

Curiosity as a Moral Virtue

Elias Baumgarten

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Recent philosophical interest in a more classical view of morality has led beyond an exclusive focus on actions to an exploration of virtues, vices, character traits, and the “moral emotions.” Most attention has been paid to those virtues and vices that bear on our willingness to respond to the needs of others or to the impact of their actions on us; e.g., compassion, forgiveness, and greed. But if virtue theory is right that ethics should focus not just on the welfare of others but on “self-perfection,” we should find useful an exploration of any emotions or character traits that enhance or impede our ability to flourish as human beings, even apart from their social benefits.¹ Though it has been largely overlooked, *curiosity* about the world shares many of the features of character traits more commonly recognized to be virtues and deserves, I think, the same kind of serious attention.²

I begin that exploration in this five-part essay. In the first part I consider the meaning of curiosity and explain the scope of my inquiry. In part two I argue that curiosity has instrumental value in promoting other virtues such as caring. In part three I claim that curiosity is an *appropriate response* to certain situations and that people may even have a duty to become curious. In part four I consider occasions where curiosity is not a virtue and where we may have a duty not to be curious. In the final section I consider the religious objection that curiosity is a vice, and I argue that curiosity has a special role to play in addressing a secular person’s need for meaning in life. Along the way, I will suggest that curiosity belongs to a family of concepts that point to different ways of gaining knowledge about the world. These include attentiveness, “taking an interest,” openness, receptivity, and even reverence. I will argue that curiosity is a distinctive virtue but suggest that these related virtues are also worthy of study and that they may contribute to different kinds of worthy engagement with the world.

I

Like other virtues, curiosity takes different forms that make it hard to classify neatly. Curiosity can be a character trait or a desire. As a character trait, curiosity is a disposition to want to know or learn more about a wide variety of things. The more one has this character trait, the more often or the more intensely one will on particular occasions experience a desire or urge to investigate and learn more about something. Though non-human animals are often characterized as exhibiting curiosity, in its human form curiosity as a desire involves choice and judgment, the choice to select some things rather than others as objects for investigation and the judgment that something is worth investigating. We can also speak of a person’s having the *capacity* for curiosity. If

it is possible to speak of some objects as genuinely worthy of investigation (just as we speak of some things as beautiful), then different people may have varying capacities to *recognize* a thing's worth as an object of investigation (just as we distinguish among people's ability to recognize beauty). Finally, a person who experiences curiosity about something may or may not *act* on the desire or urge which the curiosity "arouses." We may make moral judgments about both what kinds of things are worthy of one's curiosity and about occasions on which one should or should not act on curiosity once it is aroused.

Curiosity about the world is clearly related to the *desire to know*, yet it has never ranked with philosophy, the love of wisdom, or the "love of learning" as a noble character trait. When curiosity is directed inward, we associate it with self-reflectiveness, and the value of the "examined life" is familiar, in different ways, to philosophers and writers of university catalogues. Although it, too, deserves more study, I will put aside an assessment of inwardly directed curiosity and focus on "curiosity about the (external) world." Here we do speak of (and often praise) "intellectual curiosity," which suggests love of learning, but we also refer to idle curiosity, morbid curiosity, and the notion of curiosity as meddlesomeness. Curiosity also can take the form of voyeurism, of which we generally disapprove. Even in its more positive form, we are unlikely to speak of someone's being "curious" (even intellectually curious) about the meaning of life or the nature of her moral obligations to aging parents. Though we would not call this usage mistaken, curiosity typically has less elevated objects; it most often focuses on contingent facts about the world. Such investigation may be part of a larger search for wisdom, but it need not be. In this paper I will examine curiosity as a virtue independent of its connection with the (more generally praised) love of wisdom.

Here is a concrete example of curiosity and its opposite. I was once on an overnight ferry from Izmir to Istanbul, and I met an American soldier who was on leave from his base near a Turkish village. Jeff was from a small town in Nevada and had not been outside the United States before his military service. He shared with me his fascination with all he was learning about Turkish culture and the Turkish people. He made every effort to visit the village near his base, to talk with people, eat their food, and learn about their way of life. He felt lucky that the army had given him this opportunity to learn about another part of the world, but he told me that the other soldiers found his interest in the Turks to be bizarre. After all, there was no *need* to deal with those foreigners. The base provided everything soldiers needed, and most had no desire to venture outside their comfortable Americanized community.

Jeff was *curious* to learn about an unfamiliar part of world. His fellow soldiers were not. Nothing Jeff said suggested that his interest in Turkish culture was part of a larger search for wisdom. Nonetheless, I would claim that *curiosity*, such as that expressed by Jeff, is a moral virtue. Though curiosity is not a *necessary* feature of any well-lived life, it is a quality that is generally conducive to it.

