemic goal, towards which our intellectual endeavors are directed. It is often called the aim of inquiry, the aim of belief, the aim of cognition, or the ultimate epistemic value³. Sometimes it is understood as a norm of belief, in the deontic sense, about what we ought to believe, sometimes it is formulated as a value or a goal, towards which we tend. These vocabularies are not equivalent, but here I shall take them to be more or less equivalent.⁴ So what is it that we ought to believe or is the aim of our inquiries, in the epistemic domain? The obvious answer seems to be: truth. So the simplest formulation of the epistemic goal or norm is:

(*Truth Goal, TG*) For all p it is good to (if p believe p iff p)

(*Truth Norm, TN*) For all p , one ought (if p believe p iff p)

One might think that the normative formulation is better, because it is categorical, whereas a good can be a good relative to one circumstance and not another, but we can equate the formulations if we think in terms of *final* value or good: a good which is not for the sake of another good.

The immediate objection to these formulations is that they can hardly be suited to a norm or a goal since they seem to aim at something inaccessible or useless: there are countless things which are true, but which we do not want to believe or that we cannot believe. For instance on my desk there are thousands of specks of dust, which nobody would care to count. Let us call this *the problem of trivial truth*.⁵ So the epistemic goal or norm is sometimes formulated in the negative version:

(*Negative Truth Norm*) Believe only what is true

object of acquaintance. Inan 2013 comments more specifically on the relationships between his views and virtue epistemology.

³ Within a large literature: Sosa 2001, 2003; David 2005; Lynch 2003; Engel 2005, 2015, Chan 2013

⁴ For an account of the differences, see e.g. Grimm 2013, Engel 2013.

⁵ Treanor 2014, Pritchard 2013

in the sense of our trying to avoid error. The problem, as William James remarked in his reply to Clifford⁶, is that the prescription to avoid errors may well be followed by a sceptic, who refuses to believe anything, or by a stone, which believes nothing at all. So we need more than TN and TG. One ought to believe not only what is true, but also what for which one has good reasons, or warrants, or evidence. But if we formulate it as:

(*Norm of evidence, NE*) One ought to believe p iff one has evidence for p

we shall have the same problem with trivial truths. One might say, using Clifford's evidentialist maxim: one ought to believe only on the basis of sufficient evidence:

(*Norm of Sufficient Evidence, NSE*) One ought to believe p only if one has sufficient evidence

But this will not solve the problem of triviality, since by definition we have always sufficient evidence for trivial truths. And NSE would meet the same problem as before : sceptics would endorse it, and we do not want to be a sceptic from the start. Moreover, with NE and NSE, as well as with Clifford's maxim, there is a familiar problem : what is *sufficient* evidence? It seems that we have to determine the limit only through some kind of decision: but when do we decide that we have sufficient evidence? Here pragmatism lurks, for it is tempting to think that if the amount of evidence that we need is evaluated on the basis of a decision, evidence is not really what determines what we ought to believe.

The solution to these difficulties, according to many writers, is to adapt the epistemic goal. We do not want to believe anything whatsoever. We want to, or ought to, believe not what is true *simpliciter* , but what is true *and interesting and informative*. Our inquiries are not directed at truth only, but also at what is of interest to us and at what enriches our information. "Interest" or "information" however, are ambiguous. "Interest" may mean "what is good or useful for practical purposes". This comes close to a form pragmatism: inquiry is not regulated by truth for truth's sake, but by practical interests. Alternatively "interest" may mean "interesting for our inquiries" or, as James said, "good in the way of belief". The kind of interest which is at stake here is cognitive interest. But it seems tautological to say that what is interesting is good, cognitively speaking or *qua* object of our cognition. This boils down to defining the epistemic good by what is epistemically good. Worse, if what is epistemically good is what is epistemically good *for us*, the epistemic goal

⁶ Clifford 1878, James 1904

becomes subjective. Moreover, “interesting” is contextual: certain things interest us at some time, place and set of previous goals. The same holds for “information”, which is as interest-relative as “explanation”: it depends on what you want to be informed and what you want to explain. Perhaps, however, we need not be so contextualist with respect to the epistemic goal. According to Sosa (2001, 2007), there can be one single epistemically fundamental goal or value – truth – which is distributed into a number of insulated more specific epistemic goals, depending about our objectives. Thus if you have the goal of assassinating your uncle with a gun, your epistemic goal is relative to your knowledge of guns, to purchase a house your goal has to be relative to knowledge of houses, etc. But this view faces two difficulties. First, how can we relate the specific domains to the more fundamental one? Where does truth *simpliciter* stop and truth-about-guns begins? Second is the teleological view, which says that the epistemic goal depends upon one’s specific purpose for a specific domain, sufficient to account for the normative power of truth with respect to a wide variety of domains (perhaps all domains). If you contradict yourself in your beliefs, if you rely on too little evidence, or draw bad consequences, I can tell you “You ought not believe this”, or “You should not draw this conclusion”, but it seems odd to say: “ You ought not to believe this relative to domain D (although you could believe it relative to domain R)”. The idea that there is an overarching epistemic goal or normativity operating in each domain is hard to withdraw. Actually Sosa does not withdraw it, and accepts that there is a fundamental value of truth which transcends the various domains. But he denies that *within* a domain we have to attend this fundamental value.⁷

A number of philosophers have made an alternative proposal: we should not aim only at what is true, but also at what can constitute, or enhance, our *understanding* of a subject matter.⁸ The proposal depends in large part on how one characterises understanding. One some views it involves the possession or acquisition of properties like depth of information, inferential power, and explanatory relevance. On other views it involves some form of intuition and empathy. The problem is whether these properties can exist without presupposing truth or knowledge.

A solution to these difficulties is to claim that the epistemic goal or norm is not truth, but *knowledge*:

(*Norm of Knowledge, NK*) One ought to believe something only if one is in position to know it.

⁷ Grimm 2009 presses this point against Sosa. See also Engel 2013.

