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Curiosity and Pleasure

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It is a commonplace that natural or intellectual curiosity is valuable: it is encouraged in children, esteemed in scientists, protected in academia. But how might we understand this value that curiosity is thought to have? On one view, this will depend upon the kind of thing curiosity is; and there are good reasons to suppose that curiosity is an *emotional* response that is in some sense directed towards the truth. This view, however, runs into a serious problem. For emotions are, by and large, held to be valuable because they facilitate an appropriate response to certain kinds of important situations, objects, and events. Thus fear helps us to respond appropriately to danger, anger to insult, love to the need for commitment, joy to unexpected benefits, grief to loss. On this view emotions have value because they serve vital needs and help us to accomplish important goals. But it is difficult to understand the value of disinterested curiosity along these lines. For curiosity doesn't seem to be directed to anything of *particular* importance or significance. Indeed, there are good reasons to think that the questions or subjects that trigger curiosity are not themselves ones that it is intrinsically valuable for us to answer or understand, or ones the truth about which constitutes an important or significant goal. If so, we might wonder whether curiosity ought to be regarded as valuable. It turns out that an examination of the nature of curiosity reveals that it might lack the kind of value that it is traditionally thought to have.

In this paper I want to address this problem, and attempt to respond by invoking an analogy between curiosity and pleasure. An examination of the nature of pleasure suggests that it too consists in a desire for something that it is not, in itself, intrinsically valuable, and the achievement of which does not, by itself, constitute an important goal. Nevertheless, pleasure is (rightly) regarded as intrinsically valuable, and the desires that partly constitute pleasure are ones that it makes sense for us to have. And what is true of pleasure is also true of curiosity – or so, at least, I want to argue. In the first section I’ll examine the nature of curiosity, and make the case that it is best understood as an emotional response with a particular pattern of appraisal or evaluation. In the second section I’ll explain how this generates a problem for thinking that curiosity is valuable. And in the final section I’ll examine the analogy with pleasure, with the aim of resolving this problem. There is, I conclude, no tension between the nature of curiosity and the idea that curiosity is intrinsically valuable.

1.

What is curiosity? To begin it will be helpful to delineate the kind of curiosity I’m concerned with. We are sometimes curious about things as a result of practical interests and concerns. Thus I’m curious as to who was offered the job, as it’s of practical importance to me who my new colleague will be. Or I’m curious as to the details of who kissed whom last night, given my desire for salacious gossip. However, it is also clear that we are sometimes interested in certain questions but not because the truth of about such things is a means to some further end that we have. Instead, we sometimes engage in what Jonathan Kvanvig calls

“inquiry for its own sake”, or pursue what Stephen Grimm terms “a purely *epistemic* or *intellectual* interest in finding the truth.”¹ Inquiry for its own sake aims at the truth, but not for any ulterior purpose or concern; we simply want to know the answer to a question *for the sake of knowing that answer*.² Whereas the first kind of interest is generated by our practical concerns, an interest in truth for its own sake seems to reflect our *natural* interest or *intellectual* curiosity. Thus, Carl Hempel maintains that inquiry follows on from “sheer intellectual curiosity, [from our] deep and persistent desire to know and to understand [ourselves] and [our] world.”³ And Alvin Goldman writes that “Our interest in information has two sources: curiosity and practical concerns. The dinosaur extinction fascinates us, although knowing its cause would have no material impact on our lives.”⁴ Grimm comments: “According to both Hempel and Goldman ... it seems that the reason why we desire truth for its own sake, and quite apart from our practical goals, can be traced to the fact that we are naturally curious beings. Even when nothing of practical importance seems to ride on finding out how things stand with respect to a certain subject, given our natural curiosity we simply have a natural interest in finding out how they *do* stand.”⁵ In what follows I’ll be concerned with natural or intellectual curiosity, which involve a desire for truth its own sake, and moves people to understand just for the sake of understanding. Let us consider the nature of this kind of curiosity in more detail.

¹ Kvanvig (2003), p. 54. Grimm (2008), p. 726.

² See Lynch, (2004), p. 502.

³ Hempel (1965), p. 333.

⁴ Goldman (1999), p. 3

⁵ Grimm (2008), p. 727.

