Work for the enquiring spirit

Richard Smith

There are whose study is of smells,
And to attentive schools rehearse
How something mixed with something else
Makes something worse.

Some cultivate in broths impure
The clients of our body - these,
Increasing without Venus, cure,
Or cause, disease.

Others the heated wheel extol,
And all its offspring, whose concern
Is how to make it farthest roll
And fastest turn.

Rudyard Kipling, ‘A translation: Horace Bk V, *Ode* 3’ (1922)

I Attentive schools

There seems to be at the present time almost universal agreement that curiosity in education is a fine thing. Notes of reservation are rate. Among its gifts to humankind are the following. It will lead to high academic achievement and is as important as intelligence in determining how well children perform academically (von Stumm *et al.* 2011); it is linked to ‘happiness, creativity, satisfying intimate relationships’, the overcoming of personal trauma and an increased sense that life has meaning (Kaufman 2017); it is associated with ‘tolerance of anxiety and uncertainty, positive emotions, humor, playfulness, out-of-box thinking, and a noncritical attitude’ (Price-Mitchell 2015). Beyond education, people with ‘strong curiosity traits’ make particularly creative problem-solvers in the workplace (Hardy *et* al. 2017). Sometimes its benefits are contrasted with a dystopian picture of the school classroom as a place of deadening routine, where children are taught to write the correct answers to questions in standardised tests, without being given the opportunity to ask questions themselves, or think about why anyone might be interested in these questions at all. Sometimes curiosity seems to amount to nothing more than the desire to learn in the first

place, in which case its status as an educational good is little more than a truism. At other times a more substantial, if controversial, vision of education seems to be at issue: the child's role as active inquirer should be stimulated by 'discovery learning', where the classroom is rich in resources and the teacher is more of a guide to the child in search of knowledge and explanation than someone whose job is to stock his or her mind as quickly and efficiently as possible. The implicit context seems usually to be the science classroom rather than the teaching of any other subject, leaving the reader puzzled by how what might be true of the best way of learning about earthworms applies to the mastery of German irregular verbs.

The vacuity of much of this genre can be illustrated through examination of a particular example. On an internet site called 'edutopia', an arm of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, Stenger (2014) offers to explain 'Why curiosity enhances learning'. The opening remarks tell the reader that 'curiosity makes learning more effective and enjoyable. Curious students not only ask questions, but also actively seek out the answers' (ibid.). It is easy to nod along with these apparently uncontentious statements, but there are problems here. It is not clear whether this is a causal claim – if you inspire curiosity in your students then they will ask questions and search for the answers – or an attempt to spell out what curiosity means or involves. If it is a causal claim we have not learned anything about what curiosity is itself: just what is this 'curiosity' that triggers questioning and searching? If it is an unpacking of the concept of curiosity what we are told does not amount to much – curious students ask questions! – with the odd rider that they look for the answers too, as if we might have been under the impression that while curious people ask questions they are not much interested in finding the solutions. As if in an attempt to pre-empt the criticism that it's all rather obvious, the words of the opening sentence, 'curiosity makes learning more effective and enjoyable', are prefixed by 'It's no secret that' (ibid.).

This all seems to amount to little more than saying students will do better academically if the teacher gets them interested in what they are studying. This is indeed no secret, nor is it at all surprising. There are however what might be taken to be two claims of greater substance here. The first is that when curiosity is 'piqued by the right question' people become better at learning and remembering not only material that they are interested in but also unrelated material that they don't find interesting. This is because 'curiosity puts the brain in a state that allows it to learn and retain any kind of information, like a vortex that sucks in what you are motivated to learn, and also everything around it' (ibid.). But this too is no secret. Most teachers are familiar with the idea that their students 'learn and retain' dry but necessary facts

better if a good proportion of the lesson is lively. Kipling, in the stanzas that prefixes this paper, reminds us that the chemistry teacher who shows the class how to make a truly awesome stink-bomb, the biology teacher who makes the asexual reproduction of bacteria sexy (so to speak) or the physics teacher who relates acceleration and motion to the latest attempts at breaking the land speed record, will find her students more attentive to the duller parts of the subject that need to be learned for the next test or examination.

The second suggestion of substance appears in the introduction of brains and their states, in contrast to people who have minds and ask questions. Neuroscience is invoked in an attempt to give substance to this hymn to curiosity. Curiosity 'sparks increased activity in the hippocampus', which is involved in creating memories, and in 'the brain circuit that is related to reward and pleasure' (ibid.). But the only thing this tells us is that when students' curiosity is aroused they find their work more interesting (brain circuits relating to reward and pleasure are engaged) and they learn and retain things better (there is increased activity in the hippocampus). The important thing to notice is that the bracketed material in the sentence above adds nothing at all that is useful or illuminating from an educational point of view. Neuroscience operates here, as so often in educational discourse (Smeyers 2016) as nothing more than a form of rhetoric, in much the same way as the advertiser's claim that a product is 'scientifically proved' to kill germs or whiten your teeth. The vacuity is tacitly acknowledged, just as in 'It's no secret' at the beginning of the article, by the admission that 'most teachers already instinctively know the importance of fostering inquisitive minds, but to have science back it up is undeniably satisfying' (ibid.). Now if neuroscience added anything here – if its language was more perspicuous or revealing in this context – the author should of course replace talk of satisfaction with talk of the firing of brain circuits relating to reward and pleasure. But of course putting it in this way would be circular and the lack of substance would be even more plain.