⁸ Kvanvig 2003, Pritchard 2010

On this view we do not aim only at what is true, but at those truths which have an epistemic justification or warrant, and the general characteristic of being susceptible to be known. This is not without difficulties, for the problem of triviality is still with us : why attempt to know useless things ? However, we can say here that the goal of knowledge incorporates the idea that there are things which, by way of cognitive inquiry, are worthier knowing than others. The issue of pluralism still arises, but there are strong grounds to claim that knowledge is, with respect to *epistemic* goal, the strongest status that one can attain.⁹

These difficulties, which I can only sketch here, might invite a kind of scepticism. They might suggest a rejection the very idea that there is such a thing as an epistemic goal. Truth and knowledge, after all, are far too abstract and unreachable objectives, and they compete in many ways with other goals, such as happiness, comfort, or freedom, which it is often much more beneficial to follow. In so many cases, ignorance is better than knowledge. So why should the latter be the ultimate goal?¹⁰ There can indeed be conflicts between our aims, and in particular between our epistemic desires and others. It is hard to deny, however, that curiosity is an epistemic desire. Whether it is a vice or a virtue, it has to be assessed against an *epistemic* standard.

2. *Virtuous and vicious curiosity*

If one accepts that the epistemic goal is knowledge, we have a way to understand the nature epistemic virtue and epistemic vice:

(*Virtue*): To be epistemically virtuous is to respect what the epistemic goal (or norm) requires

(*Vice*) To be epistemically vicious is to be disrespectful of what the epistemic goal (or norm) requires.

A lot of course depends upon what one means by respecting or disrespecting the requirements of the epistemic goal or norm. Aristotle said that there are degrees in virtues and vices. Similarly, there are degrees in epistemic virtues and vices. Virtues or vices can be more or less *mild* or more or less *hard*. Let us concentrate on vices.

Mild epistemic vice covers the cases where individuals deviate from the epistemic goal because they do not understand it, although they in some sense are aware of it. The model here could be Aristotle's analysis of *akrasia*. The

⁹ Williamson 2000, Smithies 2012 , Littlejohn *to appear* , Engel 2005.

¹⁰ See Hazlett 2013, and against such scepticism Engel 2015

akratic person possesses the notion of what is good, but she has forgotten it.¹¹ Hard epistemic vice, or if one prefers a more catholic-sounding vocabulary, capital epistemic vice, corresponds to the cases where agents recognise the epistemic goal, but actually refuse to follow it. It is a form of voluntary lack of respect for truth and knowledge. On this basis, we can sketch a taxonomy of virtues and vices in the epistemic domain.

Virtue ethics, in the Aristotelian tradition, is full of taxonomies¹². Among intellectual virtues are intellectual courage, open mindedness, intellectual humility or modesty, intellectual honesty, etc. and among intellectual vices, one counts intellectual cowardice, dogmatism, intellectual dishonesty and immodesty, etc. There are other frameworks than the Aristotelian one. The most perspicuous one seems to me to be the one which Bernard Williams proposes in *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002). Williams characterises the epistemic goal or norm on the basis of a set of principles which are constitutive of a mental state, *belief*, of a practice, *assertion*, and of a property, *truth*, the three of which forming what he calls a basic triangle. Beliefs and assertions, which are expressions of belief, aim at truth. Truth is a presupposition both of assertion and belief. Williams argues that this basic triangle is the condition of possibility of all communication and social interaction. The basic triangle is presupposed, in particular, in the activity of lying. Liars need the assumption that people believe what is true, tell the truth and aim at knowing the truth. There are all sorts of ways of deviating from the triangle: one can lie, but one can also fail to say exactly the truth, by being vague or imprecise, one can also have a general attitude of distrust for truth. The basic triangle does not determine by itself the virtues or vices of truth, but it is presupposed by virtuous and vicious epistemic acts and characters. These consist respectively in our success or our failure in applying this basic triangle in the cognitive domain. To make assertions with the aim of expressing one's beliefs and of speaking the truth is to be *sincere*. To make assertions with the aim of expressing one's beliefs according to the goal or truth is to be *exact*. To have the kind of character of a person who respects truth and truthfulness about oneself is to be authentic. The three corresponding virtues of truth are *truthfulness*, *sincerity* or *veracity*, *exactness*, and *authenticity*. The three corresponding vices are *insincerity*, *sloppiness* and what we may call a form of *bad faith*. The details of the story might vary, but the basic idea is that an ethical theory of the virtues, epistemic or otherwise, is a two-tier system, which, on the one hand postulates the existence of norms and values and their objective character, and on the other hand defines the proper application of these

¹¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1147 a

¹² See e.g. Annas 2003, Zagzebski 1995, Baehr 2011, Axtell 2000, Battaly 2013

norms as virtuous and their misapplication as vicious.¹³ On that basis, we can think of epistemic vices as distortions - some mild, some hard - of the epistemic goal:

- a) *Mild* : vices consisting in aiming at what is interesting irrespective of whether it is true or not , justified or not : idle curiosity, snobbery
- b) *Strong or deep*: vices consisting in a lack of respect for truth, such as bullshitting and foolishness.

To give just a few examples, the snob is the person who aims at believing or asserting what the people whom he believes to be socially important or prestigious, irrespective of whether the beliefs and assertions are true or justified, the bullshitter is the person who gossips without caring for truth¹⁴, and the fool, in one important sense of this word, is the person who manifests his insensitivity to cognitive values.¹⁵

The distortions of the basic norms or goals can vary, and the psychology of the believers can vary too. Some deviations from the triangle may be conscious, others not, and they may be more or less voluntary. Our problem is that curiosity can come both on the positive side of being a virtue and on the negative one of being a vice. How can we account for the unity of curiosity?

Let us then suppose, as a first pass, that the epistemic goal or norm is truth or knowledge, and that an epistemic vice is a disposition, or the manifestation of a character type which consists in deviating from this epistemic goal.

