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## On curiosity as an epistemic vice

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## **Curiouser and Curiouser: On Curiosity as Epistemic Vice**

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What does Heidegger mean by “curiosity” and why does he characterize it as a kind of epistemic vice, when most contemporary accounts view it as a virtue? *Being and Time* disparagingly notes that curiosity “concerns itself with a kind of knowing, but just in order to have known” (BT 217/172); the curious person busies herself with “entertaining ‘incidentals’” (BT 358/310). Building on previous work – wherein I argue that virtues are best understood as tendencies to cope well with existential obstacles to flourishing (McMullin 2019) – I show that curiosity as Heidegger frames it is an epistemically vicious misunderstanding of self and world arising in large part from our tendencies toward impatience, arrogance, and fear. Because Heidegger's account of curiosity in *Being and Time* is not well-developed, we will look at nearby texts to get a better understanding of this sometimes-overlooked concept in Heidegger's corpus.

### **1. Curiosity and the Love of Seeing**

The epistemic virtues are typically understood as character traits – ways of seeing, feeling, and doing – that are constitutive of flourishing insofar as they enable us to be good knowers. For example, adjudicating well between competing testimonies, recognizing good evidence, and being honest in one's claims to knowledge, are all epistemic virtues. By most contemporary accounts, curiosity is one such epistemic virtue, defined by open-minded inquisitiveness and resistance to complacency. It thereby enables us to reliably and responsibly acquire knowledge.<sup>i</sup>

In contrast, Heidegger's account of curiosity seems entirely negative. He characterizes it as a paradigmatically inauthentic stance in which we cultivate distraction via anonymous and captivating possibilities that have little bearing on one's life. We find comparable criticisms of curiosity in figures like Plutarch and Seneca – with the former viewing it as “a desire to learn the troubles of others” (1939, 475 / 515D) and the latter rejecting it as a kind of arid knowledge-mongering detached from meaning (Walsh 1988, 84). Condemnation of curiosity finds further support in St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas,<sup>ii</sup> who both hold that in curiosity the desire to know – which Aristotle characterizes as a fundamental feature of being human – is perverted into a craving for gossip and distracting spectacle. Hobbes, too, argues that curiosity is “a Lust of the mind” that gravitates toward the greedy consumption of controversy, although he also compares it favourably to other basic desires.<sup>iii</sup>

Heidegger's discussion follows these thinkers in characterizing curiosity as a perversion of the natural desire to know. And like Augustine's characterization of curiosity as a lust to see (2008, 211–12, Book X), Heidegger frames it in terms of a natural tendency toward visual consumption (*BT* 214/170).<sup>iv</sup> Although he goes on to speak of curiosity as a perceptual mode in general, he nevertheless invokes Aristotle's famous opening of the *Metaphysics* such that the visual is emphasized – translating πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει not in the standard way as “All men by nature desire to know” (2001, 980a1 A.I.I.), but rather as “The care for seeing is essential to man's being” (*BT* 215/171), a translation that attempts to “undo the exclusively cognitivist connotation of the more standard translation” (McCall 2011, 181). What is essential to human being is a normatively governed caring that expresses itself in a circumspective attunement to the world – “seeing” – that only occasionally results in the cognitive grasping typically associated with knowledge. Hence what “all men desire by nature,”

Heidegger argues, is skilful, perceptive engagement with the world – not concepts, but *understanding*, with “understanding” taken in its existential sense as an ability to act into and master the possibilities through which Dasein can be who it is.

In contrast with seeing that is oriented by or in the service of genuine practical understanding, Heidegger characterizes curiosity as seeking “*only* to see” (BT 216/172) or “*only* to see and to have seen” (BT 397/346). In curiosity “Dasein lets itself be carried along solely by the looks of the world... it concerns itself with becoming rid of itself as Being-in-the-world” (BT 216/172). Curiosity is perception mobilized to help Dasein forget its own being by focusing instead on that which is “far” and “alien” (BT 216/172); that which calls for only superficial engagement: “The principal quality of the curious is reflected in the fact that whatever they are curious about ultimately and even from the outset means absolutely nothing to them. All curiosity thrives on this essential indifference” (N.II. 81). Similar themes are found in everyday usage: something is a “curiosity” if it is the object of an interest untethered to the specificity or import of one’s projects; idle curiosity is a mere playing at knowledge-pursuit that lacks grounding in one’s life commitments. Hence Heidegger notes that curiosity “accepts as valid only what is interesting [*Interessante*]. And interesting is the sort of thing that can freely be regarded as indifferent the next moment, and be displaced by something else, which then concerns us just as little as what went before” (WCT 5).

The disengagement that curiosity fosters may help explain the emphasis on sight – the perceptual capacity that is most conducive to forgetting one’s entanglement with the thing seen. Sight brings distant things near but without touching the seer; it locates things against a horizon in terms of which they can be comprehended from a distance; it enables a forgetting of the self and its limits, facilitating a sense of mastery from afar.<sup>v</sup> In contrast, the sense of touch makes real

one's entanglement with the world in a way that is foreign to the spectator position at work in vision (see Husserl 1989).

Accounts that characterize curiosity as a virtue, however, view this decoupling of curiosity from one's practical concerns as largely being what *makes* it a virtue; it is admirable insofar as the agent can pursue and appreciate knowledge for its own sake, not simply as a tool for achieving utilitarian ends. On this view, it is precisely this distance from the specificity of the knower that enables the careful theoretical work necessary for, say, scientific knowledge.