II A brief history of curiosity

The history of attitudes to curiosity brings much illumination. Curiosity had to struggle to secure its place as a respectable attitude to knowledge against elements of classical thought and the Christian traditions. The ancient Greek world was suspicious of curiosity as exemplified in several myths (for example of Pandora and Psyche). It was inclined to link curiosity with pride or *hubris*, as exemplified by Oedipus whose obsessive quest for the

identity of his natural parents ended in disaster. The charges against Socrates included that he conducted inquiries into things beneath the earth (that is, concerning the afterlife) and things in the heavens (that is, he studied astronomy, whose connections to mathematics and geometry were of great interest to his contemporaries). It is significant that part of his defence was to insist on how little he knew, although the form in which he maintained this hardly helped his cause in the Athenian lawcourt: he observed that if the Delphic oracle was right in calling him the wisest of all men, that could only mean he knew better than others just how little knowledge he possessed. I have argued elsewhere (Smith 2016) that we should read the dialogues of Plato, where Socrates is regularly shown leaving his interlocutors at an *impasse* or *aporia*, without offering them a solution or positive doctrine of his own, as a response to a crisis of knowingness in Greek culture of the late fifth and early fourth centuries: an over-confident expectation of finding answers and learning effective and profitable techniques (from the itinerant sophists, for example). It is of course ironic that Socrates was accused of being complicit in this knowingness rather than as being an early diagnoser of it. It is tempting to speculate on the links between uncritical adulation of curiosity, as illustrated above, and a crisis of knowingness in our own culture, where knowledge is widely assumed to be easily available on the internet, and education at all levels is widely cast less as an exploration of the unknown or imperfectly known than as an efficient communication of what is already known – to the point where it can be set out as the aims of the lesson or lecture, followed by different ways of checking, in tests and the writing of essays, that it is now known, in this way of knowing, by the student or consumer of education, busy swallowing it in easily digested portions.

Christian attitudes to curiosity had at their root the sin of stealing the apple from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3) – more easily identifiable as a sin, no doubt, if it was committed first by a woman, with the traditional frailties of her sex. Forbidden fruit was associated with forbidden knowledge: knowledge that ordinary mortals were never intended to have, that would puff them up with pride and vanity, and indulge 'the lust of the eyes'. Eve had seen 'that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise' (Authorized Version, Genesis 3. 6). St Paul added his authority to this tradition, asking the Corinthians rhetorically 'Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?' (ibid. Corinthians 1. 1. 20). Augustine saw curiosity at its worst 'when people study the operations of nature which lie beyond our grasp' and when 'the investigators simply desire knowledge for its own sake' (*Confessions* 10.35, 1991). Thus

‘worldly knowledge’ became identified with error and heresy, and with magic, alchemy and witchcraft.

The story of the redemption of curiosity is an absorbing one (see Harrison 2001). Francis Bacon argued in *The Advancement of Learning*, first published in 1605, that ‘worldly knowledge’ cannot be beyond us: God has created the world to accord with our capacity to investigate and understand it. Furthermore Bacon was prepared to cite scripture against scripture: we read at Daniel 12. 4 that ‘Many shall go to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased’. Bacon’s frontispiece to his book *The Great Instauration* (1620) depicts a ship sailing between two classical columns (emblematic, it is usually noted, of the straits of Gibraltar) out into the open sea, the vast domain of ‘worldly knowledge’. The date of the book is significant: this is the period of competitive European exploration and colonisation, and the illustration together with its Latin version of Daniel 12. 4 (*Multi pertransibunt & augebitur scientia*) serves as an urgent reminder that worldly riches are at stake alongside our attitudes to worldly knowledge and their philosophical and biblical bases. Yet even Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, finds it politic to make concessions to the older and sceptical tradition, which we can infer is still powerful in his time:

> For men have entered into a desire of learning and knowledge, sometimes upon a natural curiosity and inquisitive appetite; sometimes to entertain their minds with variety and delight; sometimes for ornament and reputation; and sometimes to enable them to victory of wit and contradiction; and most times for lucre and profession; and seldom sincerely to give a true account of their gift of reason, to the benefit and use of men... (1885, p. 42)