It seems that the senses in which curiosity is a good thing or a bad thing coincide with the two formulations of the epistemic goal. It is a good thing when we aim at believing or knowing what is true *and* interesting – virtuous curiosity - and a bad thing when we aim at believing or knowing what is true, irrespective of whether it is interesting or not – idle or vicious curiosity. The distinction would seem to depend upon what kind of animal you are, whether you are interested in foraging in order to find food, whether you are looking for mates in order to reproduce, or whether you need all the apparatus of science in order to reach the truth about distant planets. An animal – including the human animal- who is curious has more chances to reproduce than one who spends his time and cognitive resources to useless tasks. It also seems to depend on the desires and circumstances proper to the context of the creature in questions.

¹³ For similar two level frameworks, see Hare, 1981, Star 2014

¹⁴ According to Frankfurt's (1988, 2005) now classical analysis, the bullshitter has no *respect* for truth

¹⁵ I have developed this framework in Engel 2016

But on reflection, this won't do. For curiosity, in the usual sense, is a desire for knowledge *in general*, an appetite for *any* truth, *whether or not it is interesting*, useful, valuable, or not. As Aristotle says (*Metaphysics* A, 980a21): all humans have the desire to know, "An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for *even apart from their usefulness* they are loved for themselves" [*my italics*]. It is precisely this openness of mind, this disposition to look for truths, whatever they are, informative or not, useful or not, which characterises natural curiosity¹⁶. The curious person, however, is not the gullible person: she considers and contemplates truths which are worthy of being believed. So although she is open to *consider* any truth, she does not believe *any* truth. She aims at believing those truth which are worth *knowing*. If the curious person has to sort out beforehand the topics which are of interest to her and those which are not, she is not really curious, or she is curious only about certain things and not others. A selective attention to certain topics is certainly an inquiring attitude, which is part of curiosity but it is not curiosity proper. How do they combine? Curiosity, in the sense of a genuine desire to know, aims at knowledge *in general*. Does that include trivial and useless truths? No, for when one says that the aim of belief is truth, or believing truths, one does not mean that one aims to believe all truths. The proper aim seems rather to be:

(AB) For any proposition *which comes into consideration*, believe it if and only if it is true

"Into consideration" here means: first, select, among the objects and topics to be considered, those which are worthy of attention; then believe the relevant propositions only if they are true¹⁷. Curiosity is a desire for knowledge in general, but it is not a desire for a knowledge of *anything whatsoever*. There is no desire for truth (and knowledge) *as such*.¹⁸ Truth and knowledge are sought after only relative to a question that one asks, and inquiry that one undertakes, on a given topic, in a given context of inquiry.¹⁹ There is no desire for truth *tout court*, no "disinterested" search for truth in the sense of independence from interest. Indeed the kind of interest referred to here is disinterested in the sense

¹⁶ In the terms of Inan 2012, curiosity is based on an intentional state of looking for truths in an "unostensible" way, on the basis of an interest in a domain of information. The state is satisfied when what is merely apprehended under a *de dicto* belief, which becomes the object of a *de re* acquaintance when curiosity gets its proper focus.

¹⁷ See Wedgwood 2002. I assume here that the object of curiosity is a proposition, which can be truth or false. This can be disputed, and Inan (2012, 2014) gives good arguments against this view, claiming that curiosity can be directed at an object. But I agree with him that one has to distinguish a truth which can be the object of a belief about an object under a description, versus a *de re* belief, when the object is made ostensible. An alternative way of making the distinction is to appeal to the difference, familiar in epistemology, between propositional or *ex ante* justification and *doxastic* or *ex post* justification.

¹⁸ Cf Sosa 2001, 2003.

¹⁹ This is the classical view (Plato's) of knowledge as an answer to a certain kind of question. See White 1983, Lihoreau ed 2008.

that it is not a practical kind of interest, but an *epistemic* interest. The epistemic notion of interest, however, is itself relative to a set of objectives and to background state of knowledge. So the desire for truth does not operate in the void.

Our characterisation of curiosity thus oscillates between two versions of the epistemic goal: on the one hand, the curious person is such that her desire for knowledge drives her towards any truth whatsoever, on the other hand the desire for truth is controlled by the aim of selecting those truths which have an epistemic interest. The first corresponds to what is often called *idle curiosity*, the second is closer to *fecund curiosity*. But the difference between the two is sometimes hard to discern in practice. If I go to the Great Bazar, the *Kapali Carsi* in Istanbul, I may idly look at anything which comes under my eyes, strolling along the hundreds of shops. But I may also, when one particular object strikes me as interesting, have a look at it and select it for attention. In both cases I am curious, but the transition between the two is gradual and there is no clear dividing line between my being idly curious and my being interestedly and fecundly curious.

The difference between curiosity as a virtue and curiosity as a vice is also a difference between an innate natural disposition or faculty and an acquired habit: naturally curiosity aims at any truth, but when a cognitive system is habituated it learns how to sort out the interesting truths from others. This division is familiar within virtue epistemology. Some philosophers, like Sosa and Greco, take epistemic virtues to be mostly innate dispositions and faculties, manifested through acquired skills. Other philosophers take epistemic virtues to be habits acquired through a voluntary cultivation. I shall come back in section 5 to this distinction. But whether or not curiosity is cultivated it is far from obvious that it is driven by a desire for truth *in general*. A short historical digression will help us seeing that most of the philosophical tradition agrees with this.

3. *Concupiscentia oculi*

Although Plato calls *thaumas* (wonder) the source of philosophy and Aristotle praises the desire to know, they do not list it among the intellectual virtues. Most the Ancient and medieval writers take curiosity to be a bad disposition and a vice, which is based on a desire to know, but which is not specifically epistemic. The word *polypragmosunè*, which will later be translated by the Latins as *curiositas*, is not primarily an epistemic vice or a vice of learning. *Polypragmosunè* is not the vice of someone who directs his attention to useless things, but the vice of someone who is engaged in multifarious activities and who claims more subject areas than he is qualified for. Most of the time it

designates a disposition to take care of other people's business, a meddlesome behavior. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *polypragmon* or the *periergon* is the busybody person, very often a sycophant who cares only for other people's business.²⁰ Another commonplace associated to the ancient concept of *polypragmosunè* is that the *polypragmon* lives in a state of permanent agitation and dispersion. The *polypragmon* is not the one who is looking for any truth and does not care which truth he gets. He is rather someone who wants to know compulsively and permanently, and not about any kind of topic: he is interested in what *other people* do or think. This is different from idle curiosity. As Plutarch puts it:

For curiosity is really a passion for finding out whatever is hidden and concealed, and no one conceals a good thing when he has it; why, people even pretend to have good things when they have them or not. Since, then, it is the searching out of troubles that the busybody desires, he is possessed by the affliction called 'malignancy,' brother to envy and spite. For envy is pain at another's good, while malignancy is joy at another's evil; and both spring from a savage and bestial affliction, a vicious nature.²¹

Curiosity is what leads those who live in the narrow streets of Mediterranean villages to look over their windows into the neighbor's house, Acteon the hunter to try to see Diana bathing, the Elders to see Susan naked, crowds to gather when there is an accident on the street, *facebook* addicts to try and look for details about their "friends".