There is considerable evidence that curiosity is an *emotion*, rather than some non-emotional motivational state or trait. In particular, curiosity would seem to share many of the ‘components’ or ‘elements’ that are standardly used to characterize emotions, and that are standardly present in paradigmatic emotional experience.⁶ These include facial expression, feeling, cognitive changes, and distinctive pattern of appraisal. Let us take these in turn. (i) There are distinctive facial expressions that seem related to curiosity. We can usually recognize when people are curious about and interested in what we are saying or about their environment, and can quickly recognize when people are bored. Empirical support comes from a wide variety of experiments, including studies where parents can recognize interest, surprise and boredom on the faces of their young children when the children (and the children alone) are presented with a variety of objects. There also seem to be distinctive vocal expressions of interest and boredom. (ii) Curiosity has a distinctive feeling or affective element. Carroll Izard writes: “At the experiential level interest ... is the feeling of being engaged, caught-up ... There is a feeling of wanting to investigate, become involved, or extend or expand the self by incorporating new information ... In intense interest or excitement the person feels animated and enlivened ... Even when relatively immobile the interested or excited person has the feeling that he is “alive and active.”⁷ (iii) Curiosity, like other emotions, involves cognitive changes, such as changes to attention: it seems obvious that when we are curious our attention is fixed or focused on the relevant object or event. There is, moreover, coherence between these components: distinctive facial expressions typically occur at the

⁶ Many contemporary philosophers and psychologists regard emotions as clusters of components. For more on this, see Prinz (2004), Ch. 1.

⁷ Izard (1977), p. 216.

same time as distinctive vocal expressions and subjective feelings. (iv) Curiosity involves a certain pattern of evaluation or appraisal, or a certain 'core relational theme', which represents what the emotion is about, and distinguishes curiosity from other emotions. Since the nature of the appraisal involved in curiosity is important, let us look at this in more detail. To do so, I'll focus on recent work by the Paul Silvia in his excellent book *Exploring the Psychology of Interest*.⁸

It has long been thought – by psychologists, at any rate – that there are a number of *collative variables* that generate curiosity; these can be regarded as forms of appraisal that determine what the core relational theme of curiosity is. One of the central appraisals is of *novelty*: “whether or not an event is new, sudden, or unfamiliar. For interest, this novelty check includes whether people judge something as new, ambiguous, complex, obscure, uncertain, mysterious, contradictory, unexpected, or otherwise not understood.”⁹ As Silvia notes, this idea is grounded in the traditional account of ‘collative variables’ proposed by Daniel Berlyne. According to Berlyne, the appraisals which are constitutive of interest are appraisals of complexity, novelty, uncertainty, and conflict. Complexity “refers to the amount of variety or diversity in a stimulus pattern.”¹⁰ Novelty refers to objects that have not been experienced before, and which fall outside of the subject’s existing categorizations.¹¹ Uncertainty is a term used in information theory. According to Berlyne, “A certain degree of uncertainty is said to exist when (1) any number of alternative events can occur, (2) there is no knowing in advance which will occur at a particular time, and (3) each

⁸ Silvia (2006).

⁹ Silvia (2006), p. 24.

¹⁰ Berlyne (1960), p. 38.

¹¹ Silvia (2006), p. 34.

alternative occurs with a specifiable relative frequency or probability.”¹² Finally, Berlyne explains conflict as follows: “when two or more incompatible responses are aroused simultaneously in an organism, we shall say that the organism is in *conflict*.”¹³ Silvia comments: “A common form of conflict is receiving information that differs from existing information, such as expectancy violation, or perceiving incongruent parts within a whole object. Stimuli can also arouse conflict by implying different and incompatible categorizations.”¹⁴

More recently, Silvia has proposed that there is another appraisal involved in interest or curiosity, namely an appraisal of ‘coping potential.’ He writes: “*Coping potential* refers broadly to estimates of resources, power, abilities, and control in relation to an event. Judgements of coping potential appear in the appraisal structures of many emotions. For interest, coping potential probably refers to people’s appraisals of whether they can understand the ambiguous event. Upon appraising something as unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous, people probably appraise the likelihood that the poorly understood event will become coherent and clear.”¹⁵ For Silvia, then, curiosity or interest involves two appraisal components: an appraisal of novelty, broadly construed, and an appraisal of one’s capacity to understand or comprehend the new object, event or topic.¹⁶

There is considerable evidence for this view of curiosity’s core relational theme, from both the armchair and the laboratory. Although we tend to find old,

¹² Berlyne (1965), p. 31.