Harrison maps the complex process by which curiosity was rehabilitated in the eighteenth century, to the point where Hume could define curiosity simply as ‘love of truth’ or ‘love of knowledge’, and claim that all knowledge derives from curiosity, without which humankind is condemned to ‘stupid’ and ‘barbaric’ ignorance (2001 pp. 287 ff). He shows convincingly that the effect of Bacon’s writings and those of people who followed him was to separate the acquisition of knowledge from the moral qualities of the person whom we would now call the researcher or scientist, the growing use of these terms testifying to the supposed capacity of the seeker after knowledge to transcend moral considerations altogether. If scientific methods and procedures could be set out with sufficient certainty, then curiosity could follow its natural path ‘as if by machinery’, in Bacon’s words (cp Smith 2006), with the corollary,

attractive to many, that anybody armed with the right manual could follow their curiosity to a successful conclusion – or, to put it in terms familiar in our own time, research could be made researcher-proof. The joining of this with the reminder, less corollary than selling-point, of what could be gained by harnessing new views about the drivers of knowledge to the activities of the navies and trading-companies of the nascent European super-powers does much to explain the new status of curiosity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Not all is straightforward in this account, however, as we have seen in Bacon's prevarication above. Harrison writes (*ibid.* p. 283) that the rehabilitation of curiosity was still far from secure in the middle of the seventeenth century, when Hobbes associated it with greed, although as Harrison again notes (ibid.) Hobbes associated it, oddly, with wonder too. Richard Holmes titles his 2008 book on the explorations and scientific investigations of Banks, Herschel, Davy and others in the mid- to late-eighteenth century *The Age of Wonder*; he makes no mention of curiosity. It is not clear whether Holmes and others who have written about the 'romantic science' of this period regard 'wonder' as effectively the new name for scientific 'curiosity', influenced by the wider romantic movement, or whether Holmes in particular is indicating a new phase marked by the 'reverent contemplation' of nature, 'precise' but at the same time characterised by an 'almost sacred' attention to things observed (Holmes 2008 p. 249n.). There is clearly some tension here with Harrison's view that curiosity – even if it went underground as a prime motivating force of science – marks a deep reluctance to give way to moral and religious or quasi-religious forms of thinking. And of course the Baconian insistence that science can and should proceed 'as if by machinery' can be read as marking less a principled abandonment of interest in the moral qualities of the curious individual than an interest in *different* moral qualities, in particular the willingness of the ordinary man and woman to beware the common 'idols' of humankind, to sign up to the standards of 'scientific method' and its promise of progress, and to refuse to be deflected from the path of true knowledge thus revealed.

III The instability of virtue

It is against this background that we can understand the otherwise puzzling lack of recent philosophical interest in curiosity as a moral virtue (see Baumgarten 2001 for a welcome exception). The philosophers of modernity in the Anglophone tradition were always ready to

yield to the power and prestige of science. They were often happy to dissociate themselves from the theological roots of their discipline, and from the Aristotelian tradition of examining vices and virtues that might draw attention to the less acceptable forms or aspects of curiosity. Thus it came about that the only question to be asked about curiosity seemed to be whether the curious person has their protocols and methods in order: as if curiosity that has established its procedural soundness has done all it needs to do in order to go about its business on a separate and higher metaphysical plane.[1] Yet only a little thought reminds us that in our daily lives we often identify certain vices of curiosity. It may be morbid, prurient, obsessive or in other ways unhealthy. The person who thinks they are merely being curious may strike us as meddlesome or nosy, or in search of some way of exercising power over us. Taking this thought further, we are concerned about intrusions on our privacy, the growth of surveillance and the enormous amount of data about us collected by agencies of all kinds, often for commercial reasons.

The attempt to establish curiosity as an unconditional good beyond the realm of moral evaluation can scarcely survive these considerations. And, as was clear from the claims of our contemporary educational cheer-leaders for curiosity in § I above, they effectively readmit curiosity's moral dimension by linking it closely with many of the values illuminated by moral philosophy, such as happiness, friendship of 'satisfying intimate relationships', and an apprehension of life as meaningful. We might in this context note too that the assumption of a unique connection between curiosity and science, often invoked in the attempt to render curiosity immune to moral criticism, is wholly untenable. Alberto Manguel (2016), for example, thought the natural environment for the exercise of his curiosity was not a laboratory but his personal library of over 30,000 books. Personal relationships too, as I shall illustrate in the next section, are a field where curiosity in its many forms is thoroughly – and sometimes all too much – at home.

Another way of making this point about the ineliminability of the moral dimension of curiosity is to note that curiosity offers fine examples of what might be called the instability of the virtues, that is, the way that what we identify as the mean – in Aristotle's way of putting it – the right kind and degree of curiosity, or courtesy or humility, is essentially disputable. Courtesy, for example, may seem to be incontestably a virtue, and no doubt it is what we will continue to call the mean in this field of behaviour. Its accompanying vices are the 'too muchness' of insincerity or obsequiousness and the 'too little' of brusqueness or plain rudeness. But some will see obsequiousness where others see courtesy, and these

perspectives change over time and from culture to culture.[2] A second example: you cannot teach children humility without some parents complaining they don't want their children learning that it's alright to have people walk all over them, and no doubt other parents saying that children these days should learn to be more deferential to their elders. And, as we have seen, curiosity has swung between vice and virtue for millennia.