Heidegger recognises the degree to which certain kinds of knowledge – including theoretical knowledge – depend on interruptions to everyday practical coping (*BT* 216/172), but he distinguishes between the problematic anonymity and lack of practical connection operative in curiosity from the interruption to everyday instrumental praxis that can give rise to the questioning and openness to possibility operative in both true scientific inquiry and authentic modes of being.

The capacity for this latter kind of interruption is a function of Dasein's condition of ontological freedom – a condition that becomes known to us in fundamental attunements like anxiety and boredom. Problematic modes of interest-seeking and entertainment-production – curiosity's *modus operandi* – are largely ways to avoid these revelatory moods.

## **2. Boredom and Anxiety**

Heidegger famously notes that Dasein is constantly bored – boredom “attunes our Dasein through and through” (*FCM* 166) – although we don't always recognize it. Ontological boredom reveals Dasein to be free from the determination that comes with animal being, demonstrating the indifference that underwrites our free capacity to act into different possibilities of being.

There is no fundamental instinct, cause, or destiny governing who we must be; each of us is “held out into the nothing” (*PM* 91) and must take a stand despite this lack of ultimate ground. In *Being and Time*, it is anxiety that plays this revelatory role, stripping the world of the normative grip through which it manifests its meaning. Both boredom and anxiety confront Dasein with the groundless contingency or freedom from determinacy that helps make it what it is; a condition that can be resolutely taken up in authenticity or actively denied in curiosity, idle chatter, and ambiguity (*BT* 211-225/167-180).

Curiosity’s favored objects - distracting spectacle and salacious gossip – are well-suited to “fill up” the nothing that defines us, concealing, thereby, the responsibility posed by our freedom:

[W]e can ask whether our contemporary everyday traits, our being human, is not such that in everything – in all its doing and acting and being blinded by this – it acts counter to the possibility of that profound boredom arising. We can only ask whether contemporary man narrows down that *expanse of his concealed and most profound need* to those needs against which he immediately finds some self-protection, so as to satisfy and appease himself in this (*FCM* 166).<sup>vi</sup>

Curiosity directs our sight to only those needs that can be easily appeased, blinding us to the more profound needs operative in the injunction to self-becoming. Gossip and idle chatter point attention outward and thereby distract us from our failure to take up our own role as “the custodian of the inner greatness of Dasein and its necessities” (*FCM* 163).

Further, the objects of curiosity are often manifestations of the weakness and finitude of others – grotesque bodies, ridiculous scandals, failings of all kinds.<sup>vii</sup> Focusing on the spectacle presented by other people's failings distracts us from our own finitude, providing us with a sense of our own power by witnessing the powerlessness of others. Hence we can recognize the morally worrying implication of Dasein's drive toward distraction: treating the lives of others as objects for consumption and judgement. As Plutarch notes:

[T]here are some who cannot bear to face their own lives, regarding these as a most unlovely spectacle, or to reflect and revolve upon themselves, like a light, the power of reason, but their souls, being full of all manner of vices, shuddering and frightened at what is within, leap outwards and prowl about other people's concerns and there batten and make fat their own malice (Plutarch 1939, 479 / 516).

In contrast to contemporary tendencies to separate off the epistemic from the moral virtues, we see here the moral implications of certain forms of knowledge-seeking, which both rely on and enable damaging relationships to others and to self.<sup>viii</sup> The orientation to the superficially satisfying or interesting event prevents Dasein from answering the profound need of facing up to its ontological condition as entrusted with its own life in conditions of finitude and answerability to others.

### **3. Craving the New**

The German word for curiosity – *Neugier* – means desire or craving for the *new*, a fact that highlights another core feature of curiosity. It is not solely an appetite for distracting and

salacious worldly spectacle, but also a restless clamour to experience something *new*. Hence Plutarch notes that “curiosity apparently takes no pleasure in stale calamities [e.g. from history], but wants them hot and fresh; enjoys the spectacle of novel tragedies” (1939, 487 / 517-18). This feature of curiosity, Heidegger argues, displays how it is a distortion of the temporal foundation of Dasein’s way of being.

Curiosity’s distortion of the futural and “projective” dimension is evident in that it constantly “leaps away” toward the new, projecting endlessly into an untrammelled future. Curiosity is “so little devoted to the ‘thing’ it is curious about, that when it obtains sight of anything, it already looks away to what is coming next” (*BT* 398/347). The aim of curiosity, Heidegger argues, is not to dwell with something in order to gain understanding, but rather to undergo “a constant change of presence...the non-tarrying of curiosity is basically concerned with not having to get involved and with merely being entertained by the world” (*HCT* 277). Curiosity is a constant movement of replacing the current object of interest with the next novelty, with a preference for objects and events that can easily fit within the distraction-dismissal movement of endless novelty-consumption.

