



This is a repository copy of *Curiosity: Care, Virtue and Pleasure in Uncovering the New*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/90604/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Phillips, R. (2015) *Curiosity: Care, Virtue and Pleasure in Uncovering the New*. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 32 (3). 149 - 161. ISSN 0263-2764

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276414565718>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Philip Ball, 2012. *Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything*. London: Random House

Brian Dillon, 2013. *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*. London: Hayward Publishing

Daniel W. Gade, 2011. *Curiosity, Inquiry and the Geographical Imagination*. New York: Peter Lang

Ilhan Inan, 2012. *The Philosophy of Curiosity*. New York: Routledge

Mark Zuss, 2012, *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*. New York: Springer

### **CURIOSITY: CARE, VIRTUE AND PLEASURE IN UNCOVERING THE NEW<sup>1</sup>**

Historians of science and cultural critics have observed that it is no longer controversial or suspicious, as it once was, to be curious or to endorse this way of being. Indeed: longstanding constraints on curiosity appear to be falling away. Information technologies are facilitating the circulation and exchange of information on an unprecedented scale. Scientists are now 'interested in everything', as science writer Philip Ball puts it, and are asking big and unsettling questions about life and what was once taken for its natural order. Artists and intellectuals are smashing social, sexual and religious taboos. Nor, it seems, is there anywhere to hide for the orthodoxies and authorities, religious or secular, which once constrained and condemned the curious. All this appears to realise a vision, once articulated by Michel Foucault (1988: 328). 'I dream,' he said, 'of a new age of curiosity'.

And yet, contemporary attention to curiosity tends to be glossy, affirmative rather than searching or critical. Curiosity is now routinely affirmed in universities and museums, creative industries and ordinary workplaces, advertising campaigns and corporate communications. This article reviews a number of recent books, about and for curiosity, which begin with the premise that beneath the contemporary affirmation of curiosity, curious people and practices are embattled and constrained.

---

<sup>1</sup> Or: **CURIOSITY: CARE, VIRTUE AND PLEASURE IN SOCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC ENQUIRY**

In universities, including some that explicitly present themselves as champions of curiosity, it is said that curious people find themselves against the grain of output-driven research management and professionalised, specialised disciplinary structures. In business, too, curious people are not always welcomed as the innovators and creative problem solvers they often are, and tend to be regarded as upstarts, and kept out or kept down.

This inconsistent approach, in which curiosity is endorsed but not examined, and not necessarily encouraged, is reflected in a wider lack of curiosity about curiosity itself. Discussion of this subject tends to revolve around choice quotations rather than sustained reflection. The brevity of Foucault's intervention on the subject, and the extent to which it has nevertheless been cited, are instructive. Philosopher Ilhan Inan was recently struck by how little had been written on the subject. 'The more I looked into the literature,' he recalled, 'the more shocking it seemed to me that philosophers had simply not taken curiosity as a topic that was worthy of philosophical investigation' (Inan 2012: xii-xiii). This, he suggests, is not simply oversight; there is 'great resistance' to examining this subject (Inan 2012: 8). Others have echoed these observations. Mark Zuss (2012: vii) argues that though 'It remains fashionable to be curious,' both within his discipline of critical pedagogy and also more widely, 'this readiness to question the order and patterns of experience is rarely itself the subject of inquiry'. This attitude contrasts with other times and places in which curious people are also said to have flourished, such as early modern England and the period of Islamic rule in Spain. Then, curiosity was more reflexive.

And yet, there are signs of renewed curiosity about curiosity. A series of new books on the subject, emerging from distinct disciplinary traditions and perspectives – geographies of travel and exploration; histories of science; pedagogical criticism; philosophy; and cultural and literary criticism

– are asking new and searching questions about curiosity: ‘Why talk about curiosity? Is it really an interesting subject? Is it really a subject at all?’ (Dillon, 2013: 14) These questions raise others about the drivers of social and scientific enquiry, and these indicate what is at stake in re-examining curiosity. Most immediately, to what extent should social and scientific researchers endeavour to be ‘useful’, to what extent should they follow their curiosity, and are these interests necessarily at odds with each other? (Phillips, 2010) This begs another question: what does it mean to follow curiosity? What kind of intellectual compass does curiosity provide: what pleasures, virtues and passions does it pursue, and how far can these be trusted? And, given the etymological and conceptual relationships between curiosity and care, which I explain in due course, what are the relationships between curiosity and care, and how does each illuminate the other? To approach these questions – to pose, if not to answer them in any systematic way – it is first necessary to say more about curiosity as a subject.