We look to philosophy, of course, to help us make sense of the unstable field of the virtues and vices. But we look to literature too, for this instability is its central subject from what we think of as the start of European literature. Homer's *Iliad* begins with the poet calling on the Muse to sing of the 'destructive wrath', in one respected translation, of Achilles, son of Peleus, and the woes it brought down on the Greeks fighting in the war against Troy. Achilles had gone out with a raiding-party of his Special Forces, the Myrmidons. Finding a girl, Briseis, working as an attendant at a temple of Apollo, he appropriated her as part of the legitimate spoil of war and his by right. However Agamemnon, the supreme commander of the Greek forces at Troy, asserted his seniority and took the girl as his. We might pause to mark the euphemisms of 'appropriating' and 'taking' here. Achilles in his anger refused to fight alongside the Greeks even though he knew of the prophecy that Troy would never fall unless Achilles joined the battle. Apollo, whose temple Achilles had violated, sent a plague to afflict the Greek army, but still Achilles would not relent.

The opening two lines of the *Iliad* are (my translation, as neutral as I can make it): 'Sing, goddess, of the destructive wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus, which brought down many woes on the Greeks'. The first word is *mēnin*, 'wrath': the poet calls on the goddess or muse to sing – to tell the story – of it, as if the task requires more than human talents. Part of the difficulty, or task, is that it is not clear how we are to think of this 'wrath'. Does Achilles have every right to be enraged by Agamemnon's high-handedness, especially in the 'shame culture' of the Homeric heroes, where honour is the highest virtue and losing face the worst fate of all (Dodds, 1951)? Or should we think of his *mēnin* as an adolescent sulk on an epic scale, in its consequences for his fellow soldiers quite out of proportion to the loss of Briseis, or even as something like psychotic rage? The translations wrestle with the problem. Versions include 'destructive rage' (1660), the distinctly mild 'discontent' (1676), 'stern resentment' (1807), 'vengeance, deep and deadly' (1864), 'anger' (1898), 'bitter rancour' (1938), 'maniac rage' (1990), 'rage, black and murderous' (1997), 'calamitous wrath' (2015). The variations remind us that the Greeks were working out, in around the eighth century BCE, what to make of the behaviour of an Achilles and an Agamemnon while their culture itself changed around

them. That is to say, the *Iliad* is a sustained meditation on *mēnin* that accepts there is no one, stable thing here but lability, almost a plurality, a quality that looks like a vice in one light, but more like a virtue in the scheme of values of a bronze age warrior ('stern resentment', 'vengeance') in another.

The instability or ambiguity[3] of Odysseus's character traits is similarly highlighted in the *Odyssey*, which begins with the invocation of the Muse to speak of the *polytropos* man, the adjective variously translated as 'versatile', 'shifty', 'resourceful' 'of many ways', 'crafty'. Emily Wilson (2017), in the first published translation of the Odyssey by a woman, chooses 'complicated'. There is a strong element of curiosity in the character of Odysseus. He insists on investigating the island of the Cyclops, against the wishes of his crew, and it is his blinding of the Cyclops, who calls on his father, the sea god Poseidon, for revenge, that is the source of many of the disasters on his voyage home to Ithaca.[4] He has his ears stopped with wax so that he alone among his crew can listen to the song of the Sirens, which lures seafarers onto the rocks. The third line of the poem tells us that Odysseus 'visited the cities of many people and learned their ways' (my translation), leaving it open at this point whether he is merely a sight-seeing tourist or a man who knows that he needs to learn more about ways of living and different kinds of communities before he is fit to return to his own kingdom of Ithaca and restore order there.

In case this exploration of the ambiguity of the virtues might seem peculiar to the early phases of European literature, we should note that it was a central feature of the novel as it emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and is still a prominent feature of the novel today. Tom Jones, in Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), is both wild, impetuous and sexually rapacious, and at the same time – to see things in a different light – he is natural, spontaneous and unrepressed. Jane Austen is of course the great explorer of the virtues and vices: of what is the right degree of 'pride' (that is, of what is proper concern and what is excessive concern for one's status) and of where quickness of apprehension becomes precipitancy in weighing up people and situations, the 'prejudice' of the title (*Pride and Prejudice*, 1813). The novel form (alongside films and plays, and certain forms of poetry such as the epic) is well-fitted for the task here since, unlike the brief and often contrived examples that philosophers tend to offer, the novel has the space to illustrate the ambiguity of the virtues and vices, and the parts they play in how we live with one another.[5]

IV Living with curiosity

Kingsley Amis's 1960 novel, *Take a Girl Like You,* has the ambivalence of curiosity as one of its central themes. The 'taking' of the title, if we pause to reflect on it, alerts us to the way that other themes of the novel, including callousness, power and sexual rapacity, tend to be connected to curiosity in different ways. And we might recall the 'taking' of Briseis the temple attendant – that image of purity and innocence – first by Achilles and then by Agamemnon, in *The Iliad* (above).