*Basic Problems of Phenomenology* gives us one of Heidegger’s most detailed accounts of this kind of pathological relationship to time, whereby the future is represented as something on hand, ready for consumption. Time is treated as *extant* (*BP* 274); each now is experienced as a succession of use objects *within* time (*BP* 272). The result being that future possibilities are not experienced *as* possibilities – namely, as identity-defining risks and opportunities about which one must deliberate and choose – but are instead treated as quasi-actual objects for indifferent observation. Curiosity is aimed at eradicating or concealing possibility qua possibility. If I “merely reflect on some empty possibility into which I could enter and, as it were, just gab about



it, then this possibility is not there, precisely as possibility; instead for me it is, as we might say, actual” (*BP* 277; see also *BT* 396-400/346-349). These “possibilities” carry none of the risk or uncertainty of the genuinely experienced future, the domain of indeterminacy and freedom.<sup>ix</sup> They are instead consumables determined in advance as such no matter how “hot and fresh” the particular content. The aim is “killing” time, as the bored say. Hence the frenzied movement of constant actualization that feigns futurity but eradicates its essential qualities of risk, contingency, and possibility – the fact that the existential question “who am I?” is always at stake in one’s choices. Living one’s futurity in this impoverished way means that it does not draw one forward in the genuine work of creating oneself via the patient cultivation of one’s abilities to be, but rather restlessly leaps outward toward an anonymous banquet of ready-to-hand options available for voyeuristic enjoyment. Their actualization is guaranteed in advance because they are grasped as in some sense *already* realized – on hand waiting to be seen and enjoyed by any anonymous spectator who happens to come along. The epistemic upshot of this restless experience-consumption is, “contrary to many analytic accounts of curiosity as essential for truth-acquisition...” loss of “the ability to commit to a line of inquiry long enough to reach the truth” (Dancy 1995, 197–98).

Hence Heidegger notes that this inauthentic mode of temporalizing involves Dasein living “at a faster rate” in contrast to the “essentially slower time” of reticence (*BT* 218/174). For curiosity, each now is no different than the next because “[m]atters like significance and datability remain a closed book for this way of understanding” (*BP* 272). In *Being and Time* Heidegger had already made clear that the four features that characterize Dasein’s originary temporality are spannedness (or duration), datability, publicity, and significance (*BT* 469/416). These four features manifest the *ecstatic* nature of originary temporality; the “being-outside-self”

(BP 267) constitutive of Dasein's being in the world.<sup>x</sup> In the case of datability, its "relational structure" (BP 262) indexes Dasein's being to some meaningful worldly event or thing. This anchoring of Dasein's originary temporality in worldly things can occur through the individual projects of Dasein's unique for-the-sake-of, or through the intersubjectively shared "reckoning with time" that Heidegger analyses under the heading of "publicity." Together these features help constitute the fourth structural feature of temporality: significance, which is equivalent to the normative structures of appropriateness that constitute the worldliness of the world (BT 467/414).

Curiosity distorts Dasein's embeddedness in the world via its temporal self-indexing to existentially meaningful things and projects: it "discloses everything and anything, yet in such a way that Being-in is everywhere and nowhere" (BT 221/177). It is a worldless consumption of the *process* of experiencing, the content of which is ultimately meaningless insofar as it bears no essential relationship to the significance of the world. *Towards the Definition of Philosophy* contrasts the experiential structures of processes vs. events: In the former, lived experience "pass[es] in front of me like a thing," whereas the latter "is an experience proper to me" wherein I am fully at stake in it (TDP 63). Curiosity relates to the world qua process – encountering it as a mere spectacle passing in front of Dasein and not engaging it as the domain of significance in terms of which it struggles to be who it is. But without the significance and datability that account for the variability of duration that characterizes authentic praxis, time becomes a standing now of pure presence that can be passively experienced instead of actively lived. The possibility of resolutely taking up one's unique situation is covered over in an eternal now of absolute and endless visibility in which Dasein moves restlessly from one meaningless experience to the next, each viewed from a safe distance. "Starting from this view, [Dasein]

arrives at the opinion that time is infinite, endless, whereas by its very nature temporality is finite" (BP 272). This belief in the infinity and endlessness of time, Heidegger notes, "can enter the Dasein's mind only because temporality itself, intrinsically, forgets its own essential finitude" (BP 273). In curiosity, Dasein attempts to forget itself and occupy a kind of temporal infinity.

The aim of curiosity, then, is to go through the temporal motions of being Dasein by bringing worldly experiences to presence, but in a purely passive expectation of "what is just coming on" (BPP 287) and not for the sake of enacting who one is trying to be in the world. Hence McNeill notes that this is a kind of "fleeing of time from itself in which it nevertheless remains itself as a specific possibility of presence" (1999, 173). Curious Dasein "kills time" by rushing from one anonymous interchangeable moment to the next, creating the illusion of projecting into the future but with none of the risk.

#### **4. The Past**

Curiosity's distortion of the possibility-nature of the future is coupled with a distortion of Dasein's essential relationship to the past such that it "has forgotten what has gone before" (BT 398-99/347; BP 287). *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* points out that one can "find the genuine only provided that the old is also there, [and] for a certain stretch of the way goes along behind it" (PIE 21). But it is characteristic of factual life that "the old" has a tendency toward a "fading of meaningfulness" wherein "relations wear themselves out and where merely the content that is itself no longer primordially had 'is of interest'" (PIE 26). This foreshadows *Being and Time*'s account of curiosity, whereby interest in content divested of primordially

takes the form of unthinking acceptance and “being-busy-with” something in its availability (*PIE* 141):

From this disintegrating and depraving fading, factual life experience is endangered in its primordiality and therefore mixed with faded content, relation, and enactment. Therein is based the peculiar mixed character of factual life, from out of which a number of phenomena...like boredom, emptiness, fleetingness, speed, restlessness, insecurity of life become understandable (*PIE* 141).

Although he characterizes curiosity as an orientation to the constantly “new” Heidegger also insists that “[t]he genuine is always new” (*PIE* 21). How should we understand the “newness” operative in authentic temporality – which genuinely “goes along with” its past – as different than curiosity’s constant craving for novelty? In the case of the former the “new” cannot mean “a first-time appearing and occurring in an individual stream of consciousness” (*PIE* 64). Whereas curiosity accepts only first time occurrences – “hot and fresh” events – as fulfilling the craving for novelty, the newness characteristic of the genuine arises out of and retains an essential connection to that which has already been.

