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CURIOSITY AND UNCERTAINTY



One might argue that there two kinds of curiosity. The first kind is dangerous for whoever and whatever is the object of curiosity. For the agent of curiosity is fully cognisant of his or her own powers and fully aware of their scope and their limits. The strange and the other is confronted only to be transformed, normalised and regularised. Even if the object of curiosity is 'left alone' it only exists on sufferance. In Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the curiosity of Odysseus not merely disenchants the world but denudes it of all the things that made it worthy of curiosity in the first place.¹ Francis Bacon – Baconian enquiry – although driven by curiosity, strives to encompass all that it investigates for the benefit of mankind.

But there is another kind of curiosity that is driven by uncertainty and is content to remain uncertain. It stops short of fully satisfying curiosity. The mind of the person who has this kind of eye for the curious is one which is comfortable with uncertainty, a mind that knows it cannot comprehend everything and has no desire to. But is it possible to maintain this rather wholesome curiosity? Does not the act of curiosity destroy that which provoked it? I shall suggest that Derrida's idea of *différance* helps us to maintain an attitude of composure as the curious other escapes capture through signifiers as its meaning slips from view only to re-appear slightly changed. As Keats understood (through his idea of negative capability), uncertainty is the handmaiden of curiosity. But it also enables us to be at home in the world.

Curiosity can be viewed as a certain fascination with the world. It is almost a badge of our humanity, as if showing a lack of interest in the world is letting the side down; we have a duty to exercise our curiosity. So curiosity in the be-

¹ See T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso, 1979.

ings and doings of humans places a value on those activities and phenomena as if anything at all undertaken by humans is potentially worthy of our interest. This vision is extended to the natural world in which animals are endowed with any number of human emotions – affection, courage, solidarity, steadfastness, determination. The value placed on curiosity is a part of modern mythology, an inflated humanism, a non-critical humanism. So on this view, not to be curious is somehow to be less than fully human.

We can explain this inflated humanism as a desperate attempt to re-enchant a world irredeemably disenchanted through a relentless process of rationalisation. The framework of purposive rationality involving the subordination of nature to calculation in which it becomes a mere instrument of human preference; the corresponding lack of interest in exploring values and the meaning of value; and the accompanying rationalised self-identity which insists that ones emotions, needs and preferences be self-managed – all these are ingredients of rationalisation.² Within the interstices of rationalised behaviour and reflection there is, of course, some room for views and perspectives of acceptance, of seeing phenomena on their own terms, a ‘letting be’. But if this letting be is itself driven by a mythology of re-enchantment then it is doomed to failure because it is itself driven by a humanism desperate to exclude rationalisation. The result is that nature is merely endowed with non-calculative meaning but still reflecting the privileging of the human perspective. One way of exemplifying such privileging is through vaunting the claims of curiosity. Consequently we might even be tempted to suppose that a lack of curiosity might be worth cultivating if our curiosity is always in danger of being freighted with an inflated humanism. A studied indifference to what lies around us may be worth developing – if we don’t notice things then we are less likely to do harm.

But such indifference merely brings a fresh set of problems; surely, it might be said, we are destined to feel as if the world is our home: surely we need to ‘love the world’ as Hannah Arendt suggested;³ and if we are teachers, we need to convey this disposition to our children and students. This, it might be said, forms the background to curiosity and is what motivates it; our interest in events, actions and phenomena is not merely constituted by a mode of enquiry – it is

² See the account in J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, Cambridge: Polity Press 1991, 169–171.