¹³ Berlyne (1960), p. 10.

¹⁴ Silvia (2006), p. 36.

¹⁵ Op. cit. p. 57.

¹⁶ Silvia notes that “[s]ome appraisal theories synthesize the set of components into an abstract theme (Lazarus, 2001). The events that people find interesting can probably be described thematically as events that are not understood but understandable.” p. 58.

expected, familiar and straightforward things comfortable or enjoyable, and are for this reason attracted to such features, this attraction does not seem to amount to curiosity. We are, instead, curious about things which are unexpected, unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable: we are intrigued by the mysterious, the baffling, the peculiar, and the unexplained. This is often apparent in our reactions to the arts. Although we might enjoy seeing a good film for a second or third time, we are not curious about or interested in seeing how the story develops after the first showing; rather, curiosity or interest is generated by new films, which promise uncertainty and unpredictability. For this reason, we tend to *lose* interest in seeing a film if the plot or ending is revealed beforehand, despite being confident that the cinematic experience would nevertheless be enjoyable. Something similar can be said about other people: we are often comfortable in the company of those with whom we are most familiar, but curious about the life of the intriguing stranger we meet in the pub or on the train. The same is true of topics and questions: it is puzzles or anomalies – of consciousness in a physical universe, of free will in deterministic creatures, of normativity arising from non-normative features – that engage philosophical curiosity and interest.

By the same token, our interest would seem to vary with our capacity to understand or comprehend events or materials. We quickly lose interest if it becomes obvious that we're unable to understand some topic or subject – think of the most common reaction of readers to Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* – whilst our curiosity is often piqued or increased by the fact that some truth or understanding is within our grasp. Consider how one's interest is captured and consumed in the moments leading up to the fictional unmasking of

the murderer, or just prior to the revealing of the winner of the reality tv show.¹⁷ Common-sense reflection on our own experience provides evidence for the claim that we tend to be curious about novel, complex, unexpected events that hold out the potential for understanding, and tend to be bored by old, familiar, predictable or incomprehensible things.

There is also empirical evidence for this take on the appraisal structure of interest. Many studies show that “people tend to find complex things interesting and simple things enjoyable. In some experiments, people ranked randomly generated polygons according to how interesting and how enjoyable they found each polygon. The complex polygons were the most interesting; the simplest polygons were the most enjoyable ... The diverging effect of complexity on interest and enjoyment appears for studies of anagrams..., randomly generated melodies..., and videos... Like complexity, novelty has diverging effects on interest and enjoyment. Familiar things tend to be enjoyable, whereas new things tend to be interesting. Research on mere exposure has demonstrated this many times....while increasing liking, repetition reduces interest – things become less interesting with more repetitions.”¹⁸ Experiments with literature also bear this out: in one study, “people were interested in stories with high uncertainty (e.g., a surprise ending) that was eventually reduced; it didn’t matter whether the story had a happy or sad ending. In contrast, people enjoyed stories that had happy endings regardless of the story’s uncertainty.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Silvia writes: “An initially interesting movie, for example, can become uninteresting when the viewers feel unable to form a coherent understanding of the narrative. Conversely, a confusing text can become interesting if its hidden meaning is revealed.” (58)

¹⁸ Silvia (2006), pp. 25-6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Similarly, studies show that interest varies with appraisals of coping potential. For instance, experts in art and music rate their capacity to understand their relative fields highly, and are more interested in complex images (such as those in abstract art) and melodies than novices in art and music. A similar pattern is found when comparing what adults and children find interesting. Silvia writes that “[t]hese findings fit the hypothesis that the appraisal structure of interest involves appraisals of coping potential. Experts relative to novices, and adults relative to children, should have higher appraised ability to understand art and music.”²⁰ By the same token, studies in aesthetics show that providing meaningful information (such as a biographical sketch of the artist or what the artist said about the work) increases curiosity; it is plausible to assume that it does so, at least in part, because it makes the artwork more understandable to the viewer.²¹ A recent set of experiments conducted by Silvia indicated that increases in appraised ability to understand complex art corresponds to picking more complex polygons as the most interesting from a range of shapes.²² Other experiments indicate that interest in works of modern visual art depends “on both complexity and coping potential ... [f]or complex pictures ... ability strongly predicted interest – interest increased as appraised ability increased.”²³ If this is correct, then we can conclude that there is good empirical evidence to support an appraisal theory of interest or curiosity, along the (broad) dimensions of novelty and coping potential.