Curiosity may lead one to actions that promote human welfare, but the virtue of curiosity itself does not depend on its doing so. Jeff's curiosity did not lead him to contribute in any significant way to the welfare of the villagers. Curiosity often has other moral agents as its object, and when we express curiosity about other people, we often affect them in some way. But one may also be curious about inanimate things. Jeff wanted to know more about the Turkish people in the village, but he also was interested to learn about things he could not affect, like the geology that produced the unusual landforms in the Capadoccia region. One can also express curiosity where one has no reasonable expectation of ever having the curiosity satisfied; for example, one can be curious about whether intelligent life exists on other planets, which may or may not be part of a larger philosophical quest to understand one's place in the universe.

Some may insist that any human curiosity is an expression of the desire for a larger understanding about the "purpose of it all." But this is an *a priori* claim that seems to conflict with plain facts. Many people curious to know about things do not see themselves as questing for wisdom and may even express a modern existential sensibility that denies the existence of any larger purpose in the world. The burden of proof is on those who claim that what is really going on is different from how these people experience their own desires. A challenger might insist that such people still are searching for wisdom about how to live well, but it is far-fetched to think that curiosity about geology or other natural phenomena is connected to insight into the good life.³

II

An important feature of curiosity is its *fecundity*: it tends to lead to other virtues. The virtue of curiosity does not depend on its leading to other virtues, but its having this instrumental value is morally significant. Curiosity bears a close relationship to, and is often bound up with, care and concern. Curiosity is rooted linguistically in the other-regarding activities of "care" and "cure" (from the Latin *cūrāre*, to take care of). We use the same term, "indifference" to describe both a lack of interest in other persons or things and a lack of concern about their welfare. For one to overcome indifference and be curious about something does not conceptually imply that one will also care about its welfare, but there is often a close relationship. In this section I will explore the connection between curiosity and care or concern in our relationships both with other people and with the non-human world, and I will also try to distinguish curiosity from several closely related character traits.

Curiosity's connection to care and concern makes it an important component of any friendship or deep relationship. It is tempting to say, as Jeffrey Murphy says of "the person who cannot *forgive*," that the person unable to be *curious* "is the person who cannot have friends or lovers."⁴ Though that may be an overstatement, curiosity is conducive to the kind of deep caring that characterizes close relationships. Just as one inevitably will hurt and be hurt by those with whom one is close, making forgiveness necessary, people in a close relationship will struggle with important problems and

choices that they will want those close to them to understand, and care about. One mark of our relationships with our closest friends is that we desire from them the very opposite of the privacy we value with strangers. Whereas we do not want strangers to be curious about our most intimate longings and fears, we expect those closest to us both to want to learn more and to care about them. Lawrence Blum makes this connection between knowing and caring explicit in his description of the most morally praiseworthy friendships:

Though all genuine human caring has moral worth and significance, is it not evident that a deeper level of caring involves greater moral worth? Such caring, far from being a natural process, is difficult to achieve, and it is not really so common. It involves getting outside oneself, being able to focus clearly on and to know another person.⁵

Blum's characterization points to an important connection between the virtue of curiosity and the virtue of caring: to care deeply about another requires a degree of knowledge, and both to care and to know demand the ability and desire to get outside oneself and engage with the world.

But this is still quite general. One might argue that while intimate relationships do demand knowledge and engagement, what they require is not curiosity but, rather, *taking an interest* in learning about another person. One could point to people who come to know each other very well simply by living together, year after year. They each value what they know about the other but may not be inclined actively to seek out that knowledge. Or one might argue, still acknowledging the general importance of knowledge in a caring relationship, that the relevant virtue is *attentiveness*. Possessing one kind of moral perception, the attentive person is good at sensing another person's experiences, moods, and needs, perhaps even before the other person is aware of them.

The most important thing to note about these objections is that they suggest a family of concepts that might be called, for lack of a more graceful phrase, the "cognitive engagement virtues," character traits that help people gain the kind of knowledge they need for caring about things in the world. More conceptual work needs to be done on this family of concepts, which should also include *openness* and *receptivity*. While I do not insist that curiosity is the most important of the character traits that are conducive to caring, I do claim that it is a distinctive virtue that is uniquely important for close relationships and for caring about things more generally.

How is curiosity different from "taking an interest"? It is worth noting, again, that we use "indifference" as an opposite for both traits, perhaps suggesting our lack of attention to the distinction between them. I propose this formulation: to be interested is to care to know (in the sense that it matters to us whether we know), whereas to be curious is to desire to know. To illustrate, one can imagine three attitudes of Americans visiting the Southern Hemisphere for the first time: one is curious and actively inquires about the different stars and galaxies that appear in the sky; another does not think to

ask but is interested to learn that he can see *Alpha Centauri* only from the Southern Hemisphere and that it is the closest star to Earth after the sun; and a third finds that information of no interest. Only the first American exhibits the kind of active, autonomous involvement characteristic of curiosity, but the second shares with the first a capacity for engagement with the world that the third one lacks, at least with respect to this one matter.