³ Arendt made this claim in connection with education: “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it” (H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, London: Faber and Faber, 1959, 196).

motivated by a love and attachment to the world. Without this love, curiosity could become arbitrary at best and at worst motivated by a predatory desire. A love of the world may even be taken quite literally – not long ago on BBC radio a space astronaut was speaking of gazing from his spacecraft at this colourful, fascinating, huge orb, suspended in black space which seemed, he said, to be alive – and not merely seemed but emphatically *was* a living thing towards which it was impossible to be indifferent. Such a love of the world would need to derive from the fact that the world is worthy of love. But, as Weber observed, this is what many salvation-religions deny; their rejection and abnegation of the world helps to develop an inner-religious motivation characterised by asceticism⁴ And is well-known, Weber linked this ascetic behaviour, which was given shape by the formation of early modern commerce as well as early Protestantism, with rationalisation and disenchantment. Hence we can start to see why the vaunting of curiosity can seem so hollow; there is no world-view against which one can develop a reasonable curiosity, that is, one that is not motivated by world-denying regard or one that is converted into an inflated self-regard in which the world is treated merely as a reflection and plaything of the self.

Jane Bennett has explored the theme of disenchantment in her book *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. She suggests that that enchantment, or re-enchanting, may involve a certain plasticity with respect to identity and gives a number of examples, including:

[...] the criminal fiend, Catwoman; ...the oceanic woman in Luce Irigaray's *Marine Lover*; (to) the strategic insects in a 1996 documentary; [...] the goat-kite in Michel Tournier's *Friday*;....Alex, an African Grey parrot learning to use abstract concepts.⁵

But whilst these examples (and there are others) certainly serve to persuade us that identity may be subject to change it is not clear why these amount to enchantment. For it could be argued that they merely serve to emphasise our dis-enchanted world in that we are unable to find ordinary things and happenings of any interest but instead are driven to fictional alternatives that present a different world, certainly – but not necessarily an enchanted one. It seems

⁴ See H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1948, 323–359. The link between asceticism and rationalisation is discussed in Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1930, especially 181–182.

⁵ J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton University Press, 2001, 17.

to me, rather, that enchantment depends on being curious about the world, a willingness to take the world as it is but to see it afresh. Ordinary things like sparrows, oak-leaves, spring daffodils, a child's gesture, a fashion design, a piece of dance-theatre – all of these may present themselves as enchanted if we are able to experience them aright.

The meaning of curiosity extends to how we comport ourselves with respect to the world and each other and what a credible humanism might look like. It could be said that curiosity involves a double effect:

1. We frame the object or phenomena as an object of interest in terms of its colour, shape and size and its apparently out-of-the ordinary characteristics;
2. But at the same time we 'let go' of this object thus constituted through a deliberate entertainment of differing, random thoughts and impressions;
3. But this 'deconstruction' is entirely dependent on its having been constituted and framed. We cannot let this framing go, which remains as a trace;
4. What animates and drives this process is the spirit of uncertainty – whether it be framed as an 'object' or as a random collection of impressions.

This spirit of uncertainty was spoken of by Rilke:⁶

I am so afraid of people's words.
Everything they pronounce is so clear:
this is a hand and that is a house,
and beginning is here, and the end over there.

Their meaning frightens, their mockery-play
And their claims to know what's coming, what was;
No mountain thrills them now; their estates
And their gardens abut directly on God.

I warn; I ward them off. Stay back.
It's a wonder to me to hear things sing.
You touch them and they stultify.
You are the destroyers of things.

Kierkegaard also makes a similar point when he distinguishes between objective and subjective thought. In the former case, thought abstracts from the thinking subject and translates everything into results; but in the latter case, the thinker is aware of his own thought as a process and is less concerned in resolving this

⁶ R. M. Rilke, *Selected Poems*, trans. S. Ranson and M. Sutherland, Oxford University Press, 2011.

thought into fixed entities. By delaying resolution, by putting off a conclusion, what subjective thought also leaves room for uncertainty.⁷ This willingness to delay, this play of links and connections is not something that is controlled or managed. Rather this 'play' is the effect of 'letting be' in which, as it may seem, the connections are not made by one but *for* one whereby the connections and links do their own work. But a spirit of uncertainty is vital: for no matter how sure we might be that the constituted object is indeed 'thus and so' we need to entertain the possibility that we may be mistaken and that the more we place trust in our framing powers so the more we should mistrust them as well.