²⁰ p. 59.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ p. 61.

2.

Suppose that the above account of curiosity as an emotion is correct. It seems to me that this highlights a significant problem for the common-sense view that curiosity is intrinsically valuable, and that an intellectual desire to know is something to be esteemed. Unlike other emotions, curiosity doesn't seem to be directed at a situation, object, or event that is of importance or significance, and hence that calls for a particular response. We all face dangers or threats, and so all have a need to respond appropriately to them: this is why fear is valuable for us. We all face situations where we are disrespected, where we fail to meet group standards, where we have to rely on others, where our expectations are violated: this is why anger, shame, trust, and disappointment are valuable for us. But curiosity doesn't seem to be related to any particular value. We are naturally or intellectually curious about these subjects or those topics; but what importance or significance attaches to our knowing about or understanding these subjects or topics? Indeed, what importance or significance attaches to our knowing *anything* for its own sake – as opposed to knowing things for the sake of the other things that such knowledge can help to bring about?

To see the worry here, consider again the appraisal variables that are characteristic of curiosity. If the above is correct, we are motivated to understand subjects and answer questions that are novel, complex, ambiguous, obscure, mysterious – that violate expectations, that conflict with information we already have. But what is the intrinsic *value* of understanding the new, the complex, the obscure, the mysterious? What is so important about these things that we need an emotional response to enable us to cope with them, to register

such things when they occur in our environment, to motivate us to deal appropriately with them by understanding them if we can? These are difficult questions to answer, as evidenced by the puzzle people experience if asked to explain *why* they are curious about or interested in something. When asked such questions, our tendency is to say ‘I don’t know, I’m just curious’ about the object or event, topic or question. In other words, when curious we just want to discover the truth, to understand, but are hard-pressed to offer much in the way of a *reason* or *value* to which our curiosity and interest is a response. In so far as curiosity involves a desire to know the truth for its own sake, the curious cannot point to any extrinsic benefit that understanding in such cases would bring. [cf. case with pleasure: the extrinsic benefit isn’t foremost in our minds.] But in so far as curiosity varies according to novelty and coping potential, we can doubt that there is anything particular valuable about the subjects and questions that generate curiosity, or any features of such subjects and questions that give us good reason to be curious, that warrant or make appropriate our intellectual emotion. The puzzling, the complex, the obscure, the ambiguous, even the novel, would all fail to appear on any plausible list of intrinsic goods, or of things that contribute to human flourishing, or as elements of the good life for humans to live. So why, again, is it rational or appropriate or valuable for us to be curious about, and seek to understand, such things? Why is natural or intellectual curiosity held in such high esteem?

We might make this argument in slightly different terms. It is striking that there is a great diversity in the kinds of objects and events, topics and questions, that people are curious about, or that people find interesting. Moreover, in very many cases, we don’t regard divergence in opinion on what is interesting or an

appropriate object of curiosity as marking a difference in reasonableness or rationality. The fact that you are curious about land reform in 12th century Wales whilst I'm bored to tears by the topic doesn't suggest that either you or I are rationally criticizable for our attitudes. Similarly, the fact that I am curious to discover whether the underground system in Paris is more extensive than the one in London, while you couldn't care less about this, doesn't imply that I am right to be so curious and you are wrong to find this of any interest. In these and very many other cases it is difficult to motivate or justify the thought that curiosity is made rationally appropriate or is rationally warranted by certain subjects or questions, such that lack of curiosity about these questions is a rational failing. The thought that certain topics and events are ones that we ought to be curious about is, on the face of it, difficult to defend. But if so, why is natural or intellectual curiosity so highly valued? Why praise someone for having a response if that response is so ungrounded in value, and so rationally optional?