In *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, Heidegger examines six different meanings of history, or ways in which Dasein lives its relationship to pastness. He considers a (hypothetical) tribe that has no history, not because events haven’t transpired for its members, but because they have no *tradition*: “they do not ‘feel’ as the later ones of earlier ones. The past for them is not a character in which they factually live and which somehow permeates the content of their life experience; they do not cultivate the past” (*PIE* 35). As a result, “They live

each day as it comes, according to what the day may bring. They also have no future, no tasks” (*PIE* 35).

Here we see a cultural model of curiosity’s distorted relationship to the past, whereby there is no cultivation of or dwelling with the past and consequently no genuine future. Rather, each day is consumed in isolation from the sweep of care-driven self-becoming; each new thing is a novelty or “curiosity” disconnected from the past and hence delineating no essential tasks in the project of being who one is. In curiosity, as for the ahistorical tribe, “what we are – and what we have been is always contained in this – lies in some way behind us, *forgotten*” (*BP* 289). And indeed, the fact of this forgetting is itself forgotten (*BP* 290).

In contrast, to genuinely “have” one’s past requires a relationship of preserving of that which has been in one’s becoming or self-achievement; preserving is not a mere “attitudinal complex” that is “externally attached to Dasein” (*PIE* 40). Rather, preserving “belongs to the innermost Dasein itself” embodied in “the rhythm of one’s own Dasein” (*PIE* 40); a rhythm of “constantly having anew” one’s own having been (*PIE* 40). Hence “having the past” is not merely following on from what has come before, but is a way of understanding one’s present and future tasks as arising from and ongoingly indebted to one’s having been.<sup>xi</sup> A genuine grasping of the past thereby establishes the *rhythm* of being who one is – a deeply temporal notion echoing on an individual level the cultural structure of tradition as a renewed but repeating pattern or style of being; a way of “repeat[ing] the being we have been” in order to be who we are (*BP* 290).<sup>xii</sup>

This structure of repetition – returning to the possibilities one has chosen in order to make them new and thereby enable them to ongoingly shape the future – enables Dasein to “*run out in front of itself*” (*BP* 287). Here we see why Dasein’s authentic way of being should be understood

in terms of resolute *commitment*: namely, a stance in which the past is brought into the future by way of an ongoing renewal of self-understanding that shapes the present.<sup>xiii</sup> Dasein's authentic relationship to the past is a renewal or cultivation – a re-possibilizing – of the constituent elements of who one is. This involves aiming “at the past as what was earlier” but “as the yet still vital part of one's own self-proper [*Selbsteigentlichkeit*] [authentic] tendencies at the time” (*PIE* 45). In such a relationship to the past, Heidegger argues, “I seize my own past so that it again and again is had for the first time” such that “I myself am always affected anew by myself and ‘am’ in renewed enactment” (*PIE* 64). Hence the past “does not wear itself out but becomes with itself always more surprising” (*PIE* 64). As a result, there is in this relationship to the past “*the rejection of every trace of finality*” (*PIE* 65); a position in direct contrast to the relationship to the past operative in curiosity, whereby each new spectacle or novelty is abandoned for the next, stale the moment it arrives; each “surprise” more predictable and shallow than the last.

These disordered modes of living one's temporality are ways that Dasein fails to cope with its own ontological structure as transcendence and finitude; ways it turns away from the fact that it is at stake in the possibility-nature of the future and answerable to the constraint-nature of the past. Curiosity seeks to elude both aspects of our temporal unfolding by constraining it to the constant now of meaningless infinite novelty. Indeed, Heidegger notes that “Even if one has seen everything, this is precisely when curiosity *fabricates* something new” (*BT* 399/348). In curiosity, Dasein creates for itself the illusion of infinity, an eternal noon-day now that never shades off into the challenging darkness of the given past or the risky future.

## 5. The Production Model

This idea of *fabricating* novelty is important for understanding how curiosity mobilizes the ancient Greek production model of reality, whereby the material reality of a thing is understood to be secondary to its look [*eidos*] insofar as the craftsman uses the latter to guide the shaping or forming work necessary to bring the former into being. *Eidos* is the “anticipated look” (BP 107) that is “sighted beforehand” (BP 106), with the material form realized by way of comportments of shaping, forming, and making – which Heidegger specifies via the general concept of producing (*Herstellen*) (BP 108). On this ontological model, concrete, contingent matter is secondary to form because the latter guides the productive activity that brings something into being as what it is.

Under Plato’s watch, *eidos* was increasingly understood as a non-sensible exemplar – not merely a thing’s (anticipated) look but its truest (and separate) Form. The material thing came to be viewed as a pale imperfect copy of a reality located elsewhere.<sup>xiv</sup> The basic ontology of the production model remained, however: that one “sees” the *eidos*/Form and this seeing orients the praxis through which reality is produced as meaningful.

Of course, a key feature of reality is that it is “met with directly in intuition and perception as something already finished” (BP 112); in other words, it is primarily experienced as *not* being the result of production but as independent or “already finished” – a feature of the encounter that helps establish its status as real. But Heidegger insists that the productive mode of engagement always intends the product to be released from any relation to the producer. The independence of the produced thing from the producer is itself built into the production model’s understanding of being:

[T]he productive activity...absolves what is to be produced from relation to the producer. Not *contrary* to its intention but in *conformity* with it, it releases from this relation the being that is to be produced and that which has been produced. Productive comportment's understanding of the being of the being toward which it is behaving takes this being beforehand as one that is to be released for its own self so as to stand independently on its own account (*BP* 113).

