

Toward New
Philosophical
Explorations of the
Epistemic Desire
to Know

Toward New
Philosophical
Explorations of the
Epistemic Desire
to Know:

Just Curious about Curiosity

Edited by

Marianna Papastephanou

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Desire to Know: Just Curious about Curiosity

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In memory of Karl-Otto Apel

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

MARIANNA PAPASTEPHANOU

If asking questions is “key” to the theme of curiosity,¹ it may be pertinent to introduce this book on curiosity through a series of questions that I have been asking while engaging in its preparation, beginning with the following: why have philosophers and others been “curious about curiosity”? Why not take it for granted?

If curiosity is as natural as it is normally maintained in much philosophy, if childhood is characterized by what Melanie Klein theorized as epistemophilia,² then, being curious about curiosity is just an ultimate expression of precisely the naturalness of asking questions, one that does not stop short of problematizing even the motivating force behind the very act of question-raising. But if curiosity is natural, then why not be content with just knowing this? Why ask any questions about curiosity, as if there were more things to be learnt about it or as if its naturalness is uncertain, perhaps even problematic? For, after all, if curiosity is natural, why does it need cultivation or encouragement or channeling into appropriate fields of inquiry? Why is it – unlike thirst or hunger – dependent on favourable circumstances? Can curiosity be simultaneously natural and a virtue, given that, for Aristotle, intellectual virtues are not natural but acquired through teaching and habituation? Then a further distinction may be in order: even if curiosity is natural, does this also mean that it is spontaneous? And, in my view, a set of political questions that haunt all the above is this: by what means, through what processes, on what grounds are the questions of the curious asked and answered?

Curiosity is, after all, expressed in and through actions and, likewise, epistemic restraint as the conscious decision not to seek certain knowledge is coupled with refraining from certain actions – all this in ways ultimately

¹ Dennis Whitcomb, “Curiosity was framed” in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81.3 (2010), 664-687.

² For more on these issues, see Mashuq Ally, “A preliminary investigation of a family of cognitively significant emotions” in *Phronimon* 10. 1 (2009), 11.

significant from a *vita activa* perspective. What makes us ask questions and what kind of questions do we ask? What is the meaning of our motivation to know (the world, our own selves, the others) and how does it affect the meaning of Being? Do we enact doxastic virtues like open-mindedness when we are curious or do we seek closure and finality when we direct our curiosity at something, as Jonathan Kvanvig³ remarks? Is the desire to know reducible to the notion of curiosity or, in other words, does curiosity suffice as a concept to cover the whole ground of “desiring knowledge”, as if such desire were intransitive, that is, independent of the quality attributed to the desired object? Even if Ilhan Inan is right that the reference of curiosity is inostensible⁴ because it is a reference to the unknown, even if, strictly speaking, one asks a question precisely to render an unknown known, the framing of the searched unknown says very much about why and how a question about something appears legitimate in the mind of the questioner in the first place. Is epistemic curiosity, which drives inquiry, a desirable and acceptable motivational ground for relating to the world and for learning? Are there other, alternative and more profound ways to wonder about human and non-human reality? Is wonder⁵ such a better alternative, indicating the other's inexhaustible ability to surprise us (as Luce Irigaray⁶ would argue), or is it just an epistemic cognate of curiosity, suffering from similar difficulties and in no way meriting romanticization or sanitization? And is epistemic curiosity a distinctive feature of European culture, as some thinkers⁷ have claimed from early modernity until now? What's in the metaphors that we employ to define curiosity? Is curiosity a virtue or is it merely a cognitive emotion, is it an *orexis* (appetite) or a *pathos* (passion)? Or is it a value-neutral state of mind that acquires a normative import from the political and cultural weight that is at times attached to it? If it is a virtue, then why did Aristotle, the paramount thinker of virtues, not include it in his own “list”

³ Jonathan Kvanvig, *The value of knowledge and the pursuit of understanding*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149.

⁴ Ilhan Inan, *The philosophy of curiosity*. London: Routledge, 2013.

⁵ The notion of wonder will crop up in this book only sporadically for reasons of focus and scope. For a most insightful discussion of wonder, see Anders Schinkel, “The educational importance of deep wonder” in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51. 2 (2017), 538-553 and Paul Martin Opdal, “Curiosity, wonder and education seen as perspective development” in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20.4 (2001), 331-344.

⁶ See, Luce Irigaray, *An ethics of sexual difference* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 72-82.

⁷ See, for instance, Toby Huff, *Intellectual curiosity and the scientific revolution: a global perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

of virtues? Why did he distinguish it from *thaymazein* and the more general desire to know, and why did he often treat curiosity as a vice?⁸ Was it a mere inadvertence or failure on his part or was there a nuanced cultural and political backdrop, in some respects perhaps more nuanced, rich and aware of ambiguities than ours, against which he considered what may count as intellectual virtue?