Jenny Bunn is an attractive 20 year-old who has moved from her home in the north of England to begin her first post as a primary schoolteacher in a town not far from London. She has brought with her a set of categories, ranging from 'smashers' at one end to 'duds' and 'stooges' at the other, into which she tries to put the men she meets. She is especially curious about Dick Thompson, who with his wife runs the boarding house where Jenny lodges. He was 'obviously a nice enough man', because the headteacher of Jenny's new school had made this arrangement for her.

> But she did wish she understood more about him and how he had come to be as he was. He was too kind and cheerful, and not badly dressed enough … and not really old enough either, to be the kind of man to take in lodgers. He had treated her almost like a guest, or at least a relation. (p. 13)

And how, Jenny wonders, could he be an auctioneer as the headteacher had told her, when he was so seldom out of the house? It turns out to be crucial to one of the novel's sub-plots that Jenny, together with the other central characters, does not wonder enough – does not allow her curiosity to take her far – with this question. It emerges near the end of the novel that Dick is colluding with a wealthy businessman called Ormerod to defraud an elderly couple by selling (to Ormerod, by implication) some of their most valuable possessions at knock-down prices. Jenny however is much more concerned to confirm her rating of Dick as a 'stooge'. She watches him repairing a damaged cigarette with a piece of adhesive paper.

> This put it absolutely beyond all possible doubt that he was a stooge, even though she had still not a chance … to notice whether or not he carried a suitcase with his forefinger crooked over the lid to stop it flying open if the catches both snapped at once. Earlier, there had been valuable clues in the way he held his cigarette in his first

> two fingers as well as in his mouth when it was being lit for him, and in the way he sometimes wore a white shirt with an open neck. (p. 102)

Of course it is important for a young woman to weigh up the men she meets: she is concerned to work out whether they are likely to prove unreliable or even dangerous on the one hand, or potential partners or husbands on the other. On meeting an attractive man called Patrick, Jenny's curiosity about him seems to extend to shrewd self-criticism – to curiosity about her own curiosity, we might say:

> The fact had to be faced, though, that Patrick's hand had a ring, gold or getting on that way, on its little finger, and rings on men had something flashy and common about them. Or so she had thought in the past; but Patrick himself was obviously none of these things, and here most likely was another of those rather young and narrow-minded ideas of hers which more experience of the world and meeting all these new people were going to teach her to do away with. (p. 41)

This passage is written in what is called free indirect discourse (or style). The omniscient narrator has disappeared. We are not told directly what Jenny unambiguously thought: we are admitted to her insights and are invited to assess them, with all their evasions and self-deceptions. The style is particularly well suited, as Jane Austen knew, to revealing the complexities of the virtues and vices. The sequence of thoughts here is particularly vivid: 'Got to face the facts – flashy and common' (this, as we see in other places in the novel, is very much how Jenny's father would have spoken); 'Ah, but Patrick isn't flashy or common – that's the old me talking – my immature self which is going to start growing up'. The irony here is that what seems to be emerging wisdom and self-criticality on Jenny's part is little more than a rationalisation of her strong attraction to Patrick. Her first reaction to seeing the ring on his finger, that he must be 'flashy and common', would have served her better: towards the end of the novel he takes advantage of her when she is drunk or, as we would put it now, he rapes her.

It is not – to be clear – that Jenny's powers of curiosity are insufficiently astute. Here for example she is trying to make sense of this new kind of people – the Southerners – that she finds herself among. She reflected on 'how hard it was to finish a sentence in these parts. Everybody seemed to be putting too much energy into being themselves to listen to others' (p. 124). The Southerners' sophistication seems to contrast with Jenny's naivety. But she has in fact diagnosed a perfectly Sartrean example of *mauvaise foi*, like the waiter who acts the

part of a waiter (Sartre 1993 pp. 167-169). The point is that curiosity, like other aspects of human understanding, as Bacon puts it in *Novum Organum* (1878, XLIX), ‘receives an infusion from the will and affections’. It can be recruited by self-deception, wishful thinking, vanity, pride and self-interest as well as by the disinterested urge to make sense of the world.

As I mentioned above, the ambivalence of curiosity is especially well illustrated by many of the characters’ curiosity, but lack of sufficient curiosity, about the source of Ormerod’s wealth. On a visit to Ormerod’s house Jenny and Graham, who is Patrick’s friend and flat-mate, are alone while their host leaves the room to fetch some drinks. To fill an awkward pause Jenny says, ‘What an amazing house this is, isn’t it?’ Graham agrees.