Hence a key feature of the production ontology that Heidegger traces back to the Greeks is understanding reality as *extantness*; readiness to hand; availability (*BP* 108-9) – with Dasein's role as producer increasingly hidden.<sup>xv</sup>

Modern appropriations of this model more firmly established the separation of producer from produced, allowing the “character of setting-free” (*BP* 118) or “release” (*BP* 70) characteristic of production to come more explicitly to the fore; “every reference to the subject is pushed into the background” (*BP* 118). But Heidegger insists that the modern equation of actuality with perceivedness still operates within the horizon of a production ontology insofar as this “*intuitive finding present*... is only a modification of seeing in the sense of circumspection, of productive behaviour” (*BP* 109-10). In other words, Dasein's productive work increasingly comes to be modelled on the idea of “finding” as opposed to creating, further obscuring Dasein's creative role in the meaningful appearing of reality:

[T]he extant is conceived of ontologically not so much by referring to the disposability for use or by reverting to the productive and in general the practical mode of activity as, rather, by reverting to our *finding present* [finding there before us, *Vorfinden*] what is thus disposable,



[nevertheless] this comportment, too, the finding present of the produced and present-at-hand, belongs to producing itself (*BP* 109).

Such perceptual “finding present” presupposes – but does not acknowledge – the enabling look (or understanding of being, as he later comes to understand it) whereby the thing is available for use. But the (unacknowledged) role that the look/*eidos* plays in the modern perceptual model of reality undermines the distance between producer and produced that is the primary characteristic of that view. It shapes and enables the “finding present” – the productive activity of perception – through which reality shows up as extant, a fact that is increasingly concealed in the attempt to push the producing subject further into the background. This attempt comes to fruition in the modern theoretical sciences and their desire to know for the sake of knowing – the tendency “just to perceive” (*BT* 216/172) – that characterizes them. Heidegger’s later work on technology shows how modern science produces its own objects of knowledge through mechanisms of enframing/measurement – and then pretends to itself that it didn’t. This enables a spectator stance toward the world – think of the pure “observation” mode treasured by modern science – with little awareness of the concealed productive activity that makes possible any meaningful appearing within that space of spectatorship.

A core epistemological commitment of the production ontology is important here. Namely, the idea that the maker is viewed as having a unique kind of epistemic access to the thing: “a genuine cognitive grasp of a being in its being is available only to that being’s creator” (*BP* 150). It is the *producer* who knows a thing insofar as she brings it into being – by making it (ancient model) or by “finding it present” (modern model) in conformity with its pre-existing essential look (*eidos*/ *Form*): “The anticipation of the prototypical pattern which takes place in

production is the true knowledge of what the product is. It is for this reason that only the producer of something, its originator, perceives a being in the light of what it is” (*BP* 151).

Much more could be said about the way that technology helps itself to the epistemic authority guaranteed to “producers” while pretending to itself that it merely “finds present” what was always already there. In doing so, it ignores the productive enframing that enables this “finding” to occur. In other words, it ignores the fact that Dasein’s technological way of being – which enables things to be encountered as “found” – is itself an activity of “representing-producing [*vorstellend-herstellenden*] humanity” (*OBT*: 82–83). Hence Dasein’s modern productive activity specifies in advance how things can show up as real while pretending that it does no such thing; a delusion that inhibits a renewal of the original Greek understanding of production as a creative partnership between Dasein and the coming into meaningful being of the world.<sup>xvi</sup>

A comparable structure operates on an individual level in curiosity. In curiosity one “finds” the world interesting and distracting, a finding that obscures a prior self-production as the locus of an infinite anonymous now in which we have no ultimate stake and for which we need take no responsibility. In curiosity, Dasein “finds” the world as an object of entertainment and distraction; a finding predicated on first producing itself as a kind of experience-machine and then pretending to itself that it hasn’t done so. Dasein thereby eradicates genuine possibility as a practical imperative to which it is answerable in conditions of contingency and risk. The world becomes mere spectacle and Dasein a voyeur, enjoying the security of a total epistemic authority predicated on being the “fabricator” of the novelties by which it is distracted. The aim of curiosity is to produce a discrete consumable timeless present of pure experience events or pure knowledge bits, torn free of the repetition and renewal work necessary for genuine situation-

responsive praxis. By existing in the mode of curiosity, Dasein (almost) succeeds in being little more than a location of passive consumption that can nevertheless claim for itself a certain kind of total knowing and thereby cover over the uncertainty intrinsic to being tasked with self-becoming in conditions of thrownness.

Heidegger contrasts the production of reality at work in curiosity with the kind of creation characteristic of phronesis. According to the former, the end product is always seen in advance and conceptualized as complete. Not so with the creative self-making at work in phronesis, which is governed throughout by the risk and contingency of a genuinely open future and a beholdenness to the constantly changing world. Truly practical wisdom acknowledges that Dasein is inherently incomplete and underway, at stake in what it does and answerable to the contingent circumstances.

In *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*, Heidegger points out how Aristotle contrasts this capacity to “be otherwise” with a “higher” or “better” way of being: contemplative *sophia*’s state of *being finished*. But Aristotle’s conception of the highest realisation of human life – the stillness of pure contemplative apprehending – is modelled on the norm of perfection innate to the ontology of products: completion.