Still, despite the above very many questions and the many more that have been asked, can be asked and may be asked about the concept and conceptions of curiosity, the title of this book asserts that the editor and possibly also the contributors are “just curious”. However, if curiosity is interested, that is, if it does not only motivate but is also motivated, excited and ignited, this entails that one is not “just” or “simply” curious. And here we encounter the doubleness of interest in its connection to curiosity and to acquiring knowledge: as social and financial factor, interest is a crucial player in the active promotion of knowledge acquisition (consider, for instance, how funding and getting funded becomes revered in current academic contexts of post-truth); as motivational force, however, interest gives to the quest for truth a sort of partisanship in critical reaction to post-truth and to utility imperatives. Asking a question may (almost?) never be about being just curious. Thus, if the “just curious” of the title does not affirm the kinds of simplicity that evoke “innocence”, disinterestedness and naivety, then what is its intended operation? The title contains the words “just curious” because we purposely and consciously limit the ambitions of a book on curiosity. Instead of hoping to offer something conclusive, we only wish to join related debates and hopefully to give a different direction as concerns specific aspects of such debates. A self-reflective approach of being curious about curiosity, about curiosity’s conceptualizations, about its historical “destiny” and about its current status in our lives and works cannot but be modest. It may even be daunted by the complexity of the questions and of the object of inquiry. We aspire to rethink curiosity rather than answer related questions in a way that forestalls the dialogue that the new explorations may initiate. It should be kept in mind that the “re” of “rethinking” may not quite convey eruption of radical novelty, as scholars sometimes assume or hope; it may just indicate repetition or return, all this subject to how thought proceeds and what it effects. It even involves the risk of recycling thoughts, thinking the same thoughts over and over again, re-circulating them and securing for them a prolonged life and academic currency. We hope that this book

⁸ Matthew Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus: ancient concepts of curious and meddling behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10 and 163ff.

keeps in view this risk that “rethinking” entails, even when it does not avoid it, and that such vigilance may be of some value. We do not have the answers, we do not all agree on all the ideas of this book and we do not give a full account of what a rethinking of curiosity and the infusion of debates with *new* sensibilities might lead to. Nevertheless, the word “new” not only does justice to the innovative moments of the book and to the contributors’ diverse and fresh perspectives, but it also operates at a deeper level of readerly expectations, as it hopefully fulfills the reader’s desire for something beyond well-rehearsed views on curiosity.

So, what unites the perspectives, otherwise diverse, of the contributors and gives to this book coherence of purpose? Because I would prefer to let the chapters speak for themselves and because I do not wish to predispose the reader’s response to them in any way, I will not answer this question by summing up each chapter or by reducing its ideas to an “in a nutshell” account that fits the overall purposes of the book. I would rather say a bit more (again, in the modality of interrogation) about how this book as a whole negotiates some general tendencies in treatments of curiosity within philosophical and other theoretical frameworks.

What might the philosophical treatment of curiosity be in times when sharp philosophical divisions *inter alia* between post-analytic and post-modern trends persist? Are thinkers of each theoretical “camp” interested in, that is, curious about, how thinkers of the other “camp” theorize curiosity? As an epistemic notion, curiosity is valued (certainly for diverse reasons) in sciences, education and psychology. Though modernity has by no means been univocal as concerns curiosity, it has praised epistemic curiosity as the motivational phase of scientific inquiry. Philosophically, modern American pragmatism celebrated curiosity as expression of a will to learn, as a wish to experience and utilize reality in multiple ways and, in a more Peircean sense, as a discontent with what one knows or thinks at a given time. Modern and postmodern philosophy of a psychoanalytic leaning has, by contrast, expressed much less enthusiasm and more reservations about the so-called “scopic” drive. *Contra* such tendencies, curiosity has enjoyed a renewed interest in the Anglo-American context and has attracted the attention of a broadly understood post-analytic philosophy which investigates curiosity’s status as a mental state or cognitive emotion.⁹ As an intellectual virtue, curiosity has also preoccupied virtue epistemology. From a broadly conceived continental point of view,

⁹ See, for instance, Neil Manson, “Epistemic restraint and the vice of curiosity” in *Philosophy* 87. 2 (2012), 239-259.

curiosity has not surfaced much. De-naturalized by Sigmund Freud¹⁰ and indicted by Martin Heidegger,¹¹ curiosity has been associated with an epistemology fixated on grasping, producing, transmitting and controlling knowledge. Certainly, this skeletal reference to some treatments is merely indicative and admittedly inadequate to capture the broad spectrum of discussions of curiosity in a nuanced and fair manner. For instance, despite the Heideggerian legacy of mistrusting curiosity, the latter has been defended by Foucault¹² whose association of it with care has been disseminated by continental philosophers broadly considered postmodern and endorsed by researchers in various disciplines. Thus, a fresh valorization of curiosity is also noticeable in the French continental, postmodern philosophical persuasion, though in that context, the adjective “epistemic” often gives way to other qualifications of curiosity that either ethicize or aestheticize it, and then connect it with politics.

