

## *Epistemic Temperance and the Moral Perils of Intellectual Inquiry*

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*Food that is badly cooked and indigestible induces physical disorders and damages the body instead of nourishing it. In the same way if a glut of knowledge stuffed into the memory, that stomach of the mind, has not been cooked on the fire of love, and transfused and digested by certain skills of the soul, its habits and actions—since, as life and conduct bear witness, the mind is rendered good through its knowledge of good—will not that knowledge be rendered sinful?*

(Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>1</sup>)

### *Intellectual Virtue and the Epistemic Goal*

An oft-repeated dictum in contemporary epistemology is that the epistemic goal—the end at which all of our inquiry aims—is the acquisition of (nontrivial) true beliefs and the avoidance of false beliefs. Some epistemologists maintain that the pursuit of truth and the avoidance of error is the *sole* epistemic goal, the single underlying aim of all intellectual inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Others argue for a wider conception of the epistemic goal that encompasses not only

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ABSTRACT: An oft-repeated dictum in contemporary epistemology is that the epistemic goal minimally includes the acquisition of true beliefs and the avoidance of false beliefs. There is, however, a robust epistemological tradition in the Christian West that distinguishes between a *virtuous* and a *vicious* desire for and pursuit of cognitive contact with reality. The cognitive ideal for humans consists (in part) in *epistemic temperance*, an appetite for and pursuit of truth that is conducted in appropriate measure, and calibrated to appropriate objects and ends. Here I explore this rich Christian tradition with an eye toward its application to contemporary Christian philosophy.

1. I owe this quotation from Bernard of Clairvaux to John Webster in his “Curiosity,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), 197.

2. See William Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987); Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ernest Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (New

the acquisition of true beliefs but also of other “thicker” epistemic goods such as knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, there is widespread agreement that the minimal cognitive ideal for human agents involves maximizing one’s stock of (nontrivial) true beliefs, and minimizing one’s false beliefs. Marian David underscores the ubiquity and value of this aim in contemporary epistemology: “Epistemologists of all persuasions tend to invoke the goal of obtaining truth and avoiding error. This goal seems to be of special importance to epistemology. No other goal is invoked as frequently as this one. No other goal is given as much weight or is treated with as much respect as this one.”<sup>4</sup> Epistemic inquiry is, by the lights of most, minimally aimed at what Linda Zagzebski has called “cognitive contact with reality.”<sup>5</sup>

Contemporary virtue epistemologists, those who in one way or another place a strong emphasis on intellectual virtue in epistemology, have been keen to point out that there are normative considerations that bear on how well-suited an agent is to achieve the epistemic goal of cognitive contact with reality.<sup>6</sup> Agents who possess distinctively intellectual virtues—whether construed as reliable cognitive faculties akin to perception, induction, deduction, and memory, or personal character traits such as open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual humility and courage—are more apt to acquire true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding than those who lack such qualities. In fact, prominent virtue epistemologists such as Ernest Sosa and Linda Zagzebski, go so far as to characterize an intellectual virtue itself as “a quality bound to help maximize one’s surplus of truth over error”<sup>7</sup> and involving “a motivation component that aims at cognitive contact with reality.”<sup>8</sup> Intellectually virtuous agents, then, are motivated by a desire for true beliefs, knowledge or understanding, and are apt to attain these epistemic goods precisely *because* they are intellectually virtuous.

A question that has yet to be explored by contemporary virtue epistemologists in detail is whether or not there might be virtue-theoretic considerations that bear on the pursuit of the epistemic goal *itself*, in particular whether one’s desire and effort to maximize true beliefs, knowledge, or un-

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York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Nick Treanor, “Trivial Truths and the Aim of Inquiry,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014): 552–9.

3. See Jonathan L. Kvanvig, “Truth Is Not the Primary Epistemic Goal,” in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 2nd ed., ed. Matthias Steup, John Turri, Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

4. Marian David, “Truth as the Epistemic Goal,” in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 151.

5. Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

6. Jason Baehr, in his *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), offers a helpful taxonomy of the various ways intellectual virtue may be employed in contemporary epistemology.

7. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective*, 225.

8. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 167.

derstanding might ever be morally vicious and thus blameworthy. In other words: is it ever *morally inappropriate* to indulge our appetite for cognitive contact with reality? Are there contexts in which our intellectual appetites need to be restrained, moderated, or regulated? Can an unregulated appetite and pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding ever hinder the moral life? These questions can be subsumed under the more general question: are there distinctively *moral* considerations that ought to regulate our natural desire for and pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding?

On the surface, it would appear that an unbridled appetite for and pursuit of cognitive contact with reality is unquestionably good in so far as truth, knowledge, and understanding are themselves goods the possession of which partly constitute a flourishing human life. There is, however, a substantive strand in the Christian philosophical tradition, represented most fully by Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, that distinguishes between a *virtuous* and a *vicious* desire and pursuit of cognitive contact with reality, what medieval Christian thinkers called the virtue of *studiositas* and the vice of *curiositas*. For these thinkers, one's epistemic pursuits must be carefully monitored and situated within a larger normative framework that encompasses fitting objects, a well-regulated appetite, and ultimately aimed at proper ends, including how such pursuits cohere with other moral virtues and obligations that constitute a flourishing human life. As we will see, for Augustine and Aquinas, the cognitive ideal for human agents consists (at least in part) in exercising *epistemic temperance*, a properly ordered and moderated love for and pursuit of truth, knowledge and understanding. My aim in this paper is to explore this rich medieval epistemological tradition from an explicitly Christian theistic perspective, and proceed to offer some brief applications to contemporary Christian philosophy.

### *Augustine on the Moral Dimensions of Inquiry*

We begin with Augustine, who is arguably the most influential theologian in the Western Christian tradition save the Apostle Paul. In his *Confessions*, Augustine makes the remarkable claim that in the same way that our natural bodily desires, for example, for food and sex, need to be properly regulated if we are to avoid moral self-ruin, so it is the case with our mind's natural desire for knowledge. A disordered desire or appetite for knowledge is what Augustine refers to as the vice of *curiositas*. Inspired by the biblical passage of 1 John 2:16 ("For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world") as well as his own personal experience, Augustine is clear in his *Confessions* that in addition to the various temptations to indulge the desires of the flesh:

There is different kind of temptation, more dangerous than these because it is more complicated. For in addition to our bodily appetites, which make us long to gratify all our senses and our pleasures and lead to our ruin if we stay away from you by becoming their slaves, the mind is also subject to a certain propensity to use the sense of the body, not for self-indulgence of a physical kind, but for the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness. This futile curiosity masquerades under the name of science and learning, and since it derives from our thirst for knowledge and sight is the principle sense by which knowledge is acquired, in the Scriptures it is called *the gratification of the eye*.<sup>9</sup>

For Augustine, the vice of *curiositas* is a form of intellectual self-indulgence, a disordered appetite for knowledge that is exclusively oriented towards the benefit of the knower. A vicious desire for and pursuit of knowledge aims solely at knowing “merely for the sake of knowing” and “simply for the love of the experience.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine cites five examples of *curiositas*: (i) looking upon a mangled corpse simply for the sensation of sorrow and horror that it brings, (ii) putting on display “strange sights” and “prodigies” in the public theatre, (iii) investigating “the secrets of nature, which are irrelevant to our lives,” (iv) “turning to sorcery in the effort to obtain knowledge,” and (v) putting God to the test in demanding “signs and wonders from him, not in the hope of salvation, but simply for the love of the experience.”<sup>11</sup> By Augustine’s lights, each of these epistemic pursuits have as their *sole* end the satisfaction of the knower’s desire and thirst for knowledge, nothing more.<sup>12</sup>

While *curiositas* originates in a natural desire for knowledge, Augustine in no way thinks that a natural desire for knowledge *per se* is vicious; curiosity amounts to the *perversion* and *misuse* of one’s natural appetite for knowledge. Moreover, Augustine often refers to a vicious appetite and pur-

9. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 241.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. Paul Griffiths, whose work to date on *curiositas* and *studiositas* in the Christian tradition stands unrivaled in the current literature on the subject, also emphasizes the closed-off and parochial nature of inquiry driven by *curiositas* in so far as it is carried out solely for the purpose of control, domination, and private ownership of that knowledge. He notes, “Curiosity is, then, in brief, *appetite for the ownership of new knowledge*, and its principal method is enclosure by sequestration of particular creatures or ensembles of such. . . . The appetite of the curious is in that way closed, seeking a sequestered intimacy: they knowledge they seek is wanted as though it were the only thing to be had, and this means that the curious inevitably come to think that the only way in which they can be related to what they seek to know is by sequestration, enclosing a part of the intellectual commons for their own exclusive use, and thus mastering it” (*Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 20–1). Griffith’s work on this subject aims to develop and outline in detail a fully orbited account of *curiositas* and *studiositas* from a Christian perspective. My specific aim in this paper is limited to (i) situating *curiositas* and *studiositas* within the context of contemporary epistemology in the analytic tradition, (ii) unpacking *curiositas* and *studiositas* in the thought of Augustine and Aquinas in particular, and (iii) applying the views of Augustine and Aquinas on the moral dimensions of inquiry to the landscape of contemporary Christian philosophy.

suit of knowledge as “futile curiosity,” which suggests that he takes the vice to partially involve knowledge and inquiry that is aimed at unfitting objects (that is, “trivial,” “insignificant,” and “worthless” truths), in addition to inquiry that begets pride and “idle speculation.” Concerning the moral perils of such inquiry, Augustine explicitly warns that the soul “which purposes to keep itself chaste for God must refrain from the desire of vain knowledge like this.”<sup>13</sup> For Augustine, then, the end or *telos* of one’s appetite and pursuit of knowledge, in addition to the fittingness of the objects of inquiry, are highly relevant to whether or not the desire and pursuit of knowledge are properly classified as virtuous or vicious.

Finally, it is interesting to note from the above cited passage in the *Confessions* that Augustine considers the temptation toward curiosity to be *more dangerous* than the temptation to indulge the desires of the flesh. Indeed, the moral peril that accompanies vicious intellectual inquiry stems from its exclusive focus on the individual in isolation from others, including God himself as the greatest and supreme good for human knowers. Intellectual inquiry that is motivated by a disordered appetite for knowledge and aimed at insignificant and trivial truths can easily detract from more significant and weightier goods, goods that are conducive to one’s living a full, flourishing, and happy life. Augustine in his *Confessions* remarks: “For when our hearts become repositories piled high with such worthless stock as this, it is the cause of interruption and distraction from our prayers.”<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the vice of *curiositas*, a properly ordered appetite and pursuit of knowledge is what Augustine refers to as the virtue of *studiositas*. The virtuous person’s appetite for cognitive contact with reality is moderated and regulated by the virtue of temperance, that virtue which principally serves in “restraining and quieting the passions which make us pant for those things which turn us away from the laws of God and from the enjoyment of His goodness, that is, in a word, from the happy life.”<sup>15</sup> Citing the Apostle Paul’s warning in Colossians 2:8 against vain and deceptive philosophy, Augustine states “we are fitly warned against inquisitiveness, to correct which is the great function of temperance.”<sup>16</sup> Since a virtuous love and pursuit of knowledge is regulated by temperance, and temperance is a moral virtue for Augustine, it is evident that he thinks there is an explicitly moral dimension to one’s natural desire for and intellectual pursuit of knowledge.

By Augustine’s lights, a distinguishing feature of *studiositas* in contrast to *curiositas* is that it organically gives rise to inquiry that has within its purview a range of objective human goods that are neither restricted to the individual, nor whose value depends on whether or not individuals deem

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13. Augustine, *Confessions*, 243.

14. Augustine, *Confessions*, 243–4.

15. Augustine of Hippo, “On the Morals of the Catholic Church,” in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1, ed. Whitney J. Oates (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1948), 336.

16. *Ibid.*, 338.

them to be subjectively worthy of inquiring after. A life that is characterized by *studiositas* encompasses broader contours of human flourishing such as a knowledge of God as the objective and highest good for humans, as well as the virtues of temperance and love with respect to one's self as well as to their relations and moral obligations to others (God and neighbor). In reference to what he calls "mortal and transient things" as ends at which one's epistemic pursuits are directed, Augustine remarks: "The man, then, who is temperate in such mortal and transient things has his rule of life confirmed by both Testaments, that he should love none of these things, nor think them desirable for their own sakes, but should use them as far as is required for the purposes and duties of life, with the moderation of an employer instead of the ardor of a lover."<sup>17</sup> For the virtuous person, the desire for and pursuit of knowledge concerning mortal and transient things ought to be closely monitored and not rampantly indulged, according to Augustine.