Curiosity in this sense turns out to be the desire to know what, in most or all occasions, one *ought not* to know, to see what one ought not to see. It is the vice consisting in *unrestrained* desire for knowledge.²² The corresponding virtue, for much of the classical tradition, is a disposition to *resist* the desire to know, and, in many cases, the desire *not* to know. A presumptive knower is virtuous if he is able to balance his desire to know about any topic whatsoever (including those which are forbidden) against a conception of what is worth knowing. The *polypragmon* is this familiar character who lives in a state of perpetual agitation, listening to everything that is told, inquiring about small news, private as well as public ones, always telling stories which nobody would tell or would listen to.²³ According to an influential reading due to Michel Foucault, the *polypragmon* is the one who does not care for himself, and who does not have what the Greeks called *epimelieia seautou*.²⁴ Since he is curious of what other people are doing, he is not curious about himself. The characteristic feature of his vice is not that he distracts himself from truth or knowledge but that he distracts himself from his own self. Michel Foucault gives an unorthodox

²⁰ E.N 1142 a-1-2. See Leigh 2013.

²¹ Plutarch *De curiositate* W. C. Helmbold, Ed. § 7

²² See Manson 2012

²³ *De tranquillitate animi*, XII, 7,

²⁴ Foucault 2001: 212-3

diagnosis on what curiosity consists in: the *polypragmon* is not someone who should better know, but someone who should care more for himself, and who ought to follow his own inner guide. His vice, according to Foucault, is not epistemic. It cannot be cured by a better way of knowing, but by undertaking a different course of action and of life, through a kind of ethical ascetic training ²⁵.

The Christian tradition has furthered this wholesale condemnation of curiosity as a vice, but it has given it a new sense. For the Christian, the *curiosus* is the one who is distracted from true religion by his interest in magic and mysteries, as in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, which has been considered as a novel about curiosity. ²⁶ It is a kind of lust, comparable to sexual desire. Curiosity is what John the apostle calls « concupiscence of the eyes » where our mind is « prostituted by vain objects ». Augustine condemns it as an illness. ²⁷ He clearly opposes *curiositas* to *cognitio* and to *scientia*, which although he admits that it is an appetite or knowledge (*appetitus noscendi*). The desire for knowledge is present in the *curiosus*, but it is directed at knowledge of the wrong objects: at magic, at shows on the theatre, at the pleasures of the flesh at the wrong image of God as a purveyor of mysteries. It is a form of pride, of *superbia*, the vice of those who believe that they can learn by themselves instead of obeying the authority of the Church. Aquinas holds that if knowledge of truth is good, absolutely speaking, it can be bad by accident, because of its consequences, when someone is proud of his knowledge of such truths". To the vice of *curiositas* he opposes the virtue of *studiositas* ²⁸ For Thomas, curiosity, as natural desire for knowledge, is a good thing; but it becomes a bad thing and is a vice if it leads to want to know *certain kinds of things* – those which take us away from God. The natural desire becomes a virtue, studiosity, if it leads us towards knowledge of one kind of truth, truth about God. ²⁹

It is only in the Renaissance and in the modern times that curiosity acquires the status of a virtue of learning. Although a number of writers still condemn it as a vice, a distinction is made between "healthy" (*sana*) and "unhealthy" (*insana*) curiosity. ³⁰ Curiosity is praised as the mother of scientific knowledge and of the discovery of the secrets of nature. Curiosity does not designate the interest for certain kinds of topics which religion and morals forbid, but disinterested search for truth for truth's sake. Bacon denounces the theologians who condemn curiosity as a snake. ³¹ Montaigne is more ambiguous. On the one

²⁵ Foucault is insistent that the *polypragmon* or *curiosus* is not someone who should better *know* but someone who should care more about himself, and follow his own inner guide. His vice, according to Foucault is not epistemic. It cannot be cured by a better way of knowing, but by a different behavior. But Foucault's view is very dubiously correct. Most of the uses of *periergon*, *polypragmosunè*, and *curiosus* studies by Leigh (2013) have to do with the acquisition of knowledge.

²⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*

²⁷ *Confessions*, X, 35–54

²⁸ *Summa Theologica*, II, q 167

²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions*, lib. X, cap. XXXV, n. 51

³⁰ See Kivisto, 2014 ch 5

³¹ *The Advancement of Learning*, "Knowledge must be discharged of that venom which the serpent infused in it" See Harrison 2001.

hand he tells us that glory and curiosity are two evils of our soul. The latter leads us to put our nose everywhere, and the former prevents us from leaving anything uncertain and undecided”³² ; on the other hand he sees in curiosity nothing else than an “exercitation” of the mind, and recommends “a lazy curiosity”.

The seventeenth century has been called “The age of curiosity”. “Cabinets of wonders”, displaying all sorts of strange objects, are opened.³³ Curiosity acquires fully a positive value. Philosophers like Scipion Dupleix publish their work under the name of *Natural Curiosity*.³⁴ The curious person is not any more the one who muses around, but also the one who intends to be exhaustive on a given subject, the collector. La Bruyère in his *Characters* has a chapter on fashion, where he describes a man who wants to know everything about tulips, of another who collects birds, of another who tries to learn rare languages. For him curiosity is the passion of following fashion:

Curiosity is not having a taste for what is good and beautiful, but for what is rare and singular, and for what no one else can match; it is not to like things which are perfect, but those which are most sought after and fashionable. It is not an amusement but a passion, and often so violent that in the meanness of its object it only yields to love and ambition. Neither is it a passion for everything scarce and in vogue, but only for some particular object which is rare, and yet in fashion.