### **How to talk about curiosity?**

If curiosity is ‘a subject’, it is a slippery and elusive kind of subject. As geographer John K. Wright once argued, ‘it seems a little unfortunate that this word, used to designate a nosy, impertinent characteristic of monkeys, small children, and gossips, is also applied to the loftier and more impersonal impulse that drives the astronomer to search the depths of the universe and the geographer to penetrate the mysteries of *terrae incognitae*’ Wright (1947: 4). Such an eclectic subject presents challenges and opportunities for writing and understanding.

A number of authors have responded to the first of these challenges – the problem of whether to write about curiosity in general, or to find a more specific focus – by limiting their scope to scholarly curiosity. Philip Ball (2012) focusses upon scientific curiosity, then concentrates more specifically

upon seventeenth-century England. Mark Zuss addresses 'theoretical' or 'discerning critical curiosity' (Zuss, 2012: viii). Ilhan Inan (2012) distinguishes between 'instinctive' or 'behavioural' curiosity, which encompasses 'novelty seeking, sensation seeking, or exploratory behaviour, from 'conceptual' curiosity, a 'mental state' requiring particular cognitive and linguistic competences (Inan, 2012: 125). Daniel Gade also identifies two kinds of curiosity, which he terms 'prudential' and 'epistemic' (Gade, 2011: 10-11). The former has a practical dimension and, springing from necessity and possibility, it involves being curious about how to do things. The latter is more conceptually driven, taking inspiration from some of Gade's fellow geographers and mentors, notably Carl Sauer (1941: 353), who advocated 'focussed curiosity'. Gade concentrates upon epistemic curiosity and, in so doing, he narrows down this subject to something relatively precise, distancing it from other, ostensibly superfluous, intrusive and prurient forms of curiosity.

Even with this focus, curiosity is still difficult to write about, judging by some recent books on the subject, which appear to struggle with language and form. Zuss's *Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*, for example, is a sprawling and deeply uneven book. The quality of editing does not help: some sentences appear more than once; non-sentences, grammatical and spelling errors abound; and arguments drown in a sea of mixed metaphors. But the editors are not entirely to blame for these issues, which are also symptomatic of the challenge of attempting to write comprehensively about a subject with so many strands and dimensions that it becomes almost unmanageable.

But, in this sheer expansiveness, which ranges from amateurism to erudition, Zuss brings a curious spirit to his subject. *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity* can be read as a kind of cabinet of curiosities: an assemblage of ideas and objects. The contents range widely and almost randomly: from Roger Bacon to Francis Bacon, Biotechnology, Genetics, Psychogeography, Psychotherapy,

Pragmatism, Plato, Post-Fordism, Freud, Frankenstein, Freedom, Mathematics, Cezanne, Imperialism, Adventure, Aristotle, Odysseus, the World Trade Centre, Sierra Leone.... Evoking the inventory of a cabinet, Zuss explores what it might mean to be curious about curiosity. He shows that what can be said about curiosity depends upon how we say it.