It seems that for Augustine, any value ascribed to the desire and pursuit of knowledge of mortal and transient things is instrumental and not intrinsic. Augustine's work *On True Religion*, for example, was written to convince his principal student Romanianus to follow Augustine in abandoning Manicheanism in favor of Christianity, the "true religion." Throughout the work Augustine sets his sights on the Manichean preoccupation with a study of the heavens as an end in itself, which he thought further distorted the distinction between creature and Creator. By Augustine's lights, adherents of Manicheanism are "entangled in the lust of the eye" and are "vain persons who pursue that which is last as if it were first."<sup>18</sup> It is in this particular context that Augustine warns that even in one's study of the natural world, a seemingly harmless intellectual inquiry in its own right, one must be on guard against the vice of *curiositas*: "In considering these things there should be no exercise of vain and perishing curiosity, but a step should be taken towards immortal things that abide for ever."<sup>19</sup> For Augustine, one's appetite and pursuit of knowledge of created things is virtuous only in so far as one intends to put such knowledge to use in the pursuit of immortal and abiding things—love of God and neighbor being paramount. The above remarks highlight the inherent theological and metaphysical framework in which Augustine's account of *curiositas* is embedded; intellectual pursuits that fail to "advance from visible to invisible things in its ascent from temporal to eternal things" qualifies as an exercise in mere "vain and perishing curiosity."<sup>20</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, 339.

18. Augustine of Hippo, "On True Religion," in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J. H. S. Burleigh (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1953), 244.

19. *Ibid.*, 251.

20. For another vivid example of the inherently theological nature of Augustine's account of the moral dimensions of intellectual inquiry, consider the following from his *Confessions*: "A man who knows that he owns a tree and thanks you for the use he has of it, even though he does not know its exact height or the width of its spread, is better than another who measures it and counts all its branches, but neither owns it nor knows and loves it Creator" (95).

The person characterized by *studiositas*, then, is one who calibrates their natural intellectual appetites and pursuits to fitting objects, in proper measure and for fitting ends, namely those ends that are objectively good for humans.<sup>21</sup> In all things, even in our intellectual appetites and pursuits, Augustine's pastoral admonition rings true in *Sermon 335C*, 13: "I want your loving to be rightly ordered. Put heavenly things before earthly ones, immortal things before mortal, eternal things before temporal and put the Lord before everything else."<sup>22</sup>

### *Aquinas on the Moral Dimensions of Inquiry*

Let us turn now to the thought of Thomas Aquinas, who offers what is arguably the most well developed account of a virtuous and a vicious love and pursuit of knowledge in the Christian tradition. In *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q.167, Aquinas follows Augustine in referring to the vicious appetite and pursuit of knowledge as the vice of *curiositas*. In article 2 (ad. 2), Aquinas is careful to note that the vice of *studiositas* directly pertains to one's *appetite* for and *pursuit* of knowledge of the truth, and not directly to one's knowledge of the truth *per se*. Aquinas is of the opinion that even though knowledge of the truth is intrinsically good or good in itself (*per se*), "this does not prevent a man from misusing the knowledge of the truth from an evil purpose, or from desiring the knowledge of truth inordinately, since even the desire for good should be regulated in due manner."<sup>23</sup>

But what exactly does a vicious and thus morally blameworthy appetite for and pursuit of knowledge look like for Aquinas? Here Aquinas offers a more detailed account of the specific contours of *curiositas* than does Augustine. In article 1 of question 167, Aquinas offers two broad conditions under which one may exhibit the vice of *studiositas* and thereby be morally blameworthy in one's intellectual appetites and pursuits, the second of which encompasses four subconditions. Let's look at each general condition in turn.

The first general condition concerns the circumstances under which one's pursuit of knowledge in particular can be vicious, if one may "tend by his study to the knowledge of truth as having evil accidentally annexed to it." One's pursuit of knowledge may have as its direct and foreseen end

21. Of course wider metaphysical and theological considerations will determine *which* objects of inquiry are objectively good for humans. Within the Christian theistic tradition (which is the immediate context of my discussion here) it is widely acknowledged that knowledge of and union with God is the highest objective good (*summum bonum*) for humans.

22. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermons* 306–340A, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1994); cf. Apostle Paul in Col. 3:17: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." All scriptural references are from the English Standard Version.

23. All references to Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* are from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, OP, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute, 2012).

some morally bad state of affairs, whether the display of some further moral vice in the individual or some bad state of affairs involving other individuals more generally. Aquinas points out two examples of this first form of *curiositas*: (i) “those who study to know the truth that they may take pride in their knowledge,” and (ii) “those who study to learn something in order to sin.” To help further illustrate (i) we might imagine an academic who single-mindedly devotes himself to knowing more and having more academic publications than any of his colleagues in his respective discipline, solely for the sake of being intellectually superior to his colleagues (intellectual pride), and that this intellectual superiority be *put on display* to his colleagues and the wider academic guild (intellectual vanity). An example of (ii) might be one who devotes themselves to acquiring knowledge of other people’s confidential financial information so as to commit identity theft; or perhaps the disgruntled employee who maliciously pries into a fellow coworker’s personal records without permission, for the purpose of committing blackmail. Both (i) and (ii) are epistemic pursuits Aquinas calls “sinful study.” For Aquinas, as was the case with Augustine, the end at which the intellectual inquiry is aimed is relevant to the moral status of the inquiry in question, whether virtuous or vicious.

Regarding the second general condition, Aquinas reasons, “there may be sin by reason of the appetite or study directed to the learning of truth being itself inordinate.” Under this second condition, Aquinas offers four different ways in which a desire and pursuit of knowledge can be inordinate, and thus intemperate and morally objectionable. First, if inquiry into a particular domain detracts from another more pressing inquiry that is incumbent upon an individual, then the inquiry is inordinate and thus displays the vice of *curiositas*. Aquinas cites Jerome’s mention of priests forsaking their obligation to study the gospels and the prophets in order to read and acquire knowledge of stage-plays. Here we might extend Aquinas’s insights to include the neglect of obligations *per se* and not just obligations pertaining to intellectual inquiry. Examples of this form of *curiositas* are all too easy to come by, and are perhaps a bit closer to home for many of us (for example, a Christian philosopher who inordinately devotes himself to the mastery of modal logic at the expense of neglecting his obligation to serve and edify the body of Christ, or a Christian graduate student’s neglecting the demands of familial love for the sake of his or her studies, and so forth).

Second, Aquinas notes that one engages in inordinate and vicious inquiry if one seeks to acquire knowledge from an illicit source, in particular one that is forbidden by God. As an example of someone who “studies to learn of one, by whom it is unlawful to be taught,” Aquinas points to those who strive to know the future through consulting demons; those who pursue knowledge by means of an improper source engage in what Aquinas calls “superstitious curiosity.” Indeed, we might add that in the third chapter of Genesis we have

an example where our first human parents sought to acquire knowledge from a source that was explicitly forbidden by God, and thus transgressed the proper bounds of knowledge set down by their Creator. The close connection between this particular form of *curiositas* and the primal sin in the garden is pointed out by John Calvin in his commentary on Genesis, particularly in chapter 3, verse 5: “[T]he desire of knowledge is naturally inherent in and happiness is supposed to be placed in it; but Eve erred in not regulating the measure of her knowledge by the will of God. And we all daily suffer under the same disease, because we desire to know more than is right, and more than God allows; whereas the principal point of wisdom is a well-regulated sobriety in obedience to God.”<sup>24</sup>

Third, echoing Augustine yet again, Aquinas maintains that a person’s appetite for knowledge is inordinate and intemperate when they desire “to know the truth about creatures, without referring [their] knowledge to its due end, namely, the knowledge of God.” For Aquinas, as with Augustine, all epistemic pursuits and the cognitive goods that are attained as a result—whether they are aimed at a mastery of modal logic, horticulture, the Civil War, or financial investment—ought to be *ultimately* aimed at the chief end of knowledge and love of God. As Margaret Atkins points out, “If that is achieved, then study for study’s sake will neither distort neither the activity of study itself, nor corrupt the student through the vice of curiositas.”<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, one’s epistemic appetites and pursuits can be inordinate and morally vicious when one “studies to know the truth above the capacity of his own intelligence, since by so doing men easily fall into error.” This is a puzzling statement indeed. Does Aquinas mean here that human intellectual