Important work on curiosity has thus been produced across divides. However, I believe, disciplinary divisions and persuasion polemics often block the possibility of a more critical outlook and of a fertile exchange of ideas on curiosity. The more critical outlook that this book hopefully enables allows us to: perceive historical political complications of valorizations of curiosity, beyond the politically restrictive framework of viewing curiosity merely as a technology of the self; maintain a nuanced and qualified appreciation of curiosity sensitive to its ambiguities; reclaim the epistemic and its significance for ethico-political vision; explore the “productive” force of conceptions and valorizations of curiosity through critiquing various cultural enactments of the interpellation to “be curious”; and acknowledge that, in some instances, epistemic restraint is politically more enabling than unbridled epistemic desire. An exchange of ideas that goes beyond divisions and persuasion polemics enables more nuanced and multi-dimensional accounts of curiosity. It allows insight into the complex political operations of epistemic curiosity (and, by implication, of epistemic

¹⁰ For a discussion of Freud’s position on curiosity, see, Daniel K. Cho, “Curiosity according to Psychoanalysis: Blumenberg, Freud, and the Destiny of an Affect” in *New German Critique* 35.2 (2008): 191-205.

¹¹ For a discussion of Heidegger’s, Gadamer’s and Foucault’s positions on curiosity, see, Corey McCall, “Some Philosophical Ambiguities of Curiosity in the Work of Heidegger, Foucault, and Gadamer” in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42.2 (2011), 176-193.

¹² See, for instance, Michel Foucault, “The masked philosopher” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, philosophy, culture. Interviews and other writings, 1977-1984*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Routledge, 2013, 323-330.

restraint) without needless and sweeping incrimination of just anything epistemic. As I hope that the whole book illustrates these merits, I am here stating them axiomatically only to indicate why I think that crossing the constructed divide between post-analytic and continental philosophies and having more mixed approaches on the matter of curiosity may help us: heighten political awareness within post-analytic and continental philosophical contexts; reformulate the epistemic aspect of curiosity in ways that broaden the scope of postmodern continental thought; and make the epistemic aspect conducive to unveiling an alternative, de-colonial politicization that is bypassed by post-analytic and postmodern-continental trends.

Intersections from the broadly understood poststructuralist framework, from Frankfurt School Critical Theory and from post-analytic and virtue-epistemological frameworks enrich and at the same time drastically and importantly displace established philosophical, epistemic and pedagogical perspectives. The chapters of the book do not reproduce standard springboards for broaching the subject of curiosity. To give an example, most current approaches to curiosity begin with the opening lines of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* about the universal desire for knowledge. In so doing, they wrongly equate curiosity with ancient *aporia* and wonder and thus fail to historicize the ancient notion of curiosity or to note Aristotle's more complex and politicized stance toward curiosity. Some such approaches explore curiosity from a virtue epistemological perspective and consider it crucial for the formation of the virtuous thinker (and related education). Therefore, in current philosophies which focus on the desire to know, any discussion of curiosity's role in European colonialism / masculinism and of the implications of how curiosity is theorized and unconditionally accepted as an educational aim remains glaringly missing. The chapters of this book fill this lacuna, while also covering the topic in ways that attract interdisciplinary interest. Additionally, they bring together different theoretical traditions, while deepening and refining already existing approaches.

The book comprises two parts that rethink curiosity from somewhat different perspectives, one which challenges current, appetitive accounts of curiosity with a critical eye on modern legacies, and another which undertakes the task, indicated and prepared in the first part, to build on the critical challenges or to direct critique at cultures of curiosity. Thus, as the book unfolds from part One to part Two and to instantiations (SunInn Yun's and Paul Standish's chapters) of how a specific sort of curious eye/I reifies the relation to the world, it provides indications for possible

reconceptualizations of curiosity of the nuanced and multi-dimensional kind that is so far missing in the relevant literature.

Examples of the above-mentioned crossing of divides as concerns the theorization of curiosity are inclusions of perspectives as diverse as Geoff Hinchliffe's coupling of the early Frankfurt School and Derridean deconstruction and Safiye Yigit's historical narrative of curiosity which is carried out through a post-analytic and virtue-epistemological discussion of curiosity as virtue or vice. Bernard Reginster also engages with the question of the role of curiosity for the constitution of a life worth living but he does so by investigating how Nietzsche makes inconclusive curiosity the spirit of philosophical inquiry. That the engagement with the various political and philosophical operations of curiosity is multi-dimensional, yet without this entailing loss of the common thread of the book, is evident through the following examples. Martin Heidegger's critique of curiosity as inauthentic modality of being-in-the-world and the significance of this for a political view on reality runs across, and is debated within, the chapters of Nick Peim and Corey McCall, and illustrated through SunInn Yun's discussion of the scopic in the museum culture. De-colonial dimensions emerge in McCall's critique of imperious curiosity and Marianna Papastephanou's politicization of curiosity's conceptual history. The collector's eye and the underlying notion of curiosity is discussed in its multiple political operations and contrasted to alternative and potential theorizations of the desire to know both in Paul Standish's discussion of film material and in Richard Smith's elaboration on the enquiring spirit. Perry Zurn explores models of curiosity and raises ethical considerations, interrogating issues of responsibility relevant to such models. Such perspectives tie with discussions of early modern rehabilitations of curiosity from vice into virtue, such as those in Giorgios Kataliakos' chapter, and with Barbara Benedict's exploration of curiosity as subject and method in works of British literature from the Restoration (1660) to the twentieth century. Novel politicizations of curiosity run through all the chapters of the book in one way or other and push further the framework (Marianna Papastephanou's chapter) which initiated this book.