That which is in being moved, together with the possible features of its structural meaning, is regarded in advance in terms of the exemplary kind of movement belonging to *producing*. Being means *being finished* [Fertigsein], that way of being in which movement has attained its *end*. The being of life is seen as intrinsically unfolding movement, and it exists in such movement when human life has come to its end with regard to its ownmost possibility of movement, that of pure apprehending. Such movement lies within the *hexis* of *sophia*. (PIA: 37–38)

But Heidegger insists that Dasein is irrevocably “That which is in being moved” that which is “intrinsically unfolding movement”; thus, we cannot understand Dasein using a model that frames its highest realisation as a cessation of the very thing that makes it what it is. To be changing and incomplete is what it is to be Dasein. Thus fetishizing the actual – whether in curiosity or in “sophia” – is fundamentally at odds with the kind of open-ended movement of becoming that defines Dasein’s being qua possibility. Because the production model attempts to fix Dasein’s end in advance and then produce it, that model is at odds with *phronesis*, which demands open responsiveness to the moment and the changing immediate circumstances.<sup>xvii</sup> The fact that “*phronesis* is oriented toward something always yet to come” – i.e. that it embodies a condition of radical and irrevocable incompleteness – only justifies subordinating it to *Sophia* if we (mistakenly) assume in advance that the production model – and its commitment to completion as the measure of reality – is the appropriate way to understand Dasein (McNeill 1999, 126–30).

In curiosity, then, Dasein aims to produce itself not by way of “taking action and carrying something through” (*BT* 218/174) – a self-creation rooted in the ontology of radical uncertainty, answerability, and risk at work in phronetic authenticity<sup>xviii</sup> – but rather by working hard to “find” itself as the kind of thing for whom such genuine action is not necessary.

## **6. Curiosity and Virtue**

How does this view of curiosity as a vice square with more recent accounts of its virtuousness?

Recall that the virtues are skilful responses to existential obstacles to flourishing. In what follows, I briefly discuss three such skilful responses and show how they help distinguish virtuous forms of “care for seeing” from more worrying forms.

## *Patience*

Patience is best understood as a response to the challenge posed by our temporal finitude, which manifests for Dasein as both temporal scarcity and temporal dispersal – the fact that the project of self-becoming is dispersed in time such that it necessarily resists completion and determinacy. (McMullin 2019, Chap. 7). Curiosity seeks to deny or conceal both of these aspects of Dasein’s temporal being. In its fixation on the endless consumption of constant novelty, curious Dasein ignores its own temporal boundedness; the fact of being anchored in a now that arises from a distinct past and unfolds into a future answerable to that past. Similarly, Dasein’s dispersal in time – its necessary incompleteness and openness to possibility – is denied in curiosity’s attempt to understand being as extant and hence already in some sense actual, an interpretation predicated on a self-conception that covers over the risk and openness to possibility that define Dasein’s temporal way of being. Curiosity does not view Dasein as unfolding into self-becoming but as a largely static site for the predictable display of novelties determined in advance as incapable of challenging this understanding of the self. Like impatience, then, vicious curiosity involves a failure to appreciate or cope with how we’re thrown into time: into a past to which we are condemned to respond; into a future that is fundamentally open. Instead, it denies our temporal predicament by attempting to live in an eternal yet homogeneous process of making actual/now/present; creating and then consuming a quasi-actual future that is circumscribed in advance by the mandate of the “interesting” or “useful.”<sup>xix</sup> Vicious curiosity “cares for seeing” simply as an enjoyable but rootless process.

Patient or virtuous curiosity, on the other hand, demands that we recognize and accept the kind of temporality characteristic of our way of being. Virtuously curious Dasein is not fixated on fabricating an endless stream of interesting spectacles but focused on the existentially-

significant projects of understanding as they are beholden to the constraints of finitude. The role of patience in genuinely virtuous curiosity plays out in concrete terms as an ability to make epistemic commitments; to be persistent in the pursuit of worthwhile knowledge. If curiosity contributes to achieving or maintaining epistemic goods, as contemporary accounts of curiosity argue, then it must be capable of taking a form that is not intrinsically distractible and impatient, but rather capable of committing to the gradual unfolding of understanding that characterizes most genuine intellectual inquiry.<sup>xx</sup> Hence Ross notes that virtuous curiosity avoids “dilettantism or flaccidity” (2020, 110).

### *Humility*

As we have seen, Heidegger argues that we have a deep-seated tendency to deny an intellectual limitation that we all have; namely, the tendency to misunderstand our own being and the role that we play in the possibility of knowledge. Hence virtuous curiosity depends in part on honest inquiry into – and acceptance of – the kinds of beings we really are.<sup>xxi</sup> A key aspect of this is accepting that we are at the mercy of the world, called upon to react to and wonder at it instead of controlling it or translating it into consumable form. This requirement has resonances with the definition of intellectual humility that Whitcomb et al. provide: namely, that it involves “owning one’s intellectual limitations” (2017, 11).<sup>xxii</sup>

Whitcomb et al., like Heidegger, insist that facing up to what we really are – taking responsibility for our limitations – does not involve a fixation on the self, but rather enables us to fully engage with the world on its own terms.<sup>xxiii</sup> Intellectually humble curiosity – what the late Heidegger might call *thinking* – thereby enables a responsive partnership in the unfolding of meaning.

