

QUESTION 167

Curiosity

Next we have to consider curiosity (*curiositas*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Can the vice of curiosity exist in intellectual cognition? (2) Does curiosity exist in sentient cognition?

Article 1

Can curiosity exist with respect to intellectual cognition?

It seems that curiosity cannot exist with respect to intellectual cognition:

Objection 1: According to the Philosopher in *Ethics* 2, in the case of things that are good or bad in their own right (*secundum se*), there cannot be a mean and [two] extremes. But intellectual cognition is good in its own right; for a man's perfection seems to consist in his intellect's being led from potentiality into actuality, and this occurs through the cognition of truth. Again, in *De Divinis Nominibus*, chap. 4, Dionysius says, "The good for the human soul is to live in accord with reason," and the perfection of reason consists in the cognition of truth. Therefore, the vice of curiosity cannot exist with respect to intellectual cognition.

Objection 2: That through which a man becomes like God and which flows from God cannot be bad. But any sort of abundance of cognition is from God—this according to Ecclesiasticus 1:1 ("All wisdom is from the Lord God"). And Wisdom 7:17 says, "He has given me true knowledge of the things that exist, so that I might know the disposition of the whole world, and the powers of the elements, etc." Again, a man becomes like God in having cognition of truth, since "all things are naked and open to His eyes," as Hebrews 4:13 puts it. Hence, 1 Kings 2:3 says, "The Lord is God of all knowledge." Therefore, to the extent that the cognition of truth abounds, this is good and not bad. But a desire for the good is not sinful. Therefore, the vice of curiosity cannot exist with respect to intellectual cognition.

Objection 3: If the vice of curiosity could exist with respect to any intellectual cognition, then it would exist mainly with respect to the philosophical sciences. But it does not seem to be a vice to be intent on those sciences; for in commenting on Daniel 1:8 Jerome says, "If those who had refused to partake of the king's meat and wine, in order not to be defiled, had believed that the wisdom and science of the Babylonians was sinful, then they would never have acquiesced in learning what they were not permitted to learn." And in *De Doctrina Christiana* Augustine says, "If the philosophers mouthed any truths, those truths should, for our own advantage, be appropriated from them as from unjust possessors." Therefore, there cannot be sinful curiosity with respect to intellectual cognition.

But contrary to this: Jerome says, "Does it not seem to you that the individual who wrestles day and night in the dialectic art, the investigator of nature who raises up his eyes across the heavens, walks in empty understanding and mental darkness (*in vanitate sensus et obscuritate mentis ingredi*)?" But empty understanding and mental darkness are sinful. Therefore, there can be sinful curiosity with respect to the intellectual sciences.

I respond: As has been explained (q. 166, a. 2, ad 2), studiousness has to do *directly* not with the cognition itself, but with the desire and eagerness to acquire cognition. And one has to judge in one way concerning the *cognition of truth* and in another way concerning the *desire and eagerness to have cognition of truth*.

For the cognition of truth itself is good in its own right (*per se loquendo bona est*). However, it can be bad incidentally (*potest per accidens esse mala*), viz., by reason of some consequence, e.g., an individual's becoming proud because of his cognition of truth—this according to 1 Corinthians 8:1 ("Knowledge puffs one up")—or a man's using his cognition in order to sin.

By contrast, the desire or eagerness to know truth is itself either upright or perverse:

(a) [Perverse] in one way, insofar as an individual tends with eagerness toward cognition of truth

because some evil is conjoined to it, as in the case of those who are eager for scientific knowledge of truth *in order that they might thereby be puffed up*. Hence, in *De Moribus Ecclesiae* Augustine says, “There are those who, forsaking the virtues and ignorant of what God is and of how great the majesty is of that nature which always remains in the same way, think that they are doing something great if they thoroughly explore with the greatest curiosity and intensity the whole mass of the body that we call the world. So great a pride is thereby engendered that it seems to them that they themselves inhabit the very heavens that they so often argue about.” Similarly, those who are eager to learn something *in order to sin* are engaged in a sinful study—this according to Jeremiah 9:5 (“They have taught their tongue to speak lies, they have labored in order to act wickedly”).

(b) Next, there can be a sin because *the desire or eagerness that is directed toward learning truth is itself disordered*. And there are four ways in which this can happen:

First, insofar as individuals are, through a less useful study, drawn away from a study that is incumbent upon them as a duty (*retrahuntur a studio quod eis ex necessitate incumbit*). Hence, Jerome says, “We see priests who, having set aside the Gospels and the prophets, are reading comedies and singing love songs from the pastoral poems.”

Second, insofar as an individual learns from someone he is not permitted to learn from, as is clear in the case of those who ask the demons about certain future events; and this is the superstitious curiosity of which Augustine says in *De Vera Religione*, “Perhaps the philosophers were kept from the faith by their sinful curiosity in making inquiries of the demons.”

Third, when a man desires to have cognition of the truth about creatures without referring this cognition to its appropriate end, viz., to the cognition of God. Hence, in *De Vera Religione* Augustine says, “In studying creatures, an individual should not exercise empty and perishable curiosity; instead, he should progress toward things that are immortal and abide forever.”

Fourth, insofar as an individual is eager for cognition of truth beyond the capacity of his own intelligence, since men thereby fall into error easily. Hence, Ecclesiasticus 3:22 says, “Do not inquire into things that are too deep for you, and do not scrutinize things that are too mighty for you, and do not be curious about too many of His works.” And this is added later (3:26): “For their speculation (*suspicio*) has tripped up many individuals, and has trapped their minds in vanity.”

Reply to objection 1: The good of man consists in the cognition of truth, and yet, as is clear from the Philosopher in *Ethics* 10, a man’s highest good consists not in the cognition of just any truth, but in the perfect cognition of the highest truth. And so sin can exist in the cognition of some truths insofar as the desire involved is not ordered in the right way to the cognition of the highest truth, in which the greatest happiness (*summa felicitas*) consists.