Whereas historians of philosophy have unearthed valuable conceptualizations of curiosity, today many philosophical trends maintain an affirmative stance on curiosity that de-politicizes it, treating it as an unambiguous concept. Many thinkers focus on curiosity in a way that tacitly affirms and reproduces the modern presupposition of the appetitive and the graspable/seizable in knowledge. Some trends maintain their positive outlook on curiosity by imagining that political complicities of

curiosity can be staved off either by declaring it an epistemic virtue that is sometimes led astray and made to serve vicious purposes or by dissociating curiosity from epistemology and couching it in exclusively affective or moralistic idioms. Any attempt to offer a more qualified understanding of curiosity is kept at bay since the “philosophical figure - disciple” relationship dictates that curiosity should either be appreciated or incriminated. What is often debated concerning curiosity is limited to what matters within specific persuasions in ways that reflect philosophical divides such as the analytic versus the continental or to what might constitute ambivalences within a specific philosopher’s writings about curiosity. The positioning of the chapters of the present book varies. But the authors’ theoretical commitments and engagements do not obstruct the interplay of enacted epistemic curiosity and restraint that enables one’s being curious about what master discourses disqualify as useless or undesirable knowledge and one’s being restrained or cautious about what is uncritically disseminated and popularized as worthwhile knowledge. Guided by such concerns, the book includes approaches to curiosity from diverse philosophical persuasions and standpoints. It enriches perspectives on curiosity through new explorations of the topic. It introduces accounts that complicate dominant outlooks on curiosity that either celebrate it uncritically or sweepingly connect it with an ethic of control.

The book aims to advance scholarly research on curiosity by adding to current outlooks new sensibilities, fresh arguments and nuanced perspectives. Let me give just two examples: first, what emerges from readings of early modern philosophers such as Hobbes in this book and is, in my view, significant for current engagements with curiosity’s conceptual history is that the contemporary metonymic use of Hobbes’ metaphor “lust of the mind” as indicative of early modern, entirely positive outlooks on curiosity is wrong and misleading. Uniform accounts of Hobbes’ notion of curiosity overlook tensions and ambiguities in Hobbes and oversimplify the historical-philosophical narrative of curiosity’s passage from vice to virtue in modern times. Second, critical approaches to those Western understandings of curiosity that have metaphorized knowledge as something that you could grab (e.g. consider the modern uses of the time-honoured metaphor of Eve’s picking the apple) also make us think more about the practical and cultural consequences of knowledge viewed as graspable object in (post)modern mindsets. In my view, the book deep down sensitizes the reader to subtle though problematic political operations of what “picking the apple” evokes. In addition, from my perspective, one may feel compelled to consider in such assumptions echoes of choosing. Knowledge that can be

“picked” (and “ticked” as obtained and secured) evokes a sense of choice (of marketized knowledge on offer and available for the taking) that reminds me of picking this or that from a supermarket, ready-made, filtered through the (culture) industry and commercialized. So, as I see it, the problem may not only be that our world of today encourages thinking about knowledge as something you could grab but also as something of pure preference, something you may choose or just want. Against such self-indulgent and soporific, challenge-free conceptions of knowledge, I believe that this book indirectly encourages us to consider another sense of knowledge: some kinds of knowledge should “fall” on the person, should hit the person on the head, so to speak. If I may use another “apple” metaphor/narrative here, some kinds of knowledge may be experienced as a psychological and existential blow and metaphorized with the narrative of the apple falling on Newton's head. This does not cover just the epistemic case of coming to new knowledge about the natural world through a kind of quasi-epiphanic experience of justified true belief. It is, especially, political, uncomfortable knowledge that could or should be of this kind; bewitching, casting a spell, holding one hostage, haunting, following one like a shadow throughout life. Certainly, this is not the kind of safe and profitable knowledge that one might want or choose to have, grab, pick or seize, be praised by PISA for having, and cashing it out as distinction or as symbolic and social capital. What kind it may be, is difficult to pin down, let alone quantify and measure.