There is, of course, a rather obvious response to be made at this point. We might claim that curiosity has value insofar as it tracks or is a response to *intrinsically* significant or important truths. On this account, it is the intrinsic value of certain truths that warrants the emotion and justifies the praise we bestow on those who have it. But not all who are curious are curious about such intrinsically important truths, in which case we should qualify our praise accordingly. Just as we don't esteem those who are afraid of what is harmless or those who are shamed about what isn't shameful, so too we shouldn't praise and esteem those who are curious about truths that lack intrinsic importance or significance. If someone is interested in the latter, then this is indeed a rational failing, and one for which they are subject to rational criticism.

However, this response is unconvincing. For there is empirical evidence of (widespread) divergence between what we are curious about or interested in and what we find important or significant. In other words, there is significant divergence between what human beings are naturally and intellectually curious about, and the things that are (regarded as) important or significant for them. The *extent* to which we value and praise curiosity cannot, therefore, be explicable in terms of curiosity moving us to understand intrinsically important truths. Silvia notes that “[e]xperiments on test comprehension ... suggest that interesting and important sentences are processed according to different strategies ... A consequence is that interesting elements may be remembered better than important elements if the two diverge.”²⁴ In addition, experiments on motivation indicate that importance and interest are not necessarily linked. Increasing the importance of a boring task does not necessarily increase how interesting someone finds it. Instead, people stick at the task because of its importance and employ other strategies to make it more interesting.²⁵

In the final section I’ll explain how we can accommodate the idea that curiosity is to be esteemed, and yet isn’t a response to intrinsically valuable or significant truths. Curiosity can be an intrinsically valuable response to truth, therefore, even if there are no intrinsically good reasons to get the truth on some particular subject matter.

²⁴ Silvia (2006), p. 195.

²⁵ Ibid.

3.

It seems to me that the best way to make progress here is to compare curiosity to another kind of mental state that we think valuable, and yet which involves a desire for something that is not in itself valuable. This is the mental state of pleasure. In order to see this, let us look more closely at the question of what pleasure is.

Any plausible account of pleasure will have to capture the obvious fact that we can experience a great variety of pleasures. These might include: bodily sensations such as a warm bath, or a loved one's kiss, or a deep muscle massage, or the feel of a woollen jumper; taste sensations such as spicy food or a good red wine, hollandaise sauce, jelly beans; intellectual satisfactions such as completing a crossword puzzle or an elegant move in chess, an interesting seminar question or a breakthrough in a philosophical puzzle; aesthetic pleasures of awe, wonder, the sublime; emotional pleasures such as amusement at jokes, the feelings of companionship when out drinking with friends, a sense of identity with and pride in one's community or university or country, the thrill of anticipation or victory; and so on. There are, then, at the very least identifiable categories of bodily, intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional pleasures.

Any plausible account of pleasure will also have to explain what all these different kinds have in common, in virtue of which they count as pleasures, and in virtue of which they are intrinsically valuable. One general kind of answer here appeals to pleasure's *phenomenology* or *felt quality*. On this account, pleasures are unified in virtue of having a *distinctive feeling* or *hedonic tone* in

common.²⁶ It is this common feeling or tone which makes the disparate experiences pleasurable, and which is the source of their value. But this general answer, although it has a deal of intuitive support, ultimately seems mistaken. On the one hand, there doesn't seem to be any distinctive feeling quality that is common to all of the above experiences: pride in my university is just so very different, from the phenomenological standpoint, to the taste sensation of a nice glass of pinot noir, or a beloved's kiss, or the feeling of contentment. Even if we restrict our survey to so-called *bodily* pleasures, the very great variety of kinds of bodily pleasure tells against the possibility of identifying a single feeling quality that is present and recognizable in each. Exhaustion after a long session in the gym feels radically different from a lover's kiss; and the bodily pleasure of scratching an itch seems of a different phenomenological kind to the pleasure of crisp cotton sheets. The idea that all of the different categories of pleasure – bodily, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic – somehow feel the same seems even more implausible in light of this.²⁷

Hedonic tone views ultimately fare no better, given the difficulties in explaining what it is for some sensation to be hedonically or affectively toned. Thus Shelley Kagan maintains that pleasantness is akin to loudness, “dimension on which sounds vary” rather a distinctive sound quality. But there are problems in understanding pleasantness in this way, not least the fact that loudness *does* seem to be a particular and distinctive quality or kind of sound. We might, for instance, list ‘loud people’ alongside ‘weak beer’ and ‘mauve sofas’ in our list of

²⁶ For a nice overview of these possibilities, see Aydede (2014).