The power of the 'trace' is discussed by Jacques Derrida⁸ in terms the grasping of meaning at a semiotic level – the idea being that a term never gives us, just by itself, a full meaning: carried with that term are also the differences from other terms that give a meaning its specificity but which also give that meaning a shifting character. It is mistaken to suppose that the 'play of differences' is something that *we* bring to the scene and that meaning is somehow within our power to construct as we wish. Rather, *differance* – and its accompaniment of the *trace* – has a certain necessity inscribed within its economy since without this play of differences, meaning would not be possible. I am using the concept of a 'trace' in an extended way to show how our different modes of comportment with respect to the world also have an inscribed necessity within them.

But this deployment of the trace of a constituted object complemented by the free play of its properties runs parallel with another, deeper process as well. This is the proposition that the world always was disenchanted and this disenchantment is something that can never be wished away, never forgotten, never un-remembered. I am not here speaking of the idea of life which, in its very meaning encapsulates the concept of a life ending, of death, as if the very prospect of death in itself sullies our experience of the world. Rather it is the very monotony and repetition of the sheer effort of living – its dull necessity, its dreary tasks to perform, its often bleak landscape.⁹ If we do have a love of the

⁷ See S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton University Press, 1941, 68. See also the valuable discussion by D. Wood, *Philosophy at the Limit*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, 105–117.

⁸ See, for example, the essay 'Differance' in J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982, 3–27.

⁹ I am thinking particularly here of Hanna Arendt's description of the incessant swing of labour, tied to the uncasing changes of the seasons and driven by sheer necessity. See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958.

world then there is also this always ever-present disenchantment as well, acting as a trace of our love and joy of the world. And what we do *not* need is for this disenchantment to be wished away, for this necessity to be vaunted up as meritorious accomplishments. This is what rationalisation does. It inflates dreary repetition into something noble and laudable by dressing up the accomplishments of purposive rationality – whether at school or in the workplace – as worthy of recognition and praise. But by inflating the claims of necessity in this way we can no longer love the world because our love becomes displaced; the beloved merely becomes something that we have fashioned through rationalisation. What we end up loving and valuing is our own rationalisation – our own ‘iron cage’ as Weber put it¹⁰ and the products of that rationalisation, including a rationalised world. Our curiosity, far from being a ‘letting be’ is driven by a recognition of ourselves in the object, as something we have already fashioned.

But if we accept that our relationship with the world is partly characterised by *both* disenchantment and uncertainty then maybe we can start to have multiple relations with the world including love – and even fear. If then, we retain this disenchantment in the form of a trace perhaps we may even come to see even some of our ordinary beings and doings as odd – even curious. But without the trace of disenchantment we may find that total enchantment leads to appropriation and destruction, fuelled by a destructive curiosity.

I think the spirit of curiosity is well illustrated in Bob Dylan’s song, *Mr Tambourine Man*:¹¹

Hey! Mr Tambourine Man, play a song for me
I’m not sleepy and there is no place I’m going to
Hey! Mr Tambourine Man, play a song for me
In the jingle jangle morning I’ll come followin’ you.

Take me on a trip upon your magic swirlin’ ship
My senses have been stripped, my hands can’t feel to grip
My toes too numb to step, wait only for my boot heels
To be wanderin’
I’m ready to go anywhere, I’m ready for to fade
Into my own parade, cast your dancing spell my way
I promise to go under it.

¹⁰ In Weber (1930), 181.

¹¹ First issued in 1965 on the LP *Bringing it all back home* (Columbia Records).

Here, Dylan is summoning up his Muse, the Tambourine Man. Perhaps all of us, if we are to exercise genuine curiosity cannot do it alone and need a muse, just like Dylan. But that is for another paper.

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