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PART I:
ANCIENT AND MODERN LEGACIES
OF CURIOSITY:
DIVERSE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

CHAPTER ONE

INTERROGATING THE UNQUALIFIED VALORIZATION OF CURIOSITY

MARIANNA PAPASTEPHANOU

I. Introduction

Modernity has largely praised epistemic curiosity as the motivational phase of scientific inquiry. Nowadays, curiosity attracts renewed attention as an epistemic virtue or as a cognitive emotion within a broadly conceived post-analytic philosophical context. From a virtue-epistemological perspective, curiosity is identified with the desire to know and enjoys a prominent position in the family of intellectual virtues.¹ In addition, curiosity seems to have its own niche within a broadly conceived postmodern context, as an affective state relevant to the Foucauldian “care of the self”. Thus, a fresh valorization of curiosity is noticeable in the French continental-postmodern philosophical persuasion, though within that context, the adjective “epistemic” gives way to other qualifications of curiosity. Such qualifications either ethicize curiosity, as in Michel Foucault’s² association of it with the care of the self, or aestheticize it, as in Jacques Rancière’s³ association of it, *qua* affect, with the pensive image that destabilizes established orders. However, against tendencies to treating the desire for knowledge as curiosity in a uniform way, pertinent distinctions have at times been introduced, especially as concerns the kindred notion of wonder and important work has been produced on how the former differs from the latter or on how wonder has an as yet under-

¹ See Neil Manson, “Epistemic restraint and the vice of curiosity” in *Philosophy* 87. 2 (2012), 239-259.

² Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005).

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2009).

theorized moral significance.⁴ The differentiation of wonder from curiosity is as such a very interesting operation from antiquity to the present, one that Anders Schinkel has amongst others engagingly and informatively explored.⁵ But, as the focus of this book is exclusively on curiosity, wonder will only tangentially come up in the present chapter.

Despite the importance of the current philosophical interest in curiosity, this notion becomes depoliticized to the extent that most contemporary theoretical approaches miss (or even obstruct viewing) some of curiosity's time-honoured colonial political operations. Failures to perceive curiosity's political complicities lead to rendering de-colonial commitments a hollow rhetoric, at least as concerns possibilities of truly complicating affective investments in caring for the self and for the world. If we become curious to know more about curiosity's ambiguities in Western history, we will see that both the "appetite for knowledge" and the thematization of this appetite have, amongst many other things, been ethico-political in more complex and intricate ways than those so far noticed in the relevant discourses. I have given an outline of such a narrative elsewhere,⁶ but here, in this chapter, I will provide a somewhat more detailed account of it to facilitate the exposition of my critical argument that, ironically, fields which glorify curiosity have not been curious enough about curiosity's history and politics. In addition, a narrative of this kind helps us see that ethico-political questions are connected with questions that are usually treated as purely epistemological. It also helps us enlarge our scope of the political and protects us from aestheticizing or ethicizing curiosity. The first section indicates the position of curiosity in educational theory and philosophy. It is followed by a sketch of one of the possible narratives that can historicize and politicize curiosity. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on curiosity and political interrogation.

II. Curiosity and Education

The situation described in the introduction, namely, the current, one-sidedly appreciative, apolitical and synchronic outlook on curiosity within most fields (with the exception of disciplines such as geography)

⁴ Anders Schinkel, "Wonder and Moral Education" in *Educational Theory* 68.1 (2018), 31-48.

⁵ Anders Schinkel, "The educational importance of deep wonder" in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51. 2 (2017), 538-553.

⁶ Marianna Papastephanou, "The 'Lifeblood' of Science and Its Politics: Interrogating Epistemic Curiosity as an Educational Aim" in *Education Sciences*, 6. 1 (2015), 1-16.

characterizes educational theory too. More often than not, fashionable philosophical insights (those on curiosity notwithstanding) that infiltrate educational fields encounter too little resistance and too few questions or challenges. In most educational-philosophical discourses curiosity is valued either because it is considered the motivational force of learning or because it contributes to the formation of the virtuous learner or because it is credited with displacing and destabilizing the self. Even when curiosity is not entirely appreciated reservations concerning its significance are limited to moralist risks lurking in the desire to know trivial things or to pry into others' lives. Politically sensitive interrogations of what counts as curiosity and whether it should unconditionally be valorized are missing. Older educational theories depoliticized curiosity by considering it the disinterested lifeblood of science,⁷ while new approaches depoliticize it by focusing on its appetitive or motivational dimension exclusively. Even in cases where implications of cultivating politically resistant or dissenting subjectivities are drawn, curiosity is blithely politicized as a politically enabling force with no attention to complications and risks.

An exception to this tendency was Paulo Freire⁸ who politicized curiosity as potentially soporific. Excited by vogue, gossip, fetishized technology and other such disorientations from political issues curiosity becomes complicit in the reproduction of the *status quo*. In playing a disorienting role curiosity politically operates against emancipation and freedom. Still, Freire argues, curiosity has a positive, politically liberating role when, in its epistemic modality, it leads to questioning and unveiling relations of oppression. Thus, naïve curiosity can be transformed into epistemological, reflective questioning of the self and the world. As he writes, “the more I acknowledge my own process and attitudes and perceive the reasons behind these, the more I am capable of changing and advancing from the stage of ingenuous curiosity to epistemological curiosity”.⁹ Freire’s curiosity is a politically ambiguous concept, denoting a natural propensity (natural *qua* onto-anthropological) which, in a spontaneous form, is common to all yet becomes diversified in the public sphere. Freire’s universalist elevation of curiosity to an onto-anthropological constant is politically valuable for challenging the modern, colonial and exclusivist outlooks of curiosity as a particularist trait characterizing only the Western high classes. Freire gives a nuanced account of how this onto-anthropological common quality takes shape in actual existential situations

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

⁹ Ibid, 44.

that either block curiosity or channel it to politically conformist objects or excite it in liberating directions. This makes room for diverse politicizations of curiosity without uncritically celebrating it or indicting it wholesale.