Another book to embrace the conceptual and creative challenges of reflexive curiosity, and one that accomplishes this more eloquently, is entitled *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing* (2012). Comprising plates from the exhibition it accompanied, with notes and essays by curator Brian Dillon, the UK editor of arts magazine *Cabinet*, and also cultural critic Marina Warner, this book brings a distinctively visual perspective to its subject. Dillon asks if there is really any unity to the many things that have been addressed under the umbrella of curiosity: experiences or 'episodes' as disparate as 'the artist in her studio, the writer at his desk,' and 'the jealous lover left alone with a partner's diary' (Dillon, 2013: 14). 'Surely,' he suggests, 'the rage, desire or taste for knowledge is too disparate and motley [in these examples] to be ascribed to one feeling or faculty?' (Dillon, 2013: 14). So, he continues, 'if there is something called curiosity, it is an oddly dissolved, indistinct and various notion, overlapping with desire, avarice and envy as well as more abstract or virtuous qualities' (Dillon, 2013: 15). This exploration of curiosity revolves around an aesthetics that cuts across arts and sciences, jumping out of intellectual tramlines. Through its many plates, and inventories and descriptions of them, this book offers insights into different material and conceptual forms of curiosity: diverse curiosities.

Warner's essay develops this visual exploration of curiosity through an acrostic, composed of a series of aphorisms and paragraphs, arranged over a number of pages, in a textual design that spells out a quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*: 'Curiouser and Curiouser'. Like this book as a whole, her

essay is not entirely original. Many of its specific points – including claims about the transgressive aspects of curiosity and the mixed fortunes of curious people and practices – have been made elsewhere. The claim ‘That OVERSTEPPING is central to curiosity’ is indebted to Barbara Benedict’s argument that curiosity involves going beyond, transgressing both literally and metaphorically (Warner, 2013: 37, original capitalisation; Benedict, 2001). The more original aspect of this essay and book lies in their visual arrangement and conception, which conveys something of the place of aesthetics and of sensory responses to images and objects in sparking and sustaining curiosity.

This visual perspective develops two particular insights. First, that curiosity is a quality of ‘care and attention,’ identified with ‘precision or exactitude, a sedulous concentration’ (Dillon, 2013: 17). This builds upon Foucault’s argument that curiosity ‘evokes the care one takes for what exists and could exist’ (Foucault, 1988: 327). Second, through its visual arrangements and composition, this book explores the relationships between cabinets, inventories and taxonomies, reflecting upon the provisional, unstable and productive quality of the latter. Through the ways in which they are placed within cabinets, and also through the inventories in which they are recorded, curiosities can be combined, categorised and ordered, with implications for taxonomies and understandings. Warner’s acrostic, much like an inventory or cabinet, generates its own sequence and order, which can be read as a tentative taxonomy. ‘When the organising scheme changes, everything changes: function, effect, aesthetics and ethics’ (Warner 2013: 32). Through its writing and representational strategies, its styles and compositions, this book explores what it can mean to be curious about curiosity, throwing light upon questions about what curiosity is and why it is worth talking about.

### **What is curiosity?**

There are other ways of describing curiosity. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* provides one starting point, defining this as ‘a strong desire to know or learn something’ (Pearsall, 2002: 351). Gade’s *Curiosity, Inquiry and the Geographical Imagination* (2011) provides another, making explicit some ideas about curiosity that have wider currency, but which are usually assumed or implied. It begins with a simple positive statement, defining and affirming curiosity as ‘the pursuit of knowledge’ (Gade, 2011: xiv). Gade then makes five main more specific points.

First, reflecting his primary concern with ‘epistemic’ rather than ‘prudential’ curiosity, he argues that ‘curiosity denotes an interest in phenomena for their own sake’ (Gade, 2011: 49), and that curious people have an ‘antipathy for utilitarianism’ (Gade, 2011: 75). Epistemic curiosity is distanced from more practical, problem-based and output-driven scholarship, which he identifies with a ‘Baconian’ tradition in the UK and with pragmatism in the United States (Gade, 2011: 49): ‘A direct material benefit may ensue from what is learned, but the motivation to proceed on a particular line of inquiry comes primarily from the inner drive of an inquiring individual.’ Second, curiosity is associated with lone scholars – ‘notably curious *individuals*’ (Gade, 2011: 23, added emphasis). The epistemically curious, he claims, ‘are unlikely to compete or collaborate with others’ (Gade, 2011: 11), and they tend to eschew ‘group projects’, resisting the lure of ‘large budgets’ for staff, travel and equipment (Gade, 2011: 82). Third, Gade links the individualism of the curious to their adventurous and free-spirited scholarship and inquiry. ‘Scholars of romantic sensibility believe that an individual’s creative spirit operates under the scrutiny of his or her own conscious,’ he argues, asserting that this model of scholarship is tolerated in the humanities more than the social or natural sciences (Gade, 2011: 82). These curious figures cross boundaries and roam free. ‘Counter-enlightenment’ figures, they eschew rationalized and/or formalized inquiry and debate and are the descendants and counterparts of shamans. ‘The shaman mediates between the known and the unknown to illuminate what is hidden to others. That is the role of scholars.’ (Gade, 2011: 53). Fourth, Gade (2011: 52)