Some people immoderately thirst after knowledge, and are unwilling to ignore any branch of it, so they study them all and master none; they are fonder of knowing much than of knowing somethings well, and had rather be superficial smatterers in several sciences than be well and thoroughly acquainted with one. They everywhere meet with some person who enlightens and corrects them; they are deceived by their idle curiosity, and often, after very long and painful efforts, can but just extricate themselves from the grossest ignorance. (La Bruyère, *Caractères*, XIII, 2)

Descartes holds that curiosity is a necessary illness: «The desire for knowledge, which is common to all men, is the illness which can never be cured, since the more you know, the more you have it ».³⁵ Likewise Malebranche distinguishes two kinds of curiosity. The first is « natural and necessary », and originates in the innate restlessness of the soul, “

which is always led to search for what it hopes to find : it loves what is great, extraordinary , and what comes from the infinite: because it has not found its true good in those things which are familiar and ordinary, it imagines that it will find it in the things which are unknown.³⁶

The second is *silly* curiosity, which is directed at what is new and rare. Against this corrupted curiosity Malebranche proposes three remedies. The first is « not to love what is new in the matters of faith which are not within the domain of

³² *Essays* I, 27 .

³³ K. Pomian 1987, Kennedy 2004

³⁴ Dupleix 1620

³⁵ Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* Rule IV

³⁶ Malebranche 1674, IV, 3, Engl tr. p. 279-8 .

reason ». The second is “not to take what is new as a reason to believe that such and such is good or true”. The third is that “when we are sure that some truths are so hidden that it is morally impossible to discover them and that some goods are so small and thin that they cannot satisfy us, we should not get excited by what is new in them”.

Most writers on curiosity admit that it is not by itself a vice, when it is a natural and necessary disposition, but that it may become a vice, when the subject loses control on his attention to certain objects, or voluntarily undertakes to restrict his attention to certain kind of object. Kinds of objects determine the kinds of curiosities and the kind of curious: the collector looks after *mirabilia*, extraordinary and marvelous objects, the tourist for strange and astonishing places and details, the scientist or the erudite for certain kinds of learning and discoveries. There are also grades of curiosity: when it is attracted by new things, it is not necessarily bad. But when it becomes the search of novelty for novelty’s sake, it becomes an *ubris*, an *insane curiositas*. To that species belongs the meddlesome behavior which the ancient fustigated under the name of *polypragmon*, but also the idle curiosity of the man who he interested by trivial things, who is looking for nothing in particular, out of boredom, laziness, or dilettantism.

4. *The nature of curiosity*

“Who, asks La Bruyère, could exhaust all the kinds of curiosity?” Among all these kinds and modes of curiosity is it possible to discern common features ? Our main questions are the following: a) what kind of mental state or episode is curiosity? b) What is relationship with the epistemic goal? c) what are its main varieties? c) in what sense is it a vice or a virtue? I want to show that all these questions are related.³⁷

First, what kind of mental state is curiosity? It is clearly a desire, rather than an emotion or a feeling. Some states of being curious can be associated to emotions, such as wonder or surprise (on the view that surprise is an emotion), or to certain feelings, such as the feeling of there being something strange or disquieting (what is called in German *Uneimlichkeit*), but the emotion or the feeling are neither necessary nor sufficient for being curious: one can be curious

³⁷ I have been influenced by Denis Withcomb 2010, and like him, my general answer is that curiosity is a desire for knowledge. Inan 2012 (p.128 -135) challenges this traditional definition. According to him there can be a desire to know whether p (for instance if one has a specific interest in knowing whether Plato wrote *The Republic*) without being curious about it and there can be curiosity without a desire to know (for instance if one has no interest in knowing whether p, like the husband who is not ready to accept that his wife is unfaithful). I agree that there are such situations but they seem to me to characterize a certain kind of curiosity, rather than they are cases of non-curiosity or of curiosity without desire to know. On Inan’s view there is a more basic state, interest, which drives curiosity. I am happy to call what I characterize below as natural curiosity as such an interest, and to accept that curiosity is always associated with interest. See also Mulligan 20XX (this volume).

about something without having any emotion, or feel, and one might have an epistemic emotion, such as wonder, without being curious about the object of our emotion, although wonder is often the cause of a desire to know. The desire can be short lived, but curiosity for a certain kind of object is in general a long-standing desire.

Second what are the objects of the desire of curiosity? I shall here adopt the terminology of the schoolmen, of taking mental states and episodes to have formal objects³⁸. The formal objects are the typical intentional objects of these states. In the case of desires, the formal object can be an object in the ordinary sense of a certain thing, such as a child's desire for a toy or an apple. Children and animals can certainly be curious about various things without entertaining any proposition about them. Let us call this *animal curiosity*. Humans can have it. But most of the time the formal object of their curiosity is a proposition³⁹. It is not the proposition that a certain state of affairs be the case, as with most propositional desires. By definition, if I am curious about *p*, I do not know whether *p*, and want to know *whether p*. If I already knew that *p*, my desire would be satisfied. This tells us three things. The first is that the formal object of curiosity is a proposition which is the content of a *question*. When I am curious about *p*, I am not curious *that p*. Indeed there is a sense of being curious *that p* which means that I am surprised *that p*, and that, having seen *p* I want to know more about it. But whether *p* is or is not the first thing I am curious about, it is the object of a question. When one asks a question whether *p*, the natural answer is that *p* is or is not the case. For instance if in a quiz show I am asked whether Canberra is the capital of Australia, my answer will be a "yes" or a "no". But it cannot be said that I am curious about it. Rather either I know the answer or I don't. As many have argued, when we ask a question whether *p* we want to *know whether p*.⁴⁰ There is an obvious sense in which someone who