Freire's politicization of curiosity thus avoids conceptual uniformity and simplification. Yet, in my view, it fails to register the political dangers of the dominant conception of curiosity that extend well beyond mere escapism and political idleness. Therefore, even politically nuanced accounts such as Freire's politicize curiosity in a way that misses much of what a narrative of curiosity's conceptual history reveals, as I hope to show in this chapter.

Within French continental thought, there have been possibilities of offering different accounts of curiosity *via* major thinkers such as Foucault or Rancière. Educational theorists such as I. Geerinck, J. Masschelein, J. and M. Simons¹⁰ engage with Foucault's views on curiosity, while Tyson Lewis¹¹ engages with those of Rancière. They have drawn on such sources respectively to revisit curiosity, in an attempt, as I see it, to avoid the kind of disengagement with the notion of curiosity that concedes it to analytic and cognitivist handlings exclusively.

On the one hand, Geerinck, Masschelein and Simons educationally accommodate curiosity by giving an account of Foucault's notion of it: "not the curiosity that seeks to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself".¹² Curiosity implies a form of care (*cura*) for "what exists and could exist" and "has the power to transform the ordinary into something strange, something worthy of attention". This sense of curiosity then "wrests one free of oneself".¹³ In turn, the subject of such a curiosity is hypostasized with the curious teacher. Geerinck, Masschelein and Simons "call attention to the figure of a teacher for who not knowledge but care is the main concern: the figure of the 'caring or curious teacher'".¹⁴ Apart from seeing a dichotomous logic underneath the contrast of the "knowing" versus the "curious" teacher, by which the former is incriminated and the latter valorized or invested with (crypto-)normative significance, I also sense a depoliticization

¹⁰ Ilse Geerinck, Jan Masschelein, and Maarten Simons, "Teaching and knowledge: A necessary combination? An elaboration of forms of teachers' reflexivity" in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29. 4 (2010), 379-393.

¹¹ Tyson E. Lewis, "Teaching with Pensive Images: Rethinking Curiosity in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" in *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 46.1 (2012), 27-45.

¹² Geerinck, Masschelein, and Simons, "Teaching and knowledge", 390.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

and de-epistemicization of curiosity that blocks insight into its colonial history.

Lewis, on the other hand, begins his own examination of curiosity with the everyday incrimination of it and illustrates this with the response “I am just curious” that is often given to those who question one’s motives in wanting to know: “what is ‘just curious’ if not some sort of preemptive apology that inadvertently displays our guilt at having sensed differently”, Lewis asks. “Rather than be ashamed or embarrassed by our curiosity”, he suggests, “we must embrace it openly”.¹⁵ Again, this unqualified welcome of curiosity seems to me to bypass or block attention to all that, as I hope to show in the next section, can be extracted from narratives of time-honoured complicities of (some of) the curious.

Other thoughts/persuasions which have likewise passed the filters of educational philosophy and theory have also led educational philosophers to question the supposed disinterestedness of scientific curiosity. Though unresponsive to political operations, virtue-epistemology has, nevertheless, complicated the assumption that curiosity is disinterested and dissociated from aretaic or ethical concerns. An education that combines epistemic and ethical sensibilities has been widely praised and, within this context, education is now called to cultivate not only inquisitive, scientific mindsets directed toward knowledge acquisition and transmission but also the all-round ideal of the virtuous learner. In this effort, curiosity is given prominent position in educational goal-setting,¹⁶ yet, again, with no attention to the kind of political operations that it has been serving from antiquity to present times and which will be indicated in the next section.

In my view, both cases of renewed interest in (and appreciation of) curiosity (i.e., the postmodern-continental and the virtue-epistemological), depoliticize curiosity and consider it an unambiguously desirable educational aim. In more rare occurrences, curiosity is nuanced and its educational significance qualified for moralist purposes rather than for political sensibilities. Thus, in such cases, the adjective “epistemic” comes in to hold curiosity in check, to differentiate it and protect it from sliding into morally impermissible or undesirable versions of the desire for knowledge. Such versions are again adjectivally demarcated: idle, morbid, gossipy, trivial, naïve and nosy curiosity. Safely distinguished from nosiness, the “everyday sense” of curiosity is declared “uncontroversially valuable for

¹⁵ Lewis, “Teaching with Pensive Images”, 43.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Frederick F. Schmitt and Reza Lahroodi, “The Epistemic Value of Curiosity” in *Educational Theory* 58.2 (2008), 125-148 and Jason Baehr, “Educating for Intellectual Virtues: From theory to practice” in *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47.2 (2013), 248-262.