Attentiveness differs from curiosity in being more obviously a capacity, at least if we rely on ordinary usage. Any of the three Americans in the previous example might be attentive or inattentive. Looked at this way, one's curiosity will certainly bear more fruit if one is also attentive. But curiosity is a capacity, too (e.g., for asking questions), and I think other features of curiosity are more helpful for distinguishing it from attentiveness (and "taking an interest") and for showing its distinctive value in relation to caring.

First, curiosity involves a greater exercise of autonomy. What the attentive and "interested" person learns depends on what the world presents to her whereas the curious person raises questions that go beyond what it is possible to be attentive to. Although the desire to know does not always involve asking *explicit* questions, it implies a questioning spirit of observation that nonetheless goes beyond mere attentiveness.⁶

Curiosity most clearly differs from both attentiveness and from "taking an interest" in being a desire. The curious person will experience a *lack* before the desire for a particular kind of knowledge is satisfied. In contrast, neither the attentive person nor the one who "takes an interest" will experience the unfulfilled desire or the unanswered question that is a component of curiosity.

Curiosity is especially important in deepening one's care and concern for another person because even in a close relationship, much that one needs to know and understand about another person in order to care deeply will not be apparent without active seeking, even for the person who is extremely attentive and "interested." Especially during inevitable episodes of misunderstanding and estrangement, attentiveness without curiosity will usually be insufficient to break the deadlock and reestablish the communication needed for a sustained caring relationship. Curiosity may also generate caring in relationships that are not already close. For example, an attentive teacher might notice that a particular student is often bored or reacts in an especially strong way to certain topics. But only curiosity will lead to going beyond the phenomena presented to asking "why," a form of engagement that may lead to both greater knowledge and caring. Though the curiosity may evolve from prior concern for the student, it might not: perhaps what prompts curiosity is wounded pride and the desire to learn why one's presentation fails to spark a student's interest. In that case curiosity may be what leads to a caring relationship in the first place.

The importance of curiosity for moral concern is also evident where the object is not a human being but something like an ecosystem or a culture different from one's

own. Here, again, the initial curiosity may stem from something other than concern (e.g., puzzlement or even irritation). But a person who acts on a desire to *know* about an ecosystem or culture will come to a greater *understanding* of its distinctive features, which makes more likely the person's coming to an *appreciation* of it and a *concern* about its preservation. This is not an inevitable progression—increased knowledge of another culture could lead to repulsion and disgust (something less likely with an ecosystem)—but often a desire to know more about something will be a prerequisite to being concerned about its welfare. It is difficult to imagine someone's being concerned about the welfare of something she knows little about, and there are many things in the world *worth being concerned about* that we will be ignorant of if we are not curious. Most of these will not offer themselves to us; we may need to seek them out for investigation as well as to attend to them once they are present.

It seems fair to conclude that curiosity is a distinctive virtue which, compared to attentiveness and “being interested,” more fully expresses human autonomy, plays a distinctive role in caring relationships, and enables us to learn about things we would not otherwise know. Insofar as curiosity contributes to caring, it is likely to have social benefits, but since caring and close relationships are reasonably considered components of a well-lived life, curiosity has moral value for a person even apart from its contribution to the welfare of others. Having said that, I do not exclude the possibility that attentiveness or a related virtue that emphasizes openness and receptivity rather than autonomy may have distinctive advantages not possessed by curiosity. Curiosity and attentiveness may be virtues that contribute to different conceptions of living well, or each may be more appropriate for different kinds of encounters with the world. I will return to this issue in the last section of this paper.

III

A value of understanding human virtues is that they help us to characterize an appropriate way for a person to be affected by a situation, even apart from any action she may be obligated to take. When a good person witnesses a child being molested and killed, the *appropriate emotional response* is some combination of concern, compassion, and outrage. These feelings may lead to action, but there might be circumstances that make action impossible. Even apart from any obligation to act, we feel confident in judging that indifference is simply not an appropriate emotional response. This explains our outraged reaction to the indifference of David Cash, who watched his friend who molested seven-year-old Sherrice Iverson in a bathroom stall in a Nevada casino and later told a reporter that he had no great concern about the matter because “it is not my life.”⁷ It is reasonable to consider Cash blameworthy not only for failing to act but, independently, for failing to care. Moreover, we can say that he failed to fulfill his duty to care.