³⁸ See Kenny 1963, Teroni 2008

³⁹ Inan 2012, ch 9 denies that propositional curiosity is the only kind of curiosity. He allows for an objectual curiosity, such as being curious about an object *a*, possibly a property (a city, and object, a feature of a person, etc.) I do not deny that there is objectual curiosity, but it is not clear to me that it is incompatible with consideration of a proposition, which constitutes a question that one asks about an object or its features. P. 137, *op cit*, Inan argues that "when S is curious about the F, there is no simple true proposition in the form [the F is a] such that we could make the following inference: If S comes to know that the F is a, then S's curiosity will have been satisfied". His reason is that if there were such a proposition, there would be no guarantee that the terms figuring in such a proposition would be ostensible or object of acquaintance. His point is that *wh*-questions, such as *being curious about who the murderer is* do not involve, when curiosity is satisfied, knowing a particular proposition. This is because the individual in question is not selected beforehand as the possible object of knowledge, and even a longish description of the form "the man who has features X, Y or Z" may not provide the appropriate acquaintance which could be the "buck stopper" for the inquiry. This is correct, but even if acquaintance is acquaintance with objects and not with propositions, acquaintance is a form of knowledge, which it is reasonable to suppose that the curious person is looking after. I cannot here discuss Inan's sophisticated analysis of curiosity along these lines, but nothing in what he says seems to me to go against the classical view which I presuppose here, that curiosity is a desire for knowledge (about objects or propositions).

⁴⁰ Williamson 2000, Whitcomb 2010. White 1982 defends the view that knowledge is answering a question.

asks whether p is curious about p , and his question will be answered if he reaches the answer that p is the case. But to ask whether p is not to be curious whether p . I can ask this question without being curious whether p (for instance if I am your interrogator at the quiz, and have already the answer). But the (formal) object or the typical content of curiosity is a question. A question whether p asked, so to say, *in the mode of curiosity*, calls for an answer which will satisfy the desire in which curiosity consists. My desire for water is satisfied by water. My desire in the mode of curiosity is a desire *to know* whether p . The question which is the content of curiosity is a question about whether I can acquire knowledge about p . Hence curiosity whether p is a desire for *knowledge* that p . Knowledge is the proper formal object of curiosity.

Why is that so? Can't the content of curiosity be a belief about whether p ? No, for what the curious person desires is not to acquire the belief that p , or the belief that p is true. Someone who wants to know whether p in the curiosity mode has a desire which is satisfied only if p is the case, only if he can answer, assertively that p . The reason for this is not only that knowledge is the proper norm of assertion, as many philosophers have argued, but also because anything but knowledge falls short of satisfying curiosity as a desire. The curious does not desire to believe that p , for if the belief were false, his curiosity would not be satisfied, just as the thirst of thirsty person would not be satisfied if it turned out that the glass he is trying to drink were empty. To this one could object that *idle* or *leisurely* curiosity may well be satisfied by the mere belief that p , which can be either true or false. On such a view the curious person would be someone who wants to be in state of belief about p , rather than in a state of knowledge that p . But is that correct? The man in the Bazar who looks successively at an antique jewel, a carpet, a piece of cloth, may not want to *know* anything about these (not even the price), although he may want to have only beliefs about them, about their color, their shape, or their overall appearance. This seems to be curiosity enough: his attention is open, in the inquisitive mode, but without any desire to know about these objects. This kind of curiosity, which as we saw above, is coined by the tradition as innocuous (*innoxia, inutilis inquisitionis curiositas*). The idle *curiosus* does not want to know. But could he be curious about the objects of the bazar if he did not want to believe something *true* about these objects? He may not care about whether what he believes, or is prepared to believe, about these objects, is true or not. But could he turn his attention to the objects in question if he were not at least entertaining the possibility that he could get true beliefs about these? This is not plausible. It would be strange if the curious person said: "I just want to believe that this carpet is green by looking at it". The proper form of his question has to be: "Is it the case that p ?",

a question which is properly answered only if the person is in position to assert that p . And if to assert that p is to claim to *know* that p , then even the idle *curiosus* has a state of mind directed at knowledge. Even mild and idle curious person, who does not care seriously whether p is directed towards potential knowledge.

Suppose that curiosity were a desire for a true belief about p . We could say that the curious person's desire is

(BC) Believe that p if p and do not believe that p if not p

This would not do, for at least two reasons. First, as Sosa (2001:) remarks, if one asks oneself whether to believe p and goes on to believe p only if p , he must believe p in order to believe p , which is absurd: why would he care for the advice to believe that p only if p , if he *already* believes that p ?⁴¹ Second (BC) cannot account for the content of the desire of someone who is curious, for he could satisfy this condition through believing that p for no reason, or by mere luck. In this case his curiosity would not be satisfied. The kind of belief that a curious person desires is not any kind of true belief. It is at least a justified belief, actually a belief which is *safe* and free of luck. In other words the curious person does not strive for a belief which would just be true. He strives for knowledge. What would be the point of looking out of the window to see whether your neighbor's wife is unfaithful if it were only to get a true belief about this? Neither is the curious person gullible: someone who is curious is not prepared to accept any belief whatsoever. He is prepared to accept only those which can pass the tests for knowledge. Curiosity is not credulity or gullibility.

To the claim that curiosity is a desire for knowledge, one might object that it does not fit animal curiosity, or the kind of natural curiosity that children have, for asking whether p and desiring to know whether p seems to involve that one possesses the concept of knowledge and the concept of asking a question. Animals or children do not have these concepts, so they cannot be curious. But this does not follow. One can desire to obtain knowledge about whether p without have, reflectively or consciously, the concept of knowledge. The cat may ask itself whether there is milk in the jar, and want to know about it, without thinking about it. His action of putting its head into the jar is explained by his desire to know.⁴²

The fact that curiosity is a desire for knowledge, and not simply for belief about the truth that p , sets its relationship to the epistemic goal, which is, on this

⁴¹ This argument, which has been endorsed by Glüer and Wikfors (2009) can be resisted, though. Someone who entertains the thought that p need not *thereby* believe that p is true.