knowledge”.¹⁷ Ultimately, the new framings reflect an unqualified affirmation of epistemic (non-idle, non-morbid, etc) curiosity, lacking the additional nuance that a deeper interplay of cognitive, aesthetic, and ethico-political dimensions may offer to a philosophical exploration of curiosity’s operations. In fact, most philosophies “of curiosity emphasize its achievements”¹⁸ and most philosophies of education try to make the most of this emphasis. Stimulating curiosity becomes “central to education and learning”.¹⁹ According to Jason Baehr, “fostering growth in intellectual virtues [such as curiosity] should be a central educational aim”.²⁰

III. Historicizing and Contextualizing Curiosity

However, the “unqualified praise of curiosity as an admirable character trait” is “a relatively recent phenomenon”.²¹ If we view curiosity from a contextualizing and historicizing perspective, we will notice that diverse places, times, cultures and political configurations (e.g., city-states, hegemonies, empires, nation-states and ideological blocs) maintained a very rich variety of outlooks on curiosity, ranging from affirmative, ambivalent, and negative to univocal, diversified and multiple. As I have explained elsewhere²² the rich spectrum of metaphors and responses to curiosity neither uniformly celebrated it nor indicted it wholesale. In addition, from antiquity to modernity, the appetitive and kinetic metaphoricality of curiosity through terms such as hunger, thirst, crossing space, conquering the unknown, journey, adventure, expansion, gambling, hunting provide fertile ground for theorizing the non-strictly epistemic aspect of the desire to know. Augustine’s metaphorization of curiosity as the “lust of the eyes” and, much later, Hobbes’ metaphorization of curiosity as the “lust of the mind”²³ are historical instances that illustrate how the epistemic intersects with the figurative, the libidinal and the affective. Even the analytic approaches that supposedly confine themselves to the concept of curiosity (and set aside its historical conceptions) are fraught with metaphors. In turn, such metaphors chime with specific personifications which strike an

¹⁷ Schmitt and Lahroodi, “The Epistemic Value of Curiosity”, 126.

¹⁸ Ali Far, “Explicating Curiosity via Uncertainty and Interest, Augmented with Open-Mindedness” in *Journal of General Philosophy* 1.2 (2015), 48.

¹⁹ Schmitt and Lahroodi, “The Epistemic Value of Curiosity”, 125.

²⁰ Baehr, “Educating for Intellectual Virtues”, 249.

²¹ Axel Gelfert, “Hume on curiosity” in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21.4 (2013), 713.

²² Papastephanou, “The ‘Lifeblood’ of Science”.

²³ *Ibid.*

exclusivist and anti-universalist note: who has the appetite for knowledge and who lacks it? Who personalizes the curious hunter of knowledge, who takes the risks involved in acquiring knowledge? For some modern philosophers, the subject of curiosity, i.e., the curious self, had always been a very particular “he”: the nobleman, the adventurous traveler, the colonial settler.²⁴ Considerations of this kind compel searching questions concerning the political substratum of accounts of curiosity and concerning claims of value-neutral analytic employments of the notion of curiosity.

Some analytic, virtue-epistemological and postmodern-continental discussions of curiosity set Aristotle as their starting point of reference. Aristotle’s assertion in his *Metaphysics* [980a.21] that “all people by nature desire to know” [*Pantes anthropoi tou eidenai oregontai fysei*]²⁵ becomes the line separating curiosity’s pre-history from its “history proper”. Setting the beginning of the dominant Western narrative of curiosity as late as in Aristotle’s era is a significant move in itself. But, more importantly, it is a curiously inaccurate move that arbitrarily levels the desire for knowledge with curiosity, and it is all the more curious if we consider that just some pages below Aristotle indicates that he has wonder (*thaymazein*) rather than curiosity (*periergia*, *polypragmosyne*) in mind.²⁶ Such narratives also overlook that Aristotle does not use the infinitive “epistasthai” but the “eidenai” to signify “to know”. They thus ignore the difference between what they see as epistemic curiosity and Aristotle’s broader notion of *gnosis* associated with the desire to know.²⁷ Another point that has not yet attracted full attention is that Aristotle values the desire to know and significantly uses the verb *oregesthai*, which evokes connotations of *orexis* (appetite), and not of *pathos* (passion treated by Aristotle as passive). Modern translations of this desire to know as “passion for *scientia*”²⁸ add connotations of debatable semantic and political bearing. Such are, for instance, different political registers of the

²⁴ For more on this, see Papastephanou, “The ‘Lifeblood’ of Science”.

²⁵ See *ibid.*

²⁶ Consider a similar remark by Mashuq Ally, “A preliminary investigation of a family of cognitively significant emotions” in *Phronimon* 10. 1 (2009), 6.

More generally, in classical and Hellenistic antiquity, a positively regarded desire to know was often associated with *aporein* (experiencing an impasse) and *thaymazein* (wondering).