Curiosity shares with other virtues an ability to help us describe an “appropriate way to be affected” by a situation, and I want to make sense of the idea that there are occasions where people have a *prima facie* duty to be curious, or at least to become

curious. Though a failure to be curious on certain occasions may not be outrageous in the way indifference to another's suffering can be, the failure to respond with curiosity shares this with a failure to be compassionate: it may display the lack of a human characteristic that we expect people to have if they are equipped to live good lives. Consider the following situations:

- Your elderly mother comes back to your home and tells you that fifteen minutes ago she was held at gunpoint and robbed of her wallet, which, fortunately, contained almost nothing of value.
- Sitting in a café and reading a newspaper, your spouse or partner says to you, "the person standing over there is the most strikingly beautiful person I have ever seen."
- You are flying far from your home on the East Coast of the United States for the first time, and the pilot announces that passengers have the opportunity for a clear view of the Grand Canyon.

Putting aside highly unusual circumstances (e.g., you vowed to get your first-ever view of the Grand Canyon from a raft on the Colorado River next week), not to be curious about your mother's feelings, not to be curious about the appearance of the beautiful person in the café, and not to be curious about an aerial view of the Grand Canyon represent failures to respond appropriately in these situations.

This claim suggests that certain objects deserve one's active interest, and that the virtue of curiosity includes recognizing what one should (and should not) be curious about. Of course one could possess the virtue of curiosity and yet be indifferent in one of the above situations. (This is hardest to imagine in the first because it is so closely tied to compassion.) We can imagine a person with wide-ranging curiosities who has no interest at all in natural beauty or in "natural wonders" of the world. My claim is that being curious is something analogous to an imperfect duty, which implies that there is no particular thing about which a curious person necessarily will be curious. To say that some objects are worthy of curiosity is to say that it is not arbitrary which among all the phenomena in the world curious people will want to investigate, but it does not imply that they will want to investigate all of them. A reasonable parallel to my claim for curiosity would be the claim that appreciating beauty is a virtue. What is or is not an appropriate object of appreciation is not arbitrary, but a particular person may possess the virtue of appreciating beauty yet be left cold by abstract expressionist paintings. But there will be instances of beauty that, like the three examples of objects of curiosity, we would *expect* a person who appreciates beauty to care about, and after a certain number of indifferent responses we might reasonably conclude that a person simply lacks the capacity to appreciate beauty.

The idea of a duty to be curious may be challenged on the grounds that it assumes that we have control over whether or not we can fulfill it. The objector may claim that duty only applies to overt actions, perhaps part of a larger claim that duty-based and

virtue-based ethics are completely independent of each other.⁸ At this moment, according to the challenge, I am either curious to know more about your conflict with the dean or I am not. If you are a close but reticent friend with a pressing problem, I might be obligated, perhaps on utilitarian grounds, to take—or, more accurately, to *feign*—an interest—that is, to *act* as if interested, but I cannot have an obligation to *desire* to know more about it.

My response is that we can make sense of an obligation to be curious—or more precisely, to become curious—in the same way that we can make sense of a duty to cultivate or suppress desires more generally; namely, by focusing not on a single moment but on the judgments we make and the mental actions we choose that then affect the desires we have. First, of course, I can have an obligation to develop a disposition to be curious, and I might do this through an Aristotelian kind of habituation. But aside from cultivating a general disposition, I can choose, right now, based on judgments I make, whether or not to generate a desire to know about something in particular. We often speak of choosing to *suppress* curiosity about something we judge insignificant, although this may require some effort and require several mental steps (e.g., redirecting our attention to something else). Similarly, having developed the general disposition of curiosity, I can choose to take the steps needed to generate curiosity if I deem something to be worthy of my attention; for example, I may try to recall earlier conversations with my friend about his differences with the dean and about their divergent educational philosophies.

Although controlling our desires raises complex issues in action theory that are beyond the scope of this paper and although my larger thesis that curiosity is a moral virtue does not depend on making sense of a *duty* to be curious, I will mention one further consideration supporting the idea of a duty to have or to suppress a desire. There are occasions where one may have greater control over his desires than his overt actions. A psychotherapist might know that he will act inappropriately with a client, even if only in small ways (e.g., words or gestures) unless he suppresses sexual desires. Though a Kantian might insist that he is responsible only for his overt behavior, the therapist may have more success suppressing his desires than he would have trying to avoid wrongful action without altering his desires. He might, for example, redirect his thoughts to his concern for his client's long-term good or for his own sense of professional integrity. Even David Cash might reasonably be blamed not only for flaws in his character and for his failure to act but also for his not choosing to *generate* concern for Sherrice Iverson, perhaps by forcing himself to imagine the pain and fear the girl was experiencing.