argues that curiosity is innate and 'is a function of the evolution of the human brain'. He adds that it is particularly marked in a naturally curious minority – which he goes so far as to quantify as 3% of any given population. Finally, Gade observes that 'some cultures and sub-cultures have encouraged curiosity in their members; others have not'. He speculates that 'poor rural societies often lack the conditions to nourish curious people to reach their full potential' (Gade, 2011: 51), and asserts that the 'Islamic tradition does not allow one to ask questions' (Gade, 2011: 17) and that Arabic peoples remain in a 'medieval grip' (Gade, 2011: 16), which constrains their curiosity.

In addition to these explicit claims, Gade makes his case about and for curiosity through the ways in which he writes: his style and composition. He ranges freely, speculatively and passionately, refusing to engage in formal debates, while making claims that are neither measured nor evidenced. The outcome is homespun, openly amateurish, bold and combative. It reads more like a manifesto for curiosity than a conventional monograph about it. Like Zuss and Warner, in their different ways, Gade explores what it can mean to be curious about curiosity, and finds that what can be said depends upon how it is said.

I am not suggesting that Gade is right about curiosity, but his outspoken writing is useful in providing points of departure, opening up a conversation. The next section revisits two of his arguments: that curiosity is innate, and that some cultures are more curious than others. These claims make some intuitive sense, but can be challenged through the recognition that curiosity is not simply tolerated or nurtured better in some places than others; it is understood differently and takes different forms there. In other words, there is no essential curiosity, but rather a series of different curiosities, emerging in different forms and intensities, in different times and places.

## Curiosities

Gade's assertions about who is or is not curious are sweeping and crudely drawn, but they do find some agreement with other authors, who identify curiosity with the West and the modern period, or limit their arguments to these settings. Ball (2012) focusses upon the culture of curiosity in early modern England. Zuss (2012: vii), making a stronger case, argues that 'an alert, attentive mind is celebrated' with particular enthusiasm in 'contemporary consumer and industrial countries' and in 'the modernist West'. These claims demand to be interrogated. In particular, it will be important to challenge complacency about the place of curiosity in the West, and to avoid under-estimating curiosity elsewhere. This calls for a historically and geographically differentiated understanding of curiosity.

One, particularly readable book, which illustrates the form this might take, is Philip Ball's recent history of scientific curiosity in seventeenth-century England. Ball describes an explosion of curiosity in this context, showing how this term shifted in meanings just as cultures of curiosity found new forms. 'While there was a long, if controversial, history of asking questions about nature and human activity, such enquiries had tended to limit themselves to what was obviously useful, or important, or universal'. But then the focus of inquiry expanded, such that the main scientific association in contemporary England, the Royal Society, 'embraced a phantasmagoria of phenomena and inventions' (Ball, 2012: 5) and expressed an interest in anything and everything. This book retells some stories that have been told before, and revisits some ideas about curiosity that are equally familiar (Benedict, 2001), retelling and revisiting with a quality of writing that will reach new audiences, even if it does not always break new ground. Ball is sometimes original, though, and he is at his best in his discussion of relationships between curiosity and visuality. New fields of vision were opened up through optical technologies, above all the telescopes and microscopes that made distant and immediate objects more visible, and brought some into view for the first time. Visual curiosities

were accessible not only to the scientists with access to these new devices, but also to the wider audiences that took an interest in their reports and publications, such as Robert Hooke's study of small things entitled *Micrographia* (1665). While these endeavours deepened and extended the realm of the visual, scientists were interested not only in the objects they could increasingly see, but also the light through which this illumination took place. Light itself became an object of curiosity, through the work of Robert Boyle and other scientists, who took particular interest in luminescence, phosphorescence, the rainbow and the properties of light itself. In this form, the visual was not just another object of curiosity, but something more, getting at the heart of curiosity itself.