²⁷ For more on the distinction between the epistemological and the gnoseological in Aristotle, see Olav Eikeland, *The Ways of Aristotle* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

²⁸ See, for instance, Teri Merrick, “Teaching Philosophy: Instilling Pious Wonder or Vicious Curiosity?” in *Christian Scholar’s Review* 39.4 (2010), 405.

libidinal; a passivity that does not chime with Aristotle's notion of *gnosis*; and a reduction of *gnosis* to *scientia* that is very un-Aristotelian in its exclusivist, elitist and intellectualist prioritization of the epistemological over the gnoseological. Finally, such narratives overlook that Aristotle's sense of "natural" as concerns the human has to be seen in light of the anthropology of "the political animal" and cannot be understood just by reference to the first page of the *Metaphysics* and in disregard of the rest of the *Corpus Aristotelicum*. I am mentioning the above issues as a first indication²⁹ that the decision of many theorists to begin their account of epistemic and scientific curiosity by reference to Aristotle's desire for knowledge is deeply problematic.

But it is even more significant that co-opting and misreading Aristotle's "desire to know" as curiosity leads contemporary philosophers to totally missing Aristotle's attitude toward *polypragmosyne*, which, along with *periergia*, are the closest ancient Greek terms to the modern notion of curiosity. Aristotle has a dismissive attitude toward *periergia*³⁰ and is cautious with *polypragmosyne*. On the one hand, he condemns *polypragmosyne*, echoing those philosophers and dramatists who treated it as an excuse and rationalization of Athenian expansionism. But, on the other hand, he feels obliged to differentiate this from a desirable and praiseworthy engagement with the affairs of the city.³¹ For, *polypragmosyne* denoted a self-serving desire to know and an active look that leads to meddling into other states' affairs. Aristotle objected to those (e.g., defenders of radical quietism) who identified this with just any city politics. For Aristotle, *polypragmosyne* was a risk that a citizen should always keep in mind and try to avoid.³² Probably, Aristotle saw in *polypragmosyne* a desire for that sort of knowledge and control over reality that opposed an aretaic conception of politics and failed to hit the mean. This kind of curiosity invited an epistemic and political *akrasia*, and thus was more of a vice rather than a virtue. There had been philosophers and poets of those times (and previous centuries) who preferred *apragmosyne* and might have influenced Aristotle. *Apragmosyne* represented a politically significant epistemic restraint associated with

²⁹ Admittedly, they require a much longer discussion that goes well beyond the scope of this chapter.

³⁰ Matthew Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus: ancient concepts of curious and meddling behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10 and 163ff.

³¹ Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus*, 23ff.

³² *Ibid.*, 24.

“anti-imperialism, non-aggressive policy, quiet attitude and [...] peace”.³³ In my view, valuing the averted gaze as a virtuous attitude of the citizen who is *philopolis* (patriotic) without being hubristic and unjust chimed with valuing *bios theoretikos*. Opening up space for such a *bios* presupposed that the *apragmon* retreat from sterile knowledge-hunting and un-reflective political action. *Hesychia* (a positively meant quietism) was also praised as another possible alternative to expansionist adventure and “pursuit of what belongs to others” by many poets and thinkers of classical and Hellenistic times.³⁴

Depending on ancient positive or negative treatments, *polypragmosyne* and *periergia* denoted a very wide range of senses.³⁵ All their cognates and alternatives were politicized in diverse ways.³⁶ Such senses have, in my view, remained regrettably too neglected in modern and postmodern discourses, possibly, *inter alia*, because the related terms in their untranslated, sesquipedalian Greek forms are “mouthfuls” in English and because the critique of the colonial has not reached as deep yet. It has certainly not reached deep enough to thematize how attitudes to foreign, ostensibly “ugly”, words may reflect a colonial spirit.³⁷

Be that as it may, in Greek antiquity, the sense of *polypragmosyne* varied from signifying “one state’s intervention into the affairs of another” to signifying “more commendable investigations that imperial expansion allows”.³⁸ That there were instances where the *apragmones* thinkers or citizens were described as “unmanly and too easygoing”³⁹ proves, in my opinion, that some Athenians treated *polypragmosyne* as a commendable token of virility, one lacked by anti-imperialist thinkers. And this shows that gender-related politicization of curiosity in antiquity continues to remain under-theorized or limited to the Pandora case (as we shall see below). In contrast to those ancient gendered readings of the averted gaze

³³ Victor Ehrenberg, “Polypragmosyne: a study in Greek politics” in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 67 (1947), 52.

³⁴ Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus*, 39.

³⁵ See, indicatively, Ehrenberg, “Polypragmosyne” and Leigh, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus*.

³⁶ See, indicatively, Eric Brown, “False Idles: The Politics of the ‘Quiet Life’”. In *A Companion to Greek and Roman Political Thought*. Edited by Balot, Ryan K. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009): 485-500.

³⁷ Marianna Papastephanou, “On ugliness in words, in politics, in tour-ism” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47.13-14 (2015), 1495.

³⁸ Gary Morrison, “Classical Curiosity”. Review of M. Leigh’s, *From Polypragmon to Curiosus*. *Ancient Concepts of Curious and Meddlesome Behaviour* in *The Classical Review* 64. 2 (2014), 371.

³⁹ Brown, “False Idles”, 486.