24. John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. Rev. John King (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996), 98. Interestingly enough, throughout his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin consistently warns against the perils of undue theological *curiositas*, what he in one place refers to as “an intemperate delight in speculation” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 159) with respect to inordinate inquiry into the Trinity in particular. And in discussing the doctrine of predestination, for example, Calvin commends a “learned ignorance” (a phrase he borrows from Augustine), and goes so far as to characterize an inordinate desire for theological knowledge beyond what is revealed in Scripture—what he calls “wanton curiosity”—as “foolish,” “dangerous,” and “deadly.” Calvin takes the rather strong line that inquiry into the divine nature predicated on *curiositas* is to be willfully restrained in so far as it can lead to moral ruin. He states, “And let us not be ashamed to be ignorant of something in this matter, wherein there is a certain learned ignorance. Rather, let us willingly refrain from inquiring into a kind of knowledge, the ardent desire for which is both foolish and dangerous, nay, even deadly. But if a wanton curiosity agitates us, we shall always do well to oppose to it this restraining thought: just as too much honey is not good, so for the curious the investigation of glory is not turned into glory [Prov. 25:27, cf. Vg.]. For there is good reason for us to be deterred from this insolence which can only plunge us into ruin” (ibid., 923–4). For an excellent treatment of the dynamics of the vice of *curiositas* and the virtue of *studiositas* as it pertains to theological inquiry in particular, see John Webster, “Curiosity,” in *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2012), chap. 10.

25. Margaret Atkins, “For Gain, for Curiosity or for Edification: Why Do We Teach and Learn?,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17 (2004): 115.

capacity *per se* has an upper limit, a sort of “cognitive ceiling” as it were, where truths that lie beyond such a limit are simply beyond human ken? Or does he mean, rather, that one ought not hastily inquire beyond one’s personal intellectual capacities, which would be different for each human agent? It is more likely the case that Aquinas has the second in mind here, namely, a form of intellectual recklessness that fails to heed the limits of one’s present intellectual abilities (which is entirely consistent with one’s coming to acquire the higher intellectual ability in question, say, by gradually developing one’s lower order intellectual capacities). To illustrate, Aquinas cites the deuterocanonical Book of Sirach 3:22: “Seek not the things that are too high for thee, and search not into things above thy ability . . . and in many of His works be not curious.” At bottom, then, heedlessly striving beyond the proper bounds of one’s present intellectual capacities is to fail to take cognizance of one’s limitations and makes one susceptible to error as a result (for example, just as a pilot will be susceptible to error if they attempt to fly a plane they know is equipped with instrumentation the operation of which outstrips their present know-how). In fact, Aquinas argues that it is the principal function of the virtue of humility to “restrain one from being borne towards that which is above one. For this purpose one must know their disproportion to that which surpasses their capacity. Hence knowledge of one’s own deficiency belongs to humility, as a rule guiding the appetite.”<sup>26</sup> As he takes both the virtues of humility and *studiositas* to be parts of the moral virtue of temperance,<sup>27</sup> well-regulated or virtuous intellectual inquiry for Aquinas minimally involves the mind’s proper grasp of its intellectual deficiencies, “lest it tend to high things immoderately.”<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the virtue of *studiositas*, Aquinas is clear (again following Augustine) that when it comes to one’s natural desire for knowledge, “The moderation of this desire pertains to the virtue of *studiositas*; wherefore it follows that *studiositas* is a potential part of temperance, as a subordinate virtue annexed to a principle virtue.”<sup>29</sup> As a virtue that is subsumed under the moral virtue of temperance, *studiositas* serves to moderate and regulate one’s natural desire and appetite for knowledge. Again, along these lines, Aquinas is unequivocal that “It belongs to temperance to moderate the movement of the appetite, lest it tend excessively to that which is desired naturally. Now just as in respect of this corporeal nature man naturally desires the pleasures of food and sex, so, in respect his soul, he naturally desires to know something.”<sup>30</sup> For Aquinas, then, a morally virtuous and flourishing human life is one that partly consists in being *epistemically temperate*, that is, displaying temperance with respect to one’s intellectual appetites and inquiries. He notes:

26. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIaIIae, q.161, a.2.