⁴² Whitcomb 2010 presses this point.

view, knowledge. But what if the epistemic goal were not knowledge, and rather, as a number of writers have argued, *understanding*?⁴³ For even if we accept that curiosity is a desire for knowledge, we have to admit that it has to be *interesting* knowledge, useful information, and the objection from triviality reappears. And one of the functions of understanding, argue those who take it to be the proper epistemic goal, is to sort our interesting and relevant truths and knowledge from uninteresting and irrelevant ones. But it is not clear that the knowledge which the curious person is after has to be interesting in a different sense than the trivial one: if you are curious about p you have an interest in whether p , simply because p is the object of your investigation and of your asking whether p . Attention by definition selects objects of attention, but there is no further sense in which the objects of attention have to be interesting. The same is true of understanding. If understanding p , in the sense of having deep information, or grasping the meaning of p were the formal object of curiosity, idle curiosity would not be possible. Idle curiosity is orientated towards what is “interesting”, but what it is orientated towards may be utterly uninteresting, including by the lights of the viewer. He may not even intend to understand anything about p . Some tourists want to know, and even to understand, what they see when they visit a monument. But the vast majority of them are “just curious” about it. They still want to know, but only in the sense of taking the very first steps in that direction.

5. *A brief taxonomy of curiosities*

Let us take stock, and let us try to give a brief taxonomy of the different kinds of curiosity, in order to be able count these as virtues or vices of learning. All forms of curiosity involve a relation to the epistemic goal or norm of knowledge. But they do not involve the same kind of attitude towards this goal. The desire to know can be more or less reflexive, and more or less under the control of the agent. We can distinguish four main categories of curiosity, depending on the awareness that the agent has of the epistemic goal and of his capacity to be governed by it. The list is not exhaustive, since there are intermediary degrees of curiosity, but the following represent the main kinds.

(i) *Animal curiosity* is a desire for knowledge relative to a specific domain of interest to the animal, most of the time relative to his capacity to survive and to relevant cognitive interests. It is not reflexive, in the sense that the animal need

⁴³ Kvanvig 2002, Pritchard 2010.

not have the concept of belief or of knowledge, or of an epistemic goal, in order to be curious in this sense.

(ii) *Reflective curiosity* is a desire for knowledge relative to a subject matter of cognitive interest. It is reflective in that the agent is conscious of directing his interest towards a certain cognitive objective.

Neither of these attitudes is in itself an epistemic virtue or an epistemic vice. They are natural and proper to the animal. We could call them, following Malebranche, “natural curiosities” or alternatively “simple” curiosities. They are, as he said, good in themselves, since they are the attitudes which a fit for knowledge; and if knowledge is an epistemic good, they inherit its positive status. There are, however two kinds of curiosity which involve more complex and less natural attitudes or sets of attitudes.

Idle curiosity is a desire for knowledge which is unrestricted, conscious, and voluntarily directed at any object whatsoever. The agent is reflectively conscious that he is not aiming at the epistemic goal: he deliberately refuses to follow it, by deciding to take into consideration any belief whatsoever, whether or not it can constitute knowledge.

Inquiring curiosity is a desire for knowledge, which is aimed a cognitive interest in a given field, and which is conscious of its aim and of the epistemic goal. It may be aimed at knowledge in view of a further aim or value, which may be practical, but it may also be aimed at knowledge for not further aim, as a final value.

Such more complex forms of curiosity could be called *sophisticated*. They involve not only a capacity of the individual to be conscious of the epistemic goal (and of the basic triangle assertion-belief-truth upon which it rests), but also to distance themselves or to reject this goal.

Which of these forms of curiosity is a vice or a virtue? As I suggested above, our criterion should be the extent to which an agent manifests his observance and respect for the epistemic goal. This observance may or may not be voluntary, but whether or not it is such, it has to be credited to him. The more the agent endorses responsibility for his attitude of curiosity, the more virtuous or vicious he is. Natural or simple curiosities are basically natural dispositions that individuals have (although they can be learnt or the object of some kind of training), whereas This relates to the difference between two kinds of virtue epistemology: a dispositionalist view which bases virtue in various dispositions and skills on the one hand, and a “responsibilist” view, according to which virtues have to be acquired voluntarily and cultivated by the agent. The former

virtues are “low level” capacities, most of the time innate and tacit, whereas the latter are “high-level”, conscious, and often under the control of the agent. The main characteristics of curiosity as a vice or as a virtue are the reflective character of the attitude of the agent, who must have the capacity to deliberate about his beliefs, but also to take a stance about them.⁴⁴

Let us apply this to the *idly curious*. This person desires to know about any object whatsoever, as the occasion presents. She cares only for novelty. In this she resembles the person who exemplifies inquiring curiosity, but she fails to respect the epistemic goal, since she does not really want to know, since the objects of her knowledge are not appropriate. The idly curious need not care for what is new, since looking for novelty is having a certain kind of epistemic interest, although misplaced. He may also direct his attention to things which are trivial, as when one leafs across the pages a magazine while waiting at the dentist's. He actually does not care whether the floating object of his attention are new or not, trivial or not, for he does not care whether the beliefs that he acquires are true or not. In this respect the idly curious resembles the bullshitter. As Frankfurt's (1992) famous analysis, is the one who *does not care* for truth or knowledge, and who does not respect these as epistemic values. The bullshitter is “phony”: he acts as if he were making assertions, but he merely mimics genuine assertion: he is “just talking”. Similarly the one who is “just curious” is someone whose attitude mimics a desire to know, since he does not care for the truth of the beliefs that he acquires, or whether these can constitute knowledge. The idly curious has no more respect for the epistemic goal than the bullshitter has any respect for truth. So this kind of curiosity is vicious, and the verdict delivered by philosophers like Descartes and Malebranche about it is quite correct.