Ball suggests that the history of curiosity is not simply a matter of the waxing and waning fortunes of curious people, but rather of changing cultures of curiosity. He acknowledges arguments, previously advanced by Neil Kenny, Barbara Benedict and Robert Aymar, that curiosity has taken different forms in different times and places, and responds to this by focussing upon one particular culture of curiosity rather than venturing any trans-historical generalisations. Others develop this line of argument by more explicitly historicizing curiosity. In *The Practice of Theoretical Curiosity*, Zuss traces 'historical and cultural conditions that initiate, augment, and regulate' curiosity (Zuss, 2012: vii): from the Classical period to the age of discovery, and from space exploration to contemporary bioscience. In its grand historical sweep, this book is uneven, stronger on some times and places than others, but the panorama it affords is productive, contradicting Gade's picture of curiosity as natural, innate and therefore fundamentally constant. As he puts it, 'curiosity is never an essence, mental state or identifiable concept' (Zuss, 2012: 91). Zuss develops this point theoretically, for example through a critique of Piagetian developmental psychology, which, he argues, naturalized and universalized specifically bourgeois understandings of childhood and curiosity (Zuss, 2012, 79).

Inan also historicises curiosity, and traces commonplace understandings of curiosity to philosophical sources. For example, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition, quoted above, is indebted to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1668), which presents a positive picture of curiosity as the distinctively human 'desire, to know why, and how' (Inan, 2012: 6). A detailed synopsis of Inan's gleaning of the philosophical literatures on curiosity is beyond the scope of this review, but some key points are worth drawing out. First, an understanding of (conceptual) curiosity is distinguished not only from other forms of curiosity, but also from related ideas with which it is often conflated, notably wonder, which the Greeks referred to as *thauma* (Inan, 2012: 2). (Inan is not alone among the authors reviewed here to note this distinction, but he does so in more detail than the others.) Drawing upon Descartes and Heidegger, Inan (2012: 126) distinguishes the mental state of wonder from that of curiosity, explaining that 'One may be in a state of wonder on seeing thunder, without being curious about it or its cause.' This distinction is fundamental to his elaboration of curiosity.

Both Zuss and Inan, having addressed curiosity in broad terms, concentrate further upon a particular aspect of this: the curiosity-driven question. Zuss applies insights from phenomenology and considers how sensory experiences can spark questions, whereas Inan focusses more on the linguistic drivers and structures of curiosity-driven questions. Doing so, both put forward arguments about and for curiosity, while they also bring renewed focus to this term.

### **Curiosity-Driven Questions**

Zuss (2012: 91) envisions curiosity as 'thought's freedom', and argues that this can and ideally should be free-ranging, adventurous, playful and transgressive, but all in a particular spirit, which revolves around questioning rather than subversion for its own sake. Zuss expresses curiosity about curiosity by asking questions about curious questioning. 'How is it,' he asks, 'that, like small flames,

questions arise from the filaments of our senses?’ (Zuss, 2012: 122). He traces questions to sensory experience – the ‘immersion of bodies in the world’ (Zuss, 2012: 128) – through the ‘activity of the sensible’ (Zuss, 2012: 146) and, more specifically, the visual. Complementing Ball’s more descriptive account of relationships between curiosity and visibility, he argues that the visual is not just the symbol of curiosity, nor the source of objective truth. More than this, it is the basis for a particular relationship between humans and the perceptual world, one defined by a quality of care and attention, noted by Dillon and Warner, and formative of embodied knowledge. Through Merleau-Ponty, he argues that visual curiosity does not simply signal the contemplation of the visible, but rather the subject’s embeddedness in layers and junctions and foldings of the invisible.