27. *Ibid.*, a.4.

28. *Ibid.*, a.1.

29. *Ibid.*, q.166, a.2.

30. *Ibid.*

But as regards knowledge, man has contrary inclinations. For on the part of the soul, he is inclined to desire knowledge of things; and so it behooves him to exercise a praiseworthy restraint on this desire, lest he seek knowledge immoderately: whereas on the part of his bodily nature, man is inclined to avoid the trouble of seeking knowledge. Accordingly, as regards the first inclination studiousness [*studiositas*] is a kind of restraint, and it is in this sense that it is reckoned a part of temperance.<sup>31</sup>

Just as a lack of temperance concerning one's bodily desire for food and sex can have deleterious consequences for human flourishing (for example, gluttony, lust), so it is the case with a lack of temperance concerning one's desire for knowledge (for example, *curiositas*). For Aquinas and Augustine alike, then, there is a rich moral dimension to one's desire for and pursuit of knowledge; one's love and pursuit of cognitive contact with reality are not value-neutral affairs as they are subject to evaluative judgments and thus the appropriate objects of praise or blame. While Aquinas thinks that one's desire for and knowledge of truth is good in itself (just like one's desire for food and sex is good in itself), such a desire can be inordinate (whether too strong or too weak) and one's knowledge can be misused for evil purposes, as we noted above.

### *An Application to Christian Philosophy*

For Augustine and Aquinas, then, a virtuous appetite for and pursuit of knowledge consists in the intellect and will being properly calibrated to appropriate objects and ends, namely those ends that are objectively good for humans. One's natural desire for cognitive contact with reality ought to be restrained and moderated by the virtue of temperance, lest one devote oneself to epistemic pursuits that are directed at a vicious ends (for example, pride or covetousness), trivial or insignificant truths, pursuits that detract from one's wider moral and intellectual obligations, that rely on an illicit source, whose end or *telos* is in no way tied to love of God and neighbor, or that recklessly extend beyond the natural capacity of one's present intellectual capacities.

Within an explicitly Christian theistic framework, the views of Augustine and Aquinas on vicious intellectual inquiry find historical precedent in the Apostle Paul's warnings against epistemic pursuits that amount to "vain discussion" (1 Tim. 1:6), "empty deceit" (Col. 2:8), and have "the appearance of wisdom" (Col. 2:23). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul explicitly admonishes Timothy to "remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, *nor* to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, *which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith*" (1 Tim. 1:4 (emphasis added)). For Paul, epistemic

31. *Ibid.*, q.166, a.2, ad.3.

pursuits may either be in harmony with or at odds with the task of building up the body of Christ, a task that all teachers in the church have been commissioned by God to carry out.

Not only was the content and message of the false teachers in Ephesus, Colossae, and Crete diametrically opposed to the Gospel itself, Paul seems to disparage the false teachers' inordinate devotion to the study of "irreverent, silly myths" (1 Tim. 4:7) as well as "foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless" (Titus 3:9). Paul warned against such intellectual endeavors precisely because they were aimed at "speculation rather than the stewardship of God that is by faith" and were "according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). In contrast, Paul is clear that the aim of his teaching and apostolic instruction is "love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). In the very next verse Paul goes so far as to say that it is the possession of these very qualities that helps guard against "wandering away into vain discussion." Disciples of Christ who traffic in the world of philosophical ideas and who devote themselves to various intellectual endeavors need to pause and carefully consider how these words bear on their own lives and epistemic pursuits.

According to the Apostle Paul, and Augustine and Aquinas alike, it is simply not the case that all intellectual pursuits are "fair game." This point is particularly pressing for followers of Jesus who seek to subordinate all endeavors, including intellectual pursuits, to the end of knowing and loving God and neighbor, and the advancement of the Kingdom of God in all areas of life.

Paul Moser, more than any contemporary Christian philosopher, has emphasized the moral and explicitly theological dimensions of inquiry, particularly philosophical inquiry.<sup>32</sup> Moser remarks: "We are morally responsible for the questions we willingly pursue, just as we are similarly responsible for everything else we intentionally do."<sup>33</sup> In response to Jesus's authoritative commands to