Although idle or leisurely curiosity is in many ways close to bullshitting or to gossiping, is important to distinguish it from other epistemic vices where the epistemic goal is disregarded. Thus a snob, like the idly, curious is someone who does not care whether what he approves is true or knowledgeable: his attitude towards candidate beliefs is based purely on their social importance and their relation to eminent position. But the snob is moved by a certain kind of cognitive interest: he aims at believing, and often as merely behaving as if he believed (or accepting, in the sense of pretending to believe) things which important people believe, and especially appreciate. The idly curiously needs not pretend or fake his assent. Idle curiosity should also be distinguished from what

⁴⁴ See Lepock 2010, Sosa 2007 and Greco 2012 are in general considered as representative of the dispositionalist view, and Zagzebski 1995 as a representative of the “voluntarist” view. On epistemic agency see Sosa 2015, Engel 2013.

was called since antiquity bad curiosity, the desire to learn about many things just for the sake of learning them. La Bruyère mocks the *polymaths*, those who aim at learning dozens of languages, or to devote themselves to spurious investigations in plants, in forgotten periods of history or in maps. Such curiosity is indeed knowledge directed, but it is directed at forms of knowledge which play no role in the economy of learning. In the same way, Swift ridiculed in *Gulliver's Travels* through his description of the *Academy of Lagado* the idle learning of its scientists.

Idle curiosity is often called *silly* curiosity, for there is much in common between it and stupidity. Flaubert's characters *Bouvard and Pécuchet* illustrate this vice of learning in the best possible way. They want to know, and are curious of everything: agriculture, mathematics, law, history, geography, etc. and they have an enormous appetite for knowledge. But they are unable to use this knowledge or to organize it in their minds. Learning for learning's sake through an excess of curiosity is just as vicious as failing to learn because of a lack of curiosity, or because one disregards the epistemic goal. Both are cases of absence of respect for the epistemic values of truth and knowledge. Although I shall not here develop this point, there are reasons to define folly, or foolishness, as a failure to recognize the epistemic goal, and to pay due respect to this goal.⁴⁵ Folly is the generic vice of which curiosity, snobbery and bullshit are the species. Malebranche distinguished clearly stupidity as a cognitive impairment, of which the agent is not responsible, from which the vice of folly, of which the agent is responsible, when he said : “ The stupid and the wit both shun away from truth. The difference is that the stupid respects it, whereas the wit despises it”.⁴⁶

How can curiosity become a virtue? How can one distinguish good from bad curiosity? In two ways. The first is the one which the promoters of the advancement of learning in the early modern age, such as Francis Bacon, Descartes. It consists in having identified the epistemic goal and in paying due respect to it. Paying due respect to this goal means that one is prepared to learn any truth which is, by one's lights, of interest. This can be called, in the traditional sense, a “disinterested search for truth” (and for knowledge), or perhaps, as “inquiry”. “Disinterested” here means that one's only interest is knowledge and not some further interest. But the fact that this search is disinterested, and supposes that one welcomes any truth does not mean that the

⁴⁵ See Mulligan 2014, Engel 2016

⁴⁶ Malebranche, *Entretiens sur la métaphysique et la religion*.

search is not driven by interest. The interest in question is *cognitive* interest and it supposes that one is also able to circumscribe the range of one's inquiry.

There is, however, a second way in which one can satisfy the objectives of learning, and become curious in a virtuous way. It consists in refusing to learn, hence to know certain things, if one judges that they would clutter our minds or divert us from truths that one judges more important than others. In other words, a proper use of curiosity implies that one be prepared to be *uncurious* about certain things, and that in a number of circumstances, one restricts one's desire for truth and knowledge. This kind of restraint, which supposes the exercise of the will,⁴⁷ is what Malebranche advises as a "proper" use of curiosity⁴⁸. It involves a desire *not to know* when one has good reasons to refuse to accept certain truths. Such negative desires can be irrational, or unmotivated, as when a lover prefers not to know certain things about his or her loved one. But it can be motivated by good reasons, or by doctrinal reasons. Thus Christians, from Augustine to today, take curiosity as a vice if it diverts us from knowledge about religious matters. Malebranche advised not to be curious about matters which are inaccessible to human knowledge, such as the truths of faith. Or Swift recommended that one read only the books written by the Ancient, and not those of the Moderns. Similarly someone may choose to reread classical books that have passed the test of time, rather than trying to read every new book. These uses of uncuriosity have been considered as hostile to learning and to the scientific attitude in general, and they are such as they limit a priori the domain of the knowable and of our efforts to know. But they need not be so, if they are at the service of scientific inquiry. The conduct of inquiry may, in a number of occasions, involve a refusal to go in certain directions of research, hence a refusal to be curious, just as the proper visit of a monument or of a place of touristic interest may involve the desire not to visit everything. In this sense, we can say that uncuriosity is also part of the virtue of curiosity.

6. Conclusion

The approach to curiosity adopted here has been teleological rather than causal. I have tried to give a taxonomy of kinds of curiosity from the point of view of its goal and what it is for, rather than from the point of view of its biological and cognitive etiology, which are undoubtedly the source of our natural dispositions for knowledge. The two approaches are, however, not

⁴⁷ This is what Manson (2012) calls « epistemic restraint ». Rott 2008 describes what he calls "negative doxastic voluntarism", as the activity to refuse to accept propositions one does not trust, and refusal to revise one's beliefs at any cost. This concept can be put at the basis of reflective virtue epistemology.

⁴⁸ Malebranche 1674, p. 279-82.

incompatible, and since there is a natural or animal kind of curiosity, it remains to be seen how it can be the basis of other forms of curiosity. I have followed the lead of virtue epistemology by distinguishing the low level dispositions to curiosity upon which our competence rests from the higher-level attitudes we take about these dispositions. This distinction is the main axis upon which rests the distinction between curiosity as a vice of learning and curiosity as a virtue of learning. As a natural endowment, curiosity is far from being under the agent's control. But when it becomes reflective, and when agents are capable of recognizing the nature of the epistemic goal and of following it, they are also capable of refusing it. When the epistemic agent rejects explicitly the goal of knowledge, and orients his cognitive interest towards what is "interesting" only in the sense that it is entertaining or new, or when he lets his natural curiosity take the lead without exercising critical control on what he learns, curiosity becomes idle, and a mild – and sometimes strong – form of folly. The idly curious person does not care for truth. Learned stupidity, as we may call it, becomes a matter of the will. But reaction to this kind of stupidity is also a matter of the will, and of the reflective exercise of understanding.

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