Timothy Chappell makes the case that this kind of relationship to the world falls outside the usual attempts to categorize knowledge as either propositional, ability, or experiential in kind (2012, 184), finding further support for this call for epistemic responsivity and humility in the work of Iris Murdoch: "I am confronted by an authoritative structure which commands my respect. My work is a progressive revelation of something which exists independently of me" (2014, 87). Part of this work of progressive revelation is an abdication of the dream of completion; what we have instead is a "humble and unending pilgrimage" (Chappell 2012, 187). Hence intellectual humility and patience are deeply linked. Like Heidegger, then, these accounts hold that exemplary forms of inquiry demand humility in answering the claims of a world that exceeds our capacity to encompass it; a humility demonstrated in forms of curiosity that forswear narratives of dominance and own up to our epistemic limitations. As Heidegger puts it:

A being "does not acquire being in that man first looks upon it in the sense of representation that has the character of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked upon by beings, the one who is gathered by self-opening beings into presencing with them. To be looked at by beings, to be included and maintained and so supported by their openness, to be driven about by their conflict and marked by their dividedness, that is the essence of humanity in the great age of [pre-Platonic] Greece. In order to fulfill his essence, therefore, man has to gather (λέγειν) and save (σώζειν), catch up and preserve, the self-opening in its openness; and he must remain exposed to all of its divisive confusion. Greek humanity is the receiver [*Vernehmer*] of beings, which is the reason that, in the age of the Greeks, the world can never become picture" (OBT 68-69).<sup>xxiv</sup>

Here we see Heidegger endorsing a humility that eschews the arrogance at work in vicious forms of curiosity, whereby Dasein attempts to control reality and the possible future by establishing the parameters of anything's appearing in advance. In short, virtuous curiosity involves an intellectual flexibility, openness, and responsivity that rejects attempts to instrumentalize our innate desire to understand the world.<sup>xxv</sup> The connection between humility and wonder (*thaumazein*) – the paradigmatic motivation of philosophical curiosity – is clear: “wonder does not see its objects possessively: they remain ‘other’ and un-mastered” (Hepburn 1980, 4). The owning of limitations at work in intellectually virtuous curiosity involves owning the deepest limitation of all: the fact that we are at the mercy of a world that radically transcends us and our capacity to know or control it – a stance that manifests as wondering curiosity and the admirable forms of inquiry to which it can give rise.

### *Courage*

Whereas humility involves recognizing and accepting our limits, courage helps us cope with the fear involved in doing so. We have seen that genuinely facing the infinite world and the unknown future means abdicating delusions of control, closure, completion – and living in the face of the radical indeterminacy and risk that is our birthright. In contrast, the tendency to look away from our own finitude is, for Heidegger, ultimately grounded in fear of the painful consequences of being answerable for an existence that is not fully within one's power. And the stance in which we overcome the temptation to give in to this fear – via distraction or delusions of (temporal, epistemic) infinitude – is well understood as a form of courage. Whereas vicious forms of curiosity mobilise our love of knowledge (our natural desire to “see”) to create



spectacles and distractions that conceal those limitations from us – offering a false “guarantee to Dasein that all the possibilities of its being will be secure, genuine, and full” (BT 222/177) – virtuous forms face and overcome our fear, enabling us to know not only ourselves, but the world and the others who share it. Courage arises in conditions where one’s identity is on the line; it involves pursuing some good in the face of risks to one’s well-being (McMullin 2019, Chap. 9). *Intellectual* courage involves pursuing specifically cognitive goods such as truth, knowledge, and understanding in the face of such risks (Roberts and Wood 2007, 234). Hence a curiosity informed by intellectual courage eschews those forms of knowledge-pursuit that are complicit in Dasein’s (self-) misunderstanding, regardless of the pain involved in genuinely taking responsibility for and answering to the world.

## **7. Conclusion**

It is part of human nature to desire to know – a desire that finds expression in our curiosity. True knowing demands that we overcome the obstacles that our impatience, our arrogance, and our fear pose us. Hence virtuous forms of curiosity involve an understanding of the world and our place in it that unfolds in its own time and on its own terms, uncontaminated by the fear and irresponsibility that always tempt us to look away toward the easy distraction, to dim down the field of possibilities and claim for ourselves a certainty and safety at odds with the world and our place in it. Those willing to seek understanding in the face of their own restless pride and fear – and thereby maintain the questioning openness to possibility at work in both genuine scientific inquiry and in authentic modes of being – demonstrate a love of knowledge that rightly earns the title “virtue.”

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## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The main camps in these debates are virtue reliabilists (who assess the virtuousness of knowers in terms of how reliably their cognitive faculties or dispositions result in true beliefs) and virtue responsibilists (who link the epistemic virtues to traditional moral virtues by emphasizing the degree to which agents are responsible for developing the skills necessary for being good knowers). We will not discuss this distinction here, but my approach is broadly responsibilist. See Ross (2020), Wright (2018), Greco & Reibsam (2018). For examinations of curiosity in these terms, see Alfano (2013), Baehr (2011), Zagzebski (1996).

<sup>ii</sup> Aquinas distinguishes between virtuous *studiositas* and vicious *curiositas*: with the latter defined as “the vice of inordinate seeking after knowledge” (Hibbs 1999, 51).

<sup>iii</sup> Hobbes (2008, 37). See Engel (2018) for a good historical overview of curiosity’s evolution from vice to virtue.

<sup>iv</sup> See McNeill (1999) for an excellent book-length treatment of curiosity, theory, and the role of vision in Heidegger’s thought. I am indebted to McNeill’s careful scholarship on these topics throughout.

<sup>v</sup> Levinas critiques Husserlian phenomenology for the same problematic orientation (1995, 94, 128).