²⁷ This is known as the *Heterogeneity Problem* for distinctive feeling accounts of pleasantness. It received an early airing from Sidgwick (1907/1981), p. 127, and more recently by (amongst others) Fred Feldman (2006), p. 79.

pet hates; here loudness is a distinctive quality of some people. Other attempts to explain hedonic tone – such as Roger Crisp’s appeal to the distinction between *determinates* and *determinables* – are thought to fare no better.²⁸

In light of this, many philosophers propose that we switch to an ‘attitudinal’ account of pleasure. On this approach, pleasures share no distinctive feeling quality or affective tone, but instead are unified in virtue of a shared attitude. Traditionally, this has been held to be one of desire or liking. Thus Thomas Carson, defends “the view that the pleasantness ... of an experience is a function of one’s desires with respect to it qua feeling.”²⁹ Richard Brandt claims that “for an experience to be pleasant is for it to make the person want its continuation”.³⁰ And William Alston presents a similar view: “to get pleasure is to have an experience which, as of the moment, one would rather have than not have, on the basis of its felt quality, apart from any further considerations regarding consequences.”³¹ So attitudinal accounts maintain that pleasures actually consist of two elements: one is a sensation, which in very many cases *does* have a distinctive feel. Thus the sensation of warm sun on one’s body is distinct from the sensation of a cold beer, which is distinct from the sensation of answering a philosophical puzzle, and so on. The second element is one of desire or liking that is directed towards this sensation. So pleasant experiences consist of sensations that we desire or like. In more sophisticated terms, “a sensation S, occurring at time t, is a sensory pleasure at t iff the subject of S desires, intrinsically and *de re*, at t, of S, that it be occurring at t.”³²

²⁸ For a trenchant criticism of Crisp’s proposal, see Bramble (2013).

²⁹ Carson (2000), p. 13.

³⁰ Brandt (1979), p. 38.

³¹ Alston (1967), p. 345.

³² Heathwood (2007), p. 32.

If the attitudinal theory of pleasure is correct, then pleasure is valuable *because* it consists in a sensation that the subject likes or wants to occur. What is intrinsically valuable is thus the *relational* state of desiring that some sensation occur. But since it is the relation that is valuable, rather than any distinctive feature of the sensation that the subject desires – a feature or quality that is common to all pleasures and which (on the phenomenological account) makes them valuable – then the desires or likings that partly constitute pleasures are not themselves directed at anything of intrinsic value. In other words, there is nothing intrinsically good about the sensations that would merit or warrant the relevant desires on the subject’s part. We desire that some sensations occur, but not for features of those sensations that constitute *reasons* to so desire. Here is how Derek Parfit makes the point, in terms of liking: “When we want something, we are often responding to the features of this thing that give us reasons to want it. But we have some desire-like states that are not, in this way, responses to reasons. Three examples are the instinctive states of hunger, thirst and lust. Another important set of mental states, though they are often assumed to be desires, are better regarded as being in a separate category. These are the *hedonic likings* and *dislikings* of certain actual present sensations that make our having these sensations pleasant, painful, or in other ways unpleasant, or in which their pleasantness or unpleasantness consists.”³³ Nevertheless – and to repeat – our liking or desiring the sensations in question constitutes an intrinsically valuable relational state, and one that we have reason to pursue.

Now there is, of course, a story to be hold as to *why* human beings have developed to like a particular range of sensations, even if those sensations are

³³ Parfit, D. (2011) pp. 52-3.

not themselves intrinsically valuable, and hence even if there is no feature of the sensations in question that constitutes a recognizable reason *to* desire them. Clearly the story here will be that the relevant sensations are in *some way* connected to what is beneficial for the agent, although the connection here must be loose enough to allow a great deal of divergence and dissociation between what people find pleasurable and what is beneficial for them. Thus, sensations associated with bodily and emotional pleasures will be sensations that are (more or less reliably) associated with or generated by objects and events that enhance our well-being, whilst sensations associated with bodily and emotional suffering will be sensations that are (more or less reliably) associated with things that threaten or damage our welfare. But the fact *that* such sensations are so related to what enhances or detracts from well-being is often and perhaps nearly always hidden to us. This fact is not therefore our reason for so desiring. The linkage or connection between sensations and well-being is for the most part a sub-personal matter, as indicated by the fact that creatures lacking the capacity for reflective thought can nevertheless experience pleasure and pain, and the fact that even reflective creatures typically lack awareness of why we like the bodily sensations associated with fatty foods, or itches being scratched, or being kissed. As a result, it makes sense for us, from the standpoint of systemic functioning, to like or desire that certain sensations are occurring, even though there are no intrinsic features of *the sensations* that constitute reasons to like or desire them, and (not unrelatedly) even if we have no good idea of why we like or desire that the sensations be occurring.

