Rethinking Curiosity: An Ecumenical Theory

Curiosity provides a crucial impetus for inquiry and philosophical reflection. Some suggest that curiosity has an important role in grounding the value of true belief and knowledge[1], and determining which truths are attention-worthy.[2] Furthermore—despite Augustine branding it 'lust of the eyes'—curiosity is often counted amongst the epistemic virtues and plays an important role in the epistemically healthy character.[3] However, despite this weighty role, the nature of curiosity is a neglected topic.

In the few papers discussing curiosity, an orthodoxy is emerging claiming curiosity is comprised of *questions*, along with a desire to answer these questions satisfied only by acquiring *knowledge* (see Whitcomb 2010, 2017; Friedman 2013, 2015; also Williamson 2000).[4] I argue this approach is misguided and sketch an alternative theory.

Against the Knowledge-view.

The orthodox view claims curiosity is properly satisfied by knowledge (the Knowledge-view). The primary motivation for the Knowledge-view is that it best explains normative judgements about inappropriate continuation and cessation of curiosity. For instance, it is inappropriate to say "I know that *p*; but I'm curious, is p the case?". It also seems inappropriate to stop being curious after merely engaging in spurious guesswork. The Knowledge-view predicts these judgements: curiosity should end *if and only if* one acquires knowledge.

Curiosity arises in different contexts. This can be extracted from the commonplace thought that inquiry can aim to settle issues of *practical* (is there milk in the fridge?) or purely *intellectual* (how did the universe begin?) interest. An underexamined assumption operative in the literature is that we require a *univocal* theory of what satisfies curiosity—that both practical and intellectual curiosity have the same satisfier, namely knowledge. I reject this assumption. Specifically, I claim that intellectual curiosity often aims at being satisfied by *understanding* rather than knowledge. This can be demonstrated by identifying cases of *unsatisfying knowledge*—that is, cases where one's curiosity can legitimately remain unsatisfied after acquiring knowledge.

Consider the following simple case. Jaako goes to hospital with a sore knee. This might generate curiosity. Both Jaako's gossipy neighbour Juho, and an ambitious young medical student Hanna who is working on Jaako's case might have curiosity directed at the question: 'why does Jaako have pain in his knee?' Juho is motivated to inquire in order to gossip about Jaako at the local pub, whilst Hanna is motivated by a deep academic interest in the causes of pain in the human body. I suggest that, plausibly, the former will be satisfied by knowledge, and the latter by understanding.

Hanna is curious 'why does Jaako have pain in his knee?' Suppose her lecturer tells her, without elaboration, that he has arthritis. Hanna would then acquire knowledge-why via testimony. The problem for the Knowledge-view is this: if Hanna acquires knowledge, then the orthodox view predicts that inquiry should close, and continued inquiry should be judged *normatively*

[1] Conee (2017).
[2] See Goldman (1999: 87-96).
[3] E.g. Zagzebski (1996: *passim*).
[4] Whitcomb emphasises the requirement that *knowledge* is required, whilst Friedman emphasises the centrality of *questions*.

inappropriate. But this is clearly false—Hanna's continued inquiry would be quite appropriate given her intellectual curiosity about the human body.

This is supported by the fact that there are felicitous assertions involving knowledge *and* persistent curiosity: "Although I know Jaako's sore knee is caused by arthritis, I barely *understand* the cause of his sore knee; so I'm still curious about it." The Knowedge-view predicts this assertion to betray a conceptual confusion. This is not the case; our language suggests that intellectual curiosity can aspire to understanding. Thus, both the Knowledge-view, and univocalism, are false.

Against the Questions-view.

The orthodox view claims curiosity is constituted by questions—there is nothing to curiosity over and above wanting to answer some question (the Questions-view). One important motivation is that it does justice to certain linguistic data—Friedman points out that curiosity-attributions embed interrogative complements more readily than propositional that-clauses.[5] Another motivation is the Questions-view coheres with how we typically display curiosity—Whitcomb claims "just as we manifest belief by asserting, we manifest curiosity by asking."[6] I claim the Questions-view construes curiosity too narrowly.

Firstly, it is commonplace to have *objectual* curiosity without having any particular question in mind. I might be interested in medieval history *in general*, without this being reducible to some question or other. This coheres with the phenomenon of latent curiosity—one can have a standing, persistent interest in a subject-matter, and a tendency to take up opportunities to investigate it, even when one is not currently curious about a specific question within that topic.

Secondly, the Questions-view fails to do justice to the way that inquiry borne of curiosity can be both spontaneous and broad. My curiosity about a painting might lead me to walk over to it and look at it. In doing so, I may answer a number of questions one could have; but it is implausible to say that my reason for looking at the painting as to answer some *predetermined* question, or that my curiosity solely consisted in my wondering about some question or other. My curiosity was just directed at the painting, rather than at a question.

Relatedly, one can be curious about a topic because it yields *windfalls* of interesting information— fascinating and completely unexpected information, about which you would never have thought to formulate questions before inquiring into the topic. This is why it isn't even plausible to analyse general curiosity in terms of a *disposition* to have questions—the range of things that can satisfy our curiosity exceeds the range of things we have pre-existing questions about.

And finally, we often ascribe curiosity to infants and animals. Indeed, animal curiosity is an established area of empirical research and both Whitcomb and Friedman claim that accounting for it should be an adequacy criterion for any acceptable theory. However, it is extremely controversial whether animals have the requisite cognitive sophistication to conceive of questions, or can represent an epistemic state such as knowledge by desiring it.

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[5] E.g. contrast (1) "Alice is curious whether the bus is running on time", with (2) # "Alice is curious that the bus is running on time."

[6] Whitcomb (2010: 672).

An Ecumenical Alternative.

The orthodox view fails to capture the broad spectrum of curiosity, from the simple curiosity of animals and infants, to sophisticated intellectual curiosity aiming at understanding. To account for the varieties of curiosity, we should prefer an ecumenical theory that avoids specifying a unique satisfier of curiosity, allow curiosity aim at things other than questions, and doesn't demand too much cognitive sophistication:

(Simple theory) Curiosity about (some object, event, question or phenomena) Φ = desiring to investigate Φ.

An important objection is that this theory cannot explain the normative judgements regarding curiosity-satisfaction outlined earlier.

In response, I suggest that our *definition* of curiosity need not explain why certain instances of curiosity are inappropriate. Rather, the normative judgements under discussion really concern *inquiry*. Much of contemporary epistemology is concerned with discovering and explaining the contours of appropriate and inappropriate inquiry. There are a variety of positions holding that inquiry rightly aims at knowledge or understanding without appealing to the nature of curiosity.[7] If we conceive of curiosity as a *desire* to investigate, we can explain why certain cases of curiosity strike us as illegitimate. Just as immoral behaviour attracts opprobrium, so does the desire to engage in immoral behaviour. A similar thought explains normative judgements about curiosity—curiosity is inappropriate when it amounts to a desire to engage in inappropriate inquiry. Explaining when inquiry is inappropriate is one of the most important functions of epistemology, but these standards need not be derived from the definition of curiosity. Thus, we should prefer an ecumenical theory of curiosity that captures the entire spectrum of curiosity.

[7] For instance, numerous philosophers discuss the role of knowledge in anchoring practical reasoning (e.g. Fantl & McGrath 2009), or the distinctive epistemic value of understanding (e.g. Kvanvig 2003).

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