Attention to questions and questioning is also central to Inan’s *Philosophy of Curiosity* (2012), which shifts attention to the linguistic construction of questions and possible answers. ‘The limits of what we can be curious about are set by the limits of what we can attempt to refer to within’ the language available to us: ‘our idiolect’ (Inan, 2012: 183). For Inan, conceptual curiosity has two components: first, an awareness of ignorance on a particular subject (which Plato expressed as ‘Meno’s Paradox’); and secondly, an ability to put this into words through a particular set of mental, conceptual, and linguistic abilities (Inan, 2012: 125). Paraphrasing Plato, he argues that ‘our aptitude for curiosity is essentially based on our ability to describe what is unknown’ (Inan, 2012: 67). To describe the unknown, ‘we use ostensible terms whose referents are known to construct inostensible descriptions whose referents are unknown’ (Inan, 2012: 67).

To understand curiosity, it is therefore necessary to understand the linguistic skills and practices through which people ask questions. Inan argues that curiosity-driven questions can take different forms including the conditional ‘if...then’ and the disjunctive, which addresses the truth of a

proposition such as ‘does light behave like a particle or a wave?’ (Inan, 2012: 119). Arguments such as these, formal and technical though they are, resonate with Richard Sennett’s more concrete observations and speculations about the significance of particular forms of communication and dialogical skills for what he terms empathetic curiosity. ‘Dialogic’ skills include ‘listening well, behaving tactfully, finding points of agreement and managing disagreement, or avoiding frustration in a difficult discussion’ (Sennett, 2012: 6). In everyday life and social research, ‘the listener’s empathy can be expressed by maintaining eye-contact even while keeping silent, conveying “I am attending intently to you” rather than “I know just what you feel”’ (Sennett 2012: 21). Stressing the significance of the subjunctive tense in this context, he argues that terms and phrases such as ‘possibly’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘I would have thought’ open up ‘space for experiment’ and interaction, which more declarative and assertive speech would have closed down (Sennett 2012: 22). The subjunctive illustrates a broader set of skills for curiosity, which include the ability to ask questions and pay attention to answers.

When the question takes centre stage, curiosity really comes into focus. If we are curious about curiosity, we will ask hard questions about questions, about what we ask and what we do not, how we ask, and how our questions are received and regarded. This speaks to questions posed above about whether curiosity is a subject and, if so, what kind of subject it is. It also establishes a basis for exploring why curiosity may be an *interesting* subject: what a more reflexive curiosity might achieve or, as Dillon (2013: 14) put it, why curiosity is worth talking about.

### **Why talk about curiosity?**

This discussion has brought curiosity into focus and identified at least three reasons for talking about it. The books reviewed here have shown that curiosity takes different forms in different places and

times, and this cautions against transhistorical generalisations about it. Gade's assertions that curiosity involves the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, usually by lone scholars, individuals possessed of innately romantic sensibility, have not stood up to the level of scrutiny afforded by the scope of this paper (and a more direct critique would have contested them further). Some other general claims about curiosity are more sustainable. First, curiosity involves a quality of attention, with a strong visual element. Second, this attentiveness expresses a relation of care, which encompasses both carefulness and also a particular kind of interest. In other words, we are curious about things we care about; conversely, there is no such thing as 'sheer' or 'mere' curiosity (Inan, 2012: 126). Third, curiosity revolves around questions. Finally, genuinely searching questions are not always welcomed, and this is reflected in the combative tone of debates about (but usually for) curiosity, and also in the ambivalent positions of curious people, who are variously affirmed and constrained, feted and demonised.