> ‘The money that must have gone into all this. And the upkeep must be something quite staggering. I’d like a wee glance at the details of Mr Ormerod’s monthly income, I must say. Where it all derives from, in particular’. Then he quietened down, like somebody who knows he has let on to being a bit too interested in how they manage the floggings in prisons. (p. 119)

The suggestion here is that Graham is ashamed of his prurience, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as ‘excessive or inappropriate curiosity, especially about sexual matters’. But there is another reason for his failure to follow up his curiosity. He, like all the main characters of *Take a Girl Like You*, benefits from accepting Ormerod’s hospitality – especially the meals and drinks he buys in restaurants and pubs. Ormerod, we note, had made possible this conversation between Jenny and Graham by leaving the room to bring them drinks. The characters benefit from Ormerod’s largesse too much to risk compromising it by pressing the questions of how he manages to pay for it all.

Prurience is by definition where curiosity becomes a vice. Graham’s prurience also emerges in the arrangement by which he absents himself from the shared flat when Patrick needs it to entertain a girlfriend. The pay-back for this is that Graham expects full ‘sexual reports’ (p. 77) of these episodes. Patrick finds Graham’s requests for these ‘irreducibly unwelcome’. But the arrangement is such a useful one that he manages to convince himself that ‘It had only the most distant connexions with prurience – and who said prurience was a bad thing anyway?’ (ibid.) The reports might even prove useful to Graham when he finally has a girlfriend of his own. Patrick’s reflections on this occur during a car journey with Graham where a brief flash of curiosity on Patrick’s part concerning where Ormerod gets his money from becomes lost in sexual banter. Graham tells Patrick that Ormerod says he is a company director. Patrick

responds: ‘I thought you only got that in the *News of the World* with chaps up [ie in court] for going to bed with girls of fourteen’ (ibid.). At this point the traffic lights change and Patrick realises he has triggered an imminent request from Graham for the latest ‘sexual reports’.

At the beginning of the novel we learned that Jenny had been grateful that at her interview for her teaching job the headteacher did not question her about her reasons for coming south. (She needed to escape from an unhappy relationship with a man in her home town.) In the final chapter she comes back to her boarding house from the party where she has had too much to drink and been raped by Patrick. She finds three people waiting for her: Mrs Sinclair, the headteacher, a fellow teacher, Elsie, and the father of one her pupils, a vulnerable boy to whom Jenny had offered kindness and support. While Jenny was at the party the boy had been out playing with other children, fell from a wall and sprained his ankle. After he had been brought home he began to cry and to ask to see his teacher, Miss Bunn. Though her duties hardly extended to the middle of the night Jenny is dismayed that she had not been there for the boy. She offers to go him immediately, but Miss Sinclair says that the boy will have settled down by now and it would not be sensible to disturb him. She and the boy’s father make to depart.

> Jenny said urgently: ‘Please let me come, Miss Sinclair’.
>
> The two exchanged looks, Miss Sinclair’s saying that she knew the kind of girl Jenny was and at the same time that she did not understand Jenny’s look, which said that she was not that kind of girl. Then Miss Sinclair said: ‘There’s no need to put yourself out, Miss Bunn. I’m sure you must have lots of things to do’. She gave Jenny the up-and-down treatment in a shortened form…

Miss Sinclair and the boy’s father leave. Elsie stays behind for a moment, to explain to Jenny Miss Sinclair’s reason for humiliating her:

> ‘I saw that type in the A.T.S.[6] in the war. They’re always down on the ones that look as if they’re having a good time’.

The headteacher had not been showing tact and discretion – a proper incuriosity – at the interview. She had, perhaps not wholly consciously, been ensuring she one day had an opportunity to indulge her jealousy of a younger woman who was attractive to men. In her own way she too was ‘taking’ Jenny, in that significant word from the novel’s title: appropriating her to satisfy her own desires. And she sees Jenny not as a unique individual

but merely as one of a class of girls she knows only too well: ‘she knew the *kind* of girl Jenny was’ (above, my italics); and she rejects Jenny’s mute plea to be acknowledged as an individual and not one of a kind: ‘Jenny’s look, which said that she was not that kind of girl’ (above). The thought must now occur to the reader, if it has not done so already, that for Patrick too any other girl of Jenny’s kind – young and sexually desirable – would have served him equally well.

Take a Girl Like You thus reveals above all the predatory side of curiosity. The only central character who does not display this is Jenny. But her curiosity about the people she meets, while driven by the more innocent motive of self-protection, is naïve (the division of men into ‘duds’, ‘smashers’ and so on), and she readily modifies or abandons it at the prompting of her own amorous feelings. Incuriosity does no better in the novel, being brought into action or otherwise, again, as the characters’ self-interest dictates. The Aristotelian framework of the virtues works well here – though of course it is not invoked explicitly – even if (perhaps particularly because) it shows the Aristotelian golden mean in curiosity as hard to achieve. The uncritical adulation of curiosity, and the idea that it could somehow transcend moral considerations altogether (above), emerges with no credit: it constitutes complacency about curiosity, whose dangers are shown here with particular clarity.

Lastly, the question of just why curiosity should be considered a virtue at all, which Baumgarten (2001) seems to find puzzling, has its answer, and the extended example supplied by *Take a Girl Like You* proves its worth. It is simply that people who have the right kind and amount or degree of curiosity stand a better chance of living well together than people who do not.