Another challenge to the claim that we may have a duty to be curious is that, unlike the above examples of desires relating to the welfare of others, the desire to know something often involves no person other than oneself. This challenge is easily answered within the framework of virtue ethics (or Kantian ethics). If we accept the ethical importance of self-perfection, a duty to be curious may also apply where the welfare of others is not at stake. I might be lucky enough to be in the presence of a

distinguished biographer or diplomat who is willing to discuss her historic experiences with me but who is available only this afternoon. Or, even further from the pursuit of wisdom, I might generally care about astronomy and have the chance to see an extremely unusual astronomical event. Even though I might not be “in the mood” at this moment, I might nonetheless be capable of taking the mental steps needed to *become curious*, and it is reasonable to think this is something I *should* do. Thus, a duty to generate curiosity may exist not only in connection with our concern for other people but also on those occasions in life when we are offered unusual and important opportunities to learn about the world.

IV

Curiosity is not always a virtue. It may be experienced at inappropriate times or in inappropriate ways. Perhaps an improper exercise of the desire to know is *not truly* curiosity but something else, such as meddlesomeness, just as (following Aristotle) excessive fearlessness is not courage but foolhardiness and excessive loyalty to one’s country is not patriotism but perhaps blind obedience or jingoism. The meaning of some character traits seems to include their wise exercise in this way, but other virtues retain their identity, at least in popular usage, even when improperly exercised.⁹ Even when one forgives another person unvirtuously—for example, forgiving a person who is undeserving due to one’s own lack of self-respect¹⁰—one is still displaying forgiveness. I think the concept of curiosity is best seen as *not* including its wise exercise. This allows us to give due attention to phenomena identified in familiar expressions such as “idle curiosity” and “morbid curiosity.”

If curiosity is not always a virtue, then just as I have argued that we may have a duty to be curious, there may also be occasions when we have a duty not to be curious. This is not merely to make the claim, more easily addressed by standard theories of moral obligation, that sometimes we should not act on our curiosity. Acting on curiosity may harm other people or violate their rights to privacy. But my claim is not about actions following from curiosity but about the experience of curiosity itself, over which, I have argued, we do have some control. There are occasions when a good person will not experience curiosity, will have trained herself not to experience it “too much,” or—since our control is neither absolute nor immediate—will choose to curb the experience whenever it emerges. For example, one might be curious about exactly what Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky did and how they felt when they engaged in “inappropriate intimate contact,” but it would not be a proper or virtuous exercise of curiosity to be intensely curious or to dwell for long periods of time on this matter. The same will be true for many items featured in the tabloids. The popular expressions, “idle curiosity” and “morbid curiosity,” reflect a reasonable judgment that curiosity can be a vice when it is exercised inappropriately.

Curiosity can be a vice when it has inappropriate objects, and there are at least two ways that an object can be inappropriate, which roughly correlate with the notions of

idle and morbid curiosity. An object might be unfit for curiosity because it is, in usual circumstances, trivial and uninteresting (e.g., the number of cement blocks on a sidewalk). Just as we regard some objects as more worthy of aesthetic appreciation than others, we reasonably consider some things more worthy of our interest and investigation than others. If our hypothetical American who was curious about the sky in the Southern Hemisphere and wanted to learn to recognize many of the new constellations also wished to learn the *exact* latitude of every single place he visits, many times each day, we might think his curiosity idle and misplaced, or obsessive. It is difficult to formulate exact criteria for our judgments about fit objects of curiosity, and less effort has been devoted to doing this than to formulating criteria for aesthetic appreciation. It is noteworthy that many things we do judge worthy of curiosity do not appear to be part of a quest for wisdom. Neither the desire to learn new constellations nor the three examples of “appropriate objects of curiosity” in the previous section (e.g., desiring to know what the Grand Canyon looks like from the air) relate in any obvious way to seeking deep comprehension about “the meaning of it all” or to wisdom about how to live well.

“Morbid curiosity” suggests another kind of inappropriate object, part of a larger category I would call “debasement curiosity.” Just as it is difficult to say what makes some objects unfit because they are “uninteresting,” we have an even more difficult-to-formulate notion that curiosity about some things is not a virtue because it requires “debasement” oneself, and a classic example is the investigation of mangled cadavers after an accident. Preoccupation with the details of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair or curiosity about a colleague’s private life, while not morbid, could be considered curiosity that is debasing.¹¹ Any form of meddlesome or voyeuristic curiosity, even apart from any harmful consequences that would come from acting on it, seems to debase those who experience it. Exactly what makes curiosity about particular objects debasing and why it is a vice to want to debase oneself in these ways are subjects worthy of study. Such inquiry should also shed light on the qualities of objects that are *ennobling* to contemplate and learn about.