It seems to me that pleasure provides a model for how we should understand the intrinsic value of curiosity, in a way that acknowledges the fact

that curiosity does not seem to be directed at anything of particular value. As we saw in previous sections, curiosity varies with novelty and coping potential, but not with the importance or significance of subjects and questions. As a result, we cannot identify any distinctive valuable quality that unifies all of the very many things that we desire to know about and want to understand. The objects of our curiosity have nothing valuable in common, therefore, which could intrinsically merit or make appropriate the interest we take in them. Nevertheless, although the objects and questions that trigger our curiosity have nothing valuable in common, they are unified by the very fact that we are curious about them. This suggests that what is valuable isn't some distinctive and identifiable feature that the truth on subjects that trigger our curiosity has in common; instead, what is valuable is the relational state of *being curious about* some novel topic or understandable issue. It is the desire to know that unifies all instances of curiosity, just as it is the desire that a sensation be occurring that unifies all instances of pleasure. Moreover, just as there is no incompatibility between pleasure being relational and intrinsically valuable, there should be no obvious problem with thinking the same about curiosity: it is intrinsically valuable for us to be curious about the truth on some subject, even if we cannot identify any feature or quality of the relevant truth that would warrant the desire to know.

Now there is of course a further story to be told here about *why* human beings have developed so that curiosity varies along the appraisal variables of novelty and coping potential, even if those variables are not themselves intrinsically valuable, and hence even if there is no feature of the the relevant subjects that constitutes a recognizable reason *to* desire know the truth about them. This will presumably be a story that highlights the epistemic and practical

pay-offs of curiosity having the appraisal variables that it does: about us being curious about or interested in the unexpected, the novel, the complex, the mysterious, and about this curiosity being tempered by our assessment of our capacity to understand. The general story here will, I assume, take the form of showing how we are better off to the extent that we amass a wide range of knowledge and understanding, consistent with the costs of acquisition, and that this will only happen if we have a general attraction to the novel and mysterious and complex. So we need to increase our set of useful beliefs, in a way that the new acquisitions are sufficiently unlike our current set (otherwise why waste efforts to acquire them), but also need to balance the benefits of acquisition with the potential costs (which is why we don't pursue understanding of things that would take up significant cognitive resources). So the first appraisal variable directs us to knowledge which is, because an extension of what we know, of potential use; and the second appraisal variable limits the amount of cognitive resources we expand on getting such information and knowledge. But the fact that the objects of our curiosity are so related to the need for useful and cognitively affordable truths will be often and perhaps nearly always hidden to us, and so will not constitute our reason for desiring to know the truths on the relevant subjects. The linkage or connection between what we want to know about, and what is useful and affordable, will be for the most part a sub-personal matter. As a result, it makes sense for us, from the standpoint of systemic functioning, to desire to know what is novel and understandable, even though there are no intrinsic features of the truths in question that constitute intrinsic reasons to want to know them, and (not unrelatedly) even if we have no good idea of why we want to know truths like that, beyond the fact that we do.

It seems to me, therefore, that there is no inconsistency in maintaining that curiosity is both intrinsically valuable, and that it is constituted by a desire for truths that are not themselves distinctively valuable. It nevertheless makes sense for us to be curious about novel and understandable truths, given the (more or less) reliable connection between such truths and epistemic and practical benefits. Support for both of these claims comes, I have argued, from an analogy between curiosity and pleasure. For pleasure too is intrinsically valuable, but constituted by a desire for sensations that are not themselves distinctively valuable either. It nevertheless makes sense for us to desire that such sensations occur, given the (more or less) reliable connection between such sensations and our general welfare. If we model curiosity on pleasure, therefore, we avoid what might appear to be a significant problem in understanding why curiosity enjoys the esteem that it does.

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