V Gentler knowledge

I have said little here directly about our relations with the natural world and the place of curiosity in that. This is largely because the same issues occur here as they do in our relations with other people. Our curiosity about rocks and birds and streams can be, and has generally been in the course of human history, predatory: a kind of snatching at the non-human world around us for answers and the benefits – food, medicines and new sources of energy, for example – that may be found in them. There are also the awards and laurels that go with these discoveries. Perhaps the academic defence of ‘blue skies’ research, also called ‘curiosity driven’ research or thinking, is from time to time driven by more than pure curiosity. In any

case significant advances in medicine and the other sciences come from this kind of research and vastly improve our lives and postpone our deaths, irrespective of the kind of curiosity that drives them. The incuriosity recommended by early writers such as Augustine, echoes of which can still be heard today in some of the objections to genetic testing and engineering, rests on shaky moral grounds insofar as it amounts to a refusal to alleviate known suffering on the basis of a supposed veto by a God whose existence is entirely unproven. Francis Bacon's response, that if God created the world he also created humankind equipped with the capacity to investigate and understand it (above), also seems fatal to the case sometimes made against curiosity on religious grounds.

I make this point explicit (at the cost of making it rather crudely) because in what remains of this chapter I want to suggest that what might be summarised as 'acquisitive' curiosity has occluded a tradition, or a set of traditions connected in complex ways, characterised by, as Baumgarten puts it, virtues such as 'receptivity, acceptance, openness, attentiveness and even reverence' (p. 18). These traditions are some way from the organised, established religion and its spokesmen to whom Bacon was responding. Traditions that value these virtues include the New England transcendentalism of Thoreau, who writes of how we find a better way of understanding the animals around us by letting them come to us rather than going in search of them: 'You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns' (Thoreau 1884, ch. 12, 'Brute neighbors'). They include various shades of romanticism, prominently including William Blake and the Lakeland poets. These traditions are easily mocked and dismissed, and equally easily commercialised and marketed. But we register their force when we flinch at the sight of someone picking a rare orchid, or even ordinary wild flowers when they are abundant, or a person taking birds' eggs for his collection. The practice of 'bagging Munros', that is climbing all the mountains in Scotland over 3000 feet in height, seems emblematic of an attitude to nature that has its roots in acquisitiveness, as the crudity of 'bagging' suggests (compare talk of 'conquering' Mount Everest). The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as one of the meanings of the verb 'to bag': 'To put game killed into a bag; *also*, to kill game'. Climbing all 282 Munros (and recording your 'exploits', as one internet site puts it[7]), no doubt satisfies the urge to compete and list your achievements, the targets you have hit as if you were shooting deer. Yet to treat the mountains in the spirit of a 'bagger', who sounds as if he is more interested in himself and his feats, seems somehow disrespectful to the mountains, which can be known, attended to, in their individuality,

Nan Shepherd's book *The Living Mountain* offers a quite different way of standing in relation to the natural world. It was written in the mid-1940s, put to one side and not published until 1977 (by Aberdeen University Press) and it was largely unknown until it was reprinted in 2011 by Canongate Press with an astute introduction by Robert Macfarlane. The book is a record of and a reflection (both nouns here are inadequate) on Shepherd's experience of the Cairngorm Mountains which she lived close by and visited (climbed, walked over) constantly. The book begins:

> Summer on the high plateau can be as delectable as honey; it can also be a roaring scourge. To those who love the place, both are good, since both are part of its essential nature. And it is to know its essential nature that I am seeking here. To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living. That is not done easily nor in an hour. It is a tale too slow for the impatience of our age…Yet it has its own rare value. It is, for one thing, a corrective of glib assessment: one never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it. However often I walk on them, these hills hold astonishment for me. There is no getting accustomed to them. (p. 1)

The language is at once accurate and both evocative and mystical. The top of the mountain is not a peak: it is a plateau. There is no peak or summit to 'bag' or conquer.[8] Although Shepherd seeks the 'essential nature' of the mountain, that essence has already been shown to be no one thing: it is both honey and roaring scourge. The knowledge at stake is not something to be acquired in conventional ways; it is not, we might say, 'cognitive' at all. It is 'a process of living' – it *is*, which is to say it is not a result of such a process. There is no 'glib assessment' to be had, no summary, categorisation or easy comparison with other mountains: the process of living with the mountain, of going *into* it as a dark and mysterious place (the word *into* occurs often in this context in the book) rather than up it, perhaps on well-established routes marked on a map, is itself a corrective to our too-ready, 'glib' ways of apprehending nature. Time does not bring increasing familiarity with the mountain: there is no 'getting accustomed' to it. Curiosity is not required here because that would involve articulating a question, would involve at least knowing what it is one wants to know about the mountain, as one might be curious to know just where on the mountain the River Dee has its source.