V

To say that curiosity is a virtue is to claim, most importantly, that it helps one to live well. Debate exists about how to demonstrate the relationship between any proposed virtue and living well; for example, by showing that it gives people pleasure or satisfies their desires, by showing that it helps people attain some of the particular goods shared by anyone who lives well,¹² or by demonstrating how it helps to avoid a vice, an obstacle to living well.¹³ I have touched on several features of curiosity that connect it with other goods generally thought to be components of a good life, such as autonomy, friendship, and intimate relationships. But beyond its connection to these other goods, curiosity helps one to live well because it addresses the most fundamental existential task that human beings face, the need to see their lives as meaningful. Looked at another

way, curiosity helps people avoid a crippling obstacle to living well, the tendency to see one's life as meaningless.

Though there is no necessary connection between curiosity and the experience of meaning in life, the connection parallels one that Peter Singer argues for between a commitment to impartial morality and finding life meaningful. Singer claims that prudent egoists may find some meaning in their projects for a time, but they will not be able to find enduring meaning. "When everything in our interests has been achieved, do we just sit back and be happy? Could we be happy in this way?" The egoist either needs to decide that her goals have not been achieved or to discover some new self-interested need that must be satisfied before being able to sit back and enjoy life. But, Singer claims, a commitment to morality makes a difference:

Now we begin to see where ethics comes into the problem of living a meaningful life. If we are looking for a purpose broader than our own interests, something that will allow us to see our lives as possessing significance beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states, one obvious solution is to take up the ethical point of view.¹⁴

For Singer caring about the needs of others has the advantage that "one cannot grow out of the ethical point of view until all ethical tasks have been accomplished," something that is not a practical problem in the near future.

Curiosity, I would claim, offers many of the same advantages to the person looking for meaning in life. It makes possible an engagement with the world "beyond the narrow confines of our own conscious states." It necessarily judges that there are things outside ourselves that have inherent interest and are worth exploring, things worthy of *my* time and my engagement. It successfully avoids boredom and indifference, which are surely obstacles to a well-lived life. And just as there is no practical problem that all ethical tasks (in Singer's sense of "ethical") will be accomplished, one need have no concern about exhausting the things in the world that are worthy of exploration.

Curiosity, one might argue, avoids boredom and indifference but fails to avoid the greatest obstacle to a meaningful life, which is despair. Put another way, it is true that curiosity allows one to see some value in particular experiences within one's life and provides a kind of meaning that is denied to a classically depressed person who is withdrawn, disengaged, and indifferent. But, according to the objection, it does not respond to the larger existential concern that *life as a whole* have meaning. This distinction between meaning *within* a particular life and the meaning of "life as a whole" is of course a familiar one, and Singer himself draws on it and concedes that the moral point of view only addresses the concern for meaningful things within a life, not the demand that *life as a whole* have meaning.¹⁵ According to Singer, the claim that life as a whole has meaning rests (uncertainly) on belief in a god who has given human life on Earth some preordained meaning.

If we accept the parallel between curiosity and “the moral point of view” in helping people find meaning in their lives, we must recognize that curiosity is an especially important virtue for people who share a certain kind of modern secular outlook, one which denies the hope of finding an objective meaning for life as a whole and focuses instead on finding, or creating, meaning within each individual life. If existential despair is avoidable only by finding a meaning for life as a whole, then the objection that curiosity is useful for avoiding boredom but does nothing to overcome despair is a sound one. Curiosity helps people find or create meaning in their lives; it does not offer an answer to the meaning of life as a whole. (To do so, it would not only have to be part of a larger philosophical quest for wisdom but would have to lead to its attainment.)

The claim that curiosity is a distinctly secular or humanistic virtue receives further support from perhaps the only sustained treatment of curiosity in the recent virtue ethics literature, which treats it—from a religious perspective—as a vice. In his chapter, “It Killed the Cat: The Vice of Curiosity,” Gilbert Meilaender reviews, among others, Augustine’s concept of curiosity as “lust of the eyes” and Aquinas’s notion of unguided curiosity as the vice of *curiositas*.¹⁶ Meilaender’s discussion deserves attention because it helps us understand why the virtue of curiosity is especially important for those who do not accept a traditional religious framework.