<sup>vi</sup> Translation altered slightly: “wir können fragen, ob unsere heutigen alltäglichen Menschlichkeiten, unser Menschsein nicht in allem so ist, daß es -in allem seinem Tun und Lassen und geblendet durch dieses - der Möglichkeit des Aufsteigens jener tiefen Langeweile entgegenhandelt. Wir können nur fragen, ob der heutige Mensch jene *Weite seiner verborgenen tiefsten Not* einengt auf die Nöte, für die er alsbald eine Notwehr findet, um in dieser sich zu befriedigen und zu beruhigen” (GA 29/30: 248).

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<sup>vii</sup> Augustine’s discussion of the concupiscence of the eyes highlights the fact that we are often drawn to horrible yet fascinating things, like the “mangled corpse” (2008, 211, Book X). See also *PRL* §§13–14.

<sup>viii</sup> On whether moral and intellectual virtues are distinct, see Baehr (2011, 206–22).

<sup>ix</sup> See *BP* 277, *FCM* 363-6, and *BT* §31.

<sup>x</sup> For a fuller discussion of Dasein’s temporal structure, see McMullin 2013.

<sup>xi</sup> Interesting questions arise here regarding the relationship to habit – a key concept for virtue ethics – which Heidegger insists is “blocked” by this constant renewal of the past (*PIE* 65). The role of “epistemic playfulness” in this process of renewal is also of import here (Roberts and Wood 2007, 161).

<sup>xii</sup> Gadamer’s work on tradition in *Truth and Method* is relevant here.

<sup>xiii</sup> See Burch (2020), Crowell (2013) and (2022), and Haugeland (2000).

<sup>xiv</sup> Indeed, McNeill points out that the desire to see can acquire the pejorative connotation that it does “only when a veritable gap opens between the sensible and the nonsensible, only when truth is no longer a truth belonging to and inherent in the sensible world” (1999, 245).

<sup>xv</sup> For helpful discussion of the Greek production model of reality and its role in Heidegger’s thought, see Haugeland 2013, 170-172.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Crowell (2020, 41) for an examination of the passive/active structure at work here: “Now, a disclosing that does not “make” but “lets lie” or “appear,” and a “keeping disclosed” that is no passive acceptance but a “concern,” have the structure of something *at issue*, meaning (*Sinn*)”.

<sup>xvii</sup> See McManus (2020), for discussion of how phronesis relates to the question of what it is best to do in the “here and now,” not with general questions about the good (134). See also Zoller (2020, 5) and Brogan (1990, 126–30). Thanassas criticizes Heidegger’s treatment of



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phronesis as separable from moral/evaluative content; in such an interpretation all that is left is self-elucidation (2012, 50).

<sup>xviii</sup> Simply equating “authenticity” with “flourishing” is problematic, but for the purposes of this paper we will assume that authenticity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for flourishing, and hence that overcoming existential obstacles to authenticity can be understood as conducive to or partially constitutive of flourishing. For a concept of flourishing informed by existential themes such as authenticity see McMullin (2019).

<sup>xix</sup> A connection might be made here with Heidegger’s account of how conceptualisation attempts to cope with reality’s status as a heterogeneous continuum: the “togetherness of continuity and alterity”. According to Heidegger, we attempt to “re-form” and thereby “attain power” over the real through the concept by separating continuity from alterity, thereby transforming it “into a homogenous continuum or into a heterogeneous discretum” (*TDP* 145). Similarly, curiosity attempts a similar transformation of experience into a continuum of varieties of fundamentally indistinguishable “novelties,” each one simultaneously encountered in a discrete present isolated from the temporal continuum. We might think of this as the practical analogue of conceptualising’s inadequate coping mechanism.

<sup>xx</sup> Recall Dancy’s worry about distraction (1995, 197–98). As Tobias Keiling reminds me, in *Being and Time* Heidegger himself seems to see some form of patience as a crucial alternative to curiosity when he talks about the “un-abiding” (*Unverweilen*) typical of curiosity, to which a form of patient abiding (*Verweilen*) is the preferable alternative. Keiling has also helpfully pointed out the allusions here to the Aristotelian account of *sophia*, insofar as abiding is associated with theory, contemplation, and leisure. Hence, we can recognize that Heidegger’s critique of *sophia* is aimed not at contemplative theorizing *per se*, but rather at the tendency to

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understand Dasein's being exclusively through that lens. I am grateful to Tobias for his helpful comments on these issues.

<sup>xxi</sup> See Mišćević (2020) on the need for "self-inquisitiveness."

<sup>xxii</sup> See also Inan (2017).

<sup>xxiii</sup> "when limitation-owning is an intellectual virtue, it is motivated by the love of epistemic goods, which will largely focus an intellectually humble person on things outside of herself, as she navigates the world and attempts to increase her understanding of it." (Whitcomb et al. 2017, 20).

<sup>xxiv</sup> See Crowell (2020) for a comprehensive analysis of Heidegger's intellectual journey toward the conclusion that thinking is the unity of *noein* and *legein* whereby we are oriented toward measure, and that this is a relationship to finitude that "yields 'the phenomena of phenomenology,' the world of meaning, *on hos alethes*, being in the sense of truth" (44).

<sup>xxv</sup> This is in many ways the point of Heidegger's infamous Rector's address, in which he calls for a return to the essence of the university as a place of questioning that opens us to pure possibility, not of questioning that is chained to instrumentalist political imperatives (*SA*). Ross (2020) and Mišćević (2020) similarly characterize curiosity as virtuous if it's rooted in a non-instrumental appreciation of epistemic goods.