> Often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend with no intention but to be with him. (p. 15)

It is no criticism or rejection of curiosity to note that there are other and gentler modes of knowing, ones that make talk of 'knowing' itself seem inadequate (Smith 2016). It is also worth observing that these ways often apply to people, as Shepherd implies in the quotation above. Perhaps we might invert her spirit of 'being with the mountain' and think of being with a friend in the way that one visits a mountain.[9]

VI The tranquil spirit

Even incuriosity, which emerges so badly from *Take a Girl Like You* and is rightly regarded in general as an abrogation of one's obligation to take note of the world and act on it, may be part of a worthwhile life of a certain sort. The ancient Epicureans distinguished an important aspect of *eudaimonia* or well-being which they called *ataraxia*, meaning the tranquillity of a mind free from worry and distress. Kipling seems to praise it in the final three stanzas of the poem that prefixes this chapter. Here he writes, again in the persona of the Roman poet Horace,[10] as one who, having rejected the intellectual rigours of a life devoted to science, values a quiet life on his farm, unworried by the future with its prospect that his patron, Maecenas, might require Horace to accompany him on a journey to Brundusium (the modern Brindisi) which, we need to realise, would have been long, uncomfortable and dangerous.

> Me, much incurious if the hour
> Present, or to be paid for, brings
> Me to Brundusium by the power
> Of wheels or wings;
>
> Me, in whose breast no flame hath burned
> Life-long, save that by Pindar lit,
> Such lore leaves cold. I am not turned
> Aside to it
>
> More than when, sunk in thought profound
> Of what the unaltering Gods require,
> My steward (friend but slave) brings round
> Logs for my fire.

The picture of the poet as one who has achieved the tranquillity of caring for little but poetry (the flame lit by the Greek poet Pindar) and his duty to the Gods, sitting by his fire on his

farm, is undercut by the repeated 'Me' at the beginning of three of the first six lines, with its suggestion that his incuriosity or *ataraxia* is coloured by self-absorption. The rural idyll, we notice, is maintained by a slave who brings wood to feed the fire. He may occupy the respectable position of steward of the farm, and the speaker of the poem may think of him as a friend, but he is a slave, and we are reminded gently of the power relationship by the word 'My' at the beginning of the penultimate line, echoing the three occurrences of 'Me' earlier. The words 'steward (friend but slave)' seem both to insist on the power relationship, as if to say that this man is in the final analysis a slave, and to register a degree of discomfort with it, as if to ask how this man can be steward and friend if he is a slave, or how he can be a slave if he is steward and friend.

The costs of winning this state of being incurious suggest that it has not finally been achieved at all: insecurity masked by self-absorption and a degree of anxiety about the slave who has gained the power of a trusted servant seem to seethe beneath the surface. The attentive reader now wonders about the first three stanzas of the poem, which – in a rather patrician manner, we may think, now that we have a better understanding of the character who speaks to us here – spoke disparagingly of the sciences and by implication of an attitude to the world driven by curiosity. That world, we seem to hear, may cause us to long for the life of the incurious poet on his farm; but our insight into the self-deception that such a life involves makes us look with fresh respect on the laboratory and classroom of the curious scientist, rapacious in the quest for knowledge though he or she may be. The poem depicts a constant tension between the too-muchness and too-littleness of curiosity, with no clear path to the Aristotelian mean: as if to say, there is work for the enquiring spirit as we sort out the place of curiosity in understanding how to live our lives well.

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NOTES

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[1] It is no great distance from here to today's university Ethics Committees, in science and social science departments at any rate, that largely confine themselves to procedural issues such as anonymising data and storing it securely, and ignore wider ethical questions, such as whether it is justifiable to spend public money on this or that project, or to take up the time of 'research subjects' with interviews and questionnaires, as beyond their remit.
[2] Holding a door open for a woman, for instance, is sometimes regarded in London or New York today less as courtesy than as sexism. Strangers are still treated with the courtesy due to a guest in many parts of rural Greece, but seldom in London.
[3] I have used these words, together with 'lability' and others, interchangeably: ambiguity results from instability and so on.
[4] Zuss (2012 p. 39) identifies one of the ships shown in the frontispiece to Bacon's *The Great Instauration* (see above) as the ship of Odysseus. Zuss offers no evidence for this, and the disasters of Odysseus's voyage makes him an unlikely model for the buccaneering explorer and colonist of the seventeenth century.
[5] Some elements of this section appeared in my paper, 'Incorrigible plurality: truth, literature and interpretation', given at the conference *Philosophy of education as a lived experience: navigating through dichotomies of thought and action*, Tilos, Greece, July 2017. I am grateful for criticism and comments from the participants there.
[6] Auxiliary Territorial Service: the women's branch of the British Army during World War II.
[7] https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/munros/
[8] This does not stop some regarding the Cairngorms as a series of Monros, for 'bagging' purposes.
[9] My thanks to Anne Pirrie for introducing me to *The Living Mountain.*
[10] To avoid disappointment: the reader will look in vain for the original Horace ode that Kipling is 'translating' here.