In Meilaender’s account, curiosity is a vice when it is “only a greedy longing for a new kind of experience,” “enjoying the act of seeing itself,” or a “longing to possess the experience of knowing” rather than a “reverent desire to understand creation.”¹⁷ Not only is curiosity a vice rather than a virtue when the motive is not shaped by love of God,¹⁸ a Christian understanding of curiosity also suggests substantive limits on the appropriate objects of curiosity. Meilaender quotes Aquinas: “there can be a vice in knowing some truth inasmuch as the desire at work is not duly ordered to the knowledge of the supreme truth in which the highest felicity consists.” (2a2ae, q. 167, a.1, ad.2)¹⁹ Just as one traditional religious conception of freedom is that its moral value consists not in (merely) choosing autonomously but in being *compelled by the Good*, one religious conception of curiosity is that it lacks value when it is merely the exercise of a distinctly human faculty or in an engagement with the world based on one’s autonomous judgment and choice. On this view curiosity is a virtue only when it leads to an “increased understanding of the creation *given* us, a creation we neither possess nor control.”²⁰ For this purpose, virtues of attentiveness, openness, receptivity, and the capacity for reverence and awe may be more appropriate.

Many traditional believers, and Meilaender himself, can conceive of curiosity as a virtue, but only when it fortifies a *particular kind* of engagement with the world. And if there is indeed a supreme truth about the right ordering of ourselves to the world, then it is reasonable to infer that there is no intrinsic value in the process of “questioning the world” or in our autonomously shaping our form of engagement with it. Not only does questioning lack intrinsic value; it can be destructive because “a desire to know certain

things is incompatible with the receptive spirit which accepts the world from God and finds its limit in God.”²¹

This religious view shares with the secular one that I have outlined the idea that some expressions of curiosity are appropriate and others are inappropriate. But the religious approach imposes stronger limitations based on an understanding of the world as given to us, a world “we neither possess nor control.” I described curiosity as inappropriate when its objects lack interest or when the desire to learn about them is “debasing,” and I confessed to difficulty formulating an account of what makes the desire to know certain things debasing. Meilaender’s religious perspective may help to spell out a concept of debasing curiosity, that which is *beneath* proper human inquiry. It also expands inappropriate curiosity to include a domain that is *above and beyond* proper human concern, and it suggests the possibility that both share a common flaw, a controlling and possessive spirit of curiosity that knows no limits, in contrast to a spirit of receptivity and humility.

The theme of humans exceeding their proper role by searching for answers about things that should be left to God (or the gods) is a classic one, going back to *Genesis*. It receives contemporary expression in debates about whether we should place limits on scientific research into areas such as human genetics. Human curiosity about our own genetic make-up and how it might be altered to our “advantage” is symbolic for many of human overreaching. Meilaender puts this form of curiosity together with voyeurism as a vice rather than a virtue:

Many possibilities may pique my curiosity—I may wonder how my neighbor’s wife performs in bed; how human beings respond to experiments harmful to their bodies, or even to suffering; how the development of a fertilized egg could be stimulated to produce a monster rather than a normal human being; how to preserve a human being alive forever. I may wonder, but it would be wrong to seek to know...because I cannot possess such knowledge while willing what is good...To love the good and to possess what we love are, in this life, not always compatible.²²

Meilaender would presumably claim that a good person, one who loves the good, would choose to suppress her curiosity about areas that are properly out of bounds.

The contrast between this religious perspective and modern secular views of curiosity is especially apparent in the debate about “tampering,” which is often evoked in such areas as genetics and human reproduction. It is also evident in recent controversies about studying the bones of Native American ancestors.²³ Though Meilaender does not delineate precisely how curiosity should be limited, he suggests a framework for understanding the objection to human “tampering” that is not readily available from a secular perspective. Utilitarians can argue that we should not cultivate intense curiosity about certain areas because it is likely to lead to unwise action or to offending others’ feelings, but the religiously motivated “tampering” objection is not

contingent on our lack of success or on others being aware of our transgression. Without a religious framework, it is hard to see why we should suppress our curiosity about such matters as how our genetic makeup could be modified and improved or exactly how we were all created through natural human reproduction. These matters are clearly *interesting*, so curiosity about them is not idle, and from a secular perspective it is difficult to see why desiring to learn about them would be *debasing*, even though misuse of the knowledge gained might certainly lead to policies or practices that violate human dignity.

Can the secularist have any legitimate objection to curiosity because it leads to “tampering” or because the desire to learn is itself “degrading”? Beyond the consequences of improperly *used* knowledge, one might attempt to argue on utilitarian and psychological grounds that unrestrained curiosity about certain matters could make a person less sensitive or compassionate. But perhaps it is more than that, more than a calculation about future results.²⁴ Unrestrained curiosity, even if not a vice itself, may conflict with the development of other worthy character traits. A secular exploration of other virtues—receptivity, acceptance, openness, attentiveness, and even reverence—may reveal other ways of engaging the world that are conducive to living well but difficult to reconcile, for one person in one life, with a spirit of boundless curiosity. The limit to curiosity would then be based on its inhibition of other virtues.