Reply to objection 2: This argument shows that the cognition of truth is good in its own right, but this does not exclude an individual’s misusing the cognition of truth for something bad or, again, his desiring the cognition of truth in a disordered way—since it is likewise necessary that the desire for something good be regulated in an appropriate way.

Reply to objection 3: The study of philosophy is licit and praiseworthy in its own right (*secundum se est licitum et laudabile*) because of the truth which the philosophers perceive and which, as Romans 1:19 says, God reveals to them. However, it is because some philosophers make bad use of those truths by attacking the faith that the Apostle says in Colossians 2:8, “See that no one deceives you by means of philosophy and empty learning, according to human tradition ... and not according to Christ.” Again, in *Epistola ad Polycarpum* Dionysius says about certain philosophers, “They use divine things in an unholy way against divine things, trying to expel the veneration of God through the wisdom of God.”

Article 2

Does the vice of curiosity exist with respect to sentient cognition?

It seems that the vice of curiosity does not exist with respect to sentient cognition:

Objection 1: Just as some things are known through the sense of sight, so, too, some things are known through the senses of touch and taste. But the vice of curiosity is not posited with respect to things that can be touched or tasted; instead, the vice of lust or the vice of gluttony is posited in their case. Therefore, it seems that the vice of curiosity does not exist with respect to things that are known through the sense of sight, either.

Objection 2: Curiosity seems to exist in the watching of games; hence, in *Confessiones* 6 Augustine says, “At a certain point in the fight, when the vast roar of all the people strongly agitated him, Alypius, overcome by curiosity, opened his eyes.” But watching games does not seem to be sinful, since, as the Philosopher points out in *Poetics*, this sort of watching is rendered pleasureable because of a representation in which a man naturally delights. Therefore, the *vice* of curiosity does not exist with respect to the cognition of things that can be sensed.

Objection 3: As Bede points out, curiosity seems to involve looking into the affairs of one’s neighbors. But looking into the affairs of others does not seem to be sinful, since, as Ecclesiasticus 17:12 says, “God gave to each individual a command concerning his neighbor.” Therefore, the vice of curiosity does not exist in having cognition of particular things of this sort that can be sensed.

But contrary to this: In *De Vera Religione* Augustine says, “Concupiscence of the eyes renders men curious.” But as Bede comments, “Concupiscence of the eyes exists not only in learning the magical arts, but also in watching spectacles and in diagnosing and about the vices of our neighbors”—which are certain particular things that can be sensed. Therefore, since *concupiscence of the eyes* is a vice—as are *pride of life* and *concupiscence of the flesh*, from which it is distinguished in 1 John 2:16— it seems that the vice of curiosity exists with respect to the cognition of things that can be sensed.

I respond: There are two things that sentient cognition is ordered toward. First, in both men and animals it is ordered toward sustaining the body, since through this sort of cognition men and the other animals avoid dangers and search for the things that are necessary for sustaining the body. Second, in man sentient cognition is ordered in a special way toward intellectual cognition, whether theoretical or practical.

Therefore, there are two possible ways in which it is sinful to devote study to having cognition of things that can be sensed:

First, insofar as the sentient cognition is not ordered toward something useful and instead turns a man away from some useful consideration. Hence, in *Confessiones* 10 Augustine says, “I no longer go to the games to watch a dog chasing a hare, but if in going through a field I come upon the same thing, the chase may easily draw me off from some serious thought and concentrate me upon myself ... And unless, with my weakness already demonstrated to myself, You quickly admonish me ... I go blank.”

Second, insofar as the sentient cognition is ordered toward something harmful, in the way that looking at a woman is ordered toward having a disordered sentient desire, and in the way that a diligent investigation of things that are done by others is ordered toward detraction.

On the other hand, if an individual intends the cognition of things that can be sensed in a well-ordered way because of his duty to sustain his nature, or because of his eagerness to understand truth, then this is a virtuous studiousness with respect to sentient cognition.

Reply to objection 1: *Lust* and *gluttony* have to do with the pleasures involved in the use of things that can be *touched*. But *curiosity* has to do with the pleasure involved in having cognition with *all the senses*. And as Augustine says in *Confessiones* 10, “Curiosity is called ‘concupiscence of the eyes’ because the eyes are the most important of the senses for having cognition; thus everything that can be

sensed is said to be ‘seen’.” And as Augustine adds in the same place, “By this one more clearly discerns what is done by the senses for pleasure and what is done out of curiosity. For pleasure seeks what is beautiful, sweet, melodious, fragrant, and soft, whereas curiosity, for the sake of experimenting, seeks the contraries of these as well, not in order to undergo annoyance, but to come under a disordered desire for experience and cognition.”

Reply to objection 2: Watching games is rendered sinful insofar as a man thereby becomes prone to either the vice of lasciviousness or the vice of cruelty because of the things that are represented therein. Hence, Chrysostom says, “Such sights make for individuals who are adulterous and shameless.”

Reply to objection 3: It is praiseworthy for an individual to look into the affairs of others with a good spirit, either (a) for its usefulness to himself, so that the man might be prodded to better things by the good works of his neighbor, or (b) for its usefulness to his neighbor, so that, in keeping with the rule of charity and the duties of his office, he might correct his neighbor if the latter is doing something sinful—this according to Hebrews 10:24 (“Think about how to stir up one another to charity and good works”).

By contrast, it is sinful for an individual to want to think about the vices of his neighbors in order to look down on them or to subject them to distraction or to at least disquiet them to their disadvantage. Hence, Proverbs 24 says, “Do not lie in wait and look for iniquity in the house of the just man, or disturb his rest.”