The first reason why we need to be interested in curiosity is because it has consequences. For example, curiosity-driven research can pay unexpected dividends, assuming social and/or economic 'relevance' and making an 'impact' (Phillips, 2010; Smith, 2010), for better or worse. Second, since curiosity has outcomes, it also brings responsibilities. The impacts of curiosity cannot always be anticipated, though Paul Rabinow (1996) suggests that it is important to try, in order to make judgements about the agenda and limits of curiosity-driven activities such as scientific research. Ethical curiosity, he argues, 'entails being curious about scientific curiosity and curious about one's own curiosity':

It leads one to thematize the form of life that surrounds, sustains, and undermines curiosity. Thus, even when claims are made to have discovered "the curiosity gene," the question of what kind of society has posed such questions to itself, why it has sought to produce this type of knowledge, will remain open. So, too, the question will remain of how to situate

oneself in relation to that knowledge, that society, and those goals. (Rabinow 1996: 170-171)

Inan frames the ethics of curiosity directly, asking whether curiosity is ‘a virtue’: ‘Is it required to lead a good life? Is it required to lead a moral life?’ (Inan, 2012: 185). He argues that an ethical or virtuous curiosity is defined variously by its outputs and its practices, and that curiosity is not necessarily virtuous in any straightforward way. ‘A good philosopher is almost by definition, a curious being,’ he suggests, complicating the question of what it means to be ‘good’ (Inan, 2012: 13). So, while curiosity raises ethical questions, it takes a reflexive curiosity to follow these questions through. This leads to further questions about the regulation of curiosity and the responsibilities of the curious. These responsibilities grow as it becomes increasingly possible to shake off the external constraints upon curiosity, including those presented by authorities and orthodoxies, legal and social rules and norms, religious and secular authorities. ‘Thought’s freedom’ brings responsibilities.

A third reason curiosity is worth talking about is because it has intrinsic value, alluded to in the subtitle of the exhibition and book discussed above: *‘the Pleasures of Knowing’*. Passion and pleasure are important drivers of curiosity, as each of the authors discussed in this paper have illustrated. Not only in their main texts, but also in acknowledgements, prefaces and margins, they declare personal commitments to asking and answering questions. Even the most analytical, Inan’s *Philosophy of Curiosity*, begins with a personal memory that illustrates the workings and value of curiosity. He remembers reading books for no particular reason and reflecting upon ‘the power and the beauty of curiosity’ (Inan, 2012: xii). Similarly, Zuss alludes to the allure of books, found on other peoples’ desks at the New York Public Library (Zuss, 2012: v). And Gade dedicates *Curiosity, Inquiry and the Geographical Imagination* ‘to all whose curiosity has driven them to formulate new knowledge about planet earth in its richness and diversity now and in the past’ (Gade, 2011: v). These personal stories remind us that curiosity is driven, in part, by the passions and pleasures of

learning and inquiry. To be curious about to curiosity is to follow these desires and convictions to their conclusions, and it is also to examine the extent to which these intellectual instincts – if that is what the pleasures, virtues and passions of knowing and uncovering the new entail – can be trusted. These are ambitious questions. Comprehensive answers have not been feasible within a paper of this length, nor within the five books upon which it is based, but this is appropriate, since each of us must answer these questions for ourselves, in contextually specific ways. It has been fitting for a discussion of curiosity to shift some attention answers to questions, and to pose some new questions about questions themselves, and what drives them, what constrains them, and where they may lead.

So there are many different reasons why curiosity is worth talking about. The most fundamental, cross-cutting these, is concerned with the nature of knowledge: with why and how we come to know the things we know. The focus on curiosity shifts some attention from the ways in which we answer questions, and do so differently in different historical, geographical and intellectual contexts, to the ways in which we ask these questions.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Jessica Dubow and Tariq Jazeel for conversations and comments, and to the readers and editors at *Theory Culture and Society* for the critical and constructive engagement.

### **References**

Benedict, B. (2001) *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Foucault, M. (1988) The Masked Philosopher: interview first published in *Le Monde*, April 6-7, 1980, in Kritzman, L. (ed.) *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan. New York: Routledge: 327-8.

Phillips, R. (2010) The impact agenda and geographies of curiosity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35(4): 447-452

Rabinow, P. (1996) *Essays on the Anthropology of Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sennett, R. (2012) *Together: the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*. London: Allen Lane.

Smith, N. (2010) Academic free fall. *Social Text*: <http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/impact/>

Wright, J. K. (1947) *Terrae incognitae*: the place of the imagination in geography. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 37: 1–15.