Without further study, both empirical and conceptual, it would be unreasonable to rule out this possibility. But it is by no means clear, within a secular framework, that virtues emphasizing acceptance, receptivity, and reverence are incompatible with even the boldest forms of curiosity. The richest human life may be one that embraces both kinds of virtues. It might be impossible to combine these different virtues in any single project, or we might find it difficult but nonetheless possible: the genetic scientist with an intense desire to unlock the secrets of the human genome or the archaeologist interested in ancient bones might be capable of inquiring with a spirit of “reverent curiosity.”²⁵

From certain religious standpoints, curiosity about details of our genetic endowment or the structure of ancient bones is by its nature a striving to possess and understand what we should instead approach with a more humble spirit that accepts the world as *given* to us. Secularists will respond that even if this striving is a “lust of the eyes” that we have no hope of fully satisfying, our engagement is worth while in itself. It is an exercise of a distinctly human faculty, and that exercise has a nobility of its own. But the secularist will have to concede this much to the religious challenger: curiosity, virtuous as it is in overcoming indifference and in giving meaning to people’s lives, cannot overcome the deepest kind of existential despair or alter the ultimately tragic nature of the human condition.

Notes

¹ G. F. Schueler takes a step in this direction, arguing that *modesty* is a virtue not because of its social effects but because it reveals a person's "substance of character," a trait which presumably increases the possibility of living well. See "Why IS Modesty a Virtue?" *Ethics* 109 (July 1999): 835-841.

² For example, the recent collection of essays, *How Should One Live: Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press, 1996) includes a comprehensive index with references not only to the obvious virtues of compassion and benevolence but also to such virtues or vices as acquisitiveness, ambition, charity, chastity, envy, industriousness, love of children, loyalty, lust, and wittiness. However, there is no reference to curiosity or inquisitiveness.

³ Of course if one just stipulates that all human curiosity is part of a search for wisdom, then my claim in this paper is that curiosity is a virtue even when it does not relate to the quest for wisdom in any clear and obvious way.

⁴ Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1982): 505.

⁵ Lawrence A. Blum, *Friendship, Altruism, and Morality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 72.

⁶ Of course someone might define attentiveness so that it necessarily includes "active seeking" as one of its components. If so, then the concept has been sufficiently enlarged to include all that I am arguing for with regard to curiosity. But I would object to this move not only for reasons I explain (i.e., attentiveness is not a desire) but also because this "enlargement" blurs an important distinction which may deprive attentiveness of valuable traits that it possesses precisely because it is *not* a form of active seeking.

⁷ For news accounts, see, for example, <http://www.lasvegassun.com/dossier/crime/childmurder/index.html>.

⁸ Of course many authors have argued otherwise. See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20 (Summer 1991): 223-246 and Hursthouse, "Normative Virtue Ethics" in Crisp, pp. 19-36.

⁹ See, for example, T. H. Irwin's discussion of the "supremacy thesis," the claim that the goodness of a virtue is intrinsic to it and that "as long as we describe abilities or states of character that can be used either well or badly, we are not describing virtues." "The Virtues: Theory and Common Sense in Greek Philosophy" in Crisp, p. 40. Also see R. E. Ewin, "Loyalty and Virtues," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (October 1992): 403.

¹⁰ See Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 7 (1982): 505.

¹¹ Debasing curiosity is often idle as well, but not all debasing curiosity is considered idle; for example, those who explore mangled corpses are not thought to be indulging *idle* curiosity.

¹² For example, the “list theory of well-being.” See Brad Hooker, “Does Moral Virtue Constitute a Benefit to the Agent” in Crisp, p. 141-155.

¹³ See, for example, Gabrielle Taylor, “Deadly Vices?” in Crisp, p. 158.

¹⁴ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 218-19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 216-17.

¹⁶ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 127-151.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²³ See, for example, accounts of the controversy about studying the bones of Kennewick Man; e.g., Charles W. Petit, “A Fight Over the Origins of Ancient Bones,” *U.S. News & World Report* (October 12, 1998): 64, and Giles Whittell, “Bones Put Indians on Warpath,” *The Times*, London (October 4, 1997): 19.

²⁴ Leon Kass claims revulsion against cloning is an emotional expression of deep wisdom which can also be partially articulated in a rational, secular way. See “The Wisdom of Repugnance,” *The New Republic* 216 (June 2, 1997): 17-26.

²⁵ The more usual tension between curiosity and reverence is conveyed in remarks by University of California-Davis researcher David Glenn Smith, whose investigation of the bones of Kennewick Man was stopped after a group of North American tribes opposed it a desecration of their heritage: “Every day, I look at that bone, and I’d sure like to grind a little of it up—all I need is a tenth of a gram. Then we’d know so much more about these early people.” See Constance Holden, “Kennewick Man Still in Play,” *Science* 275 (March 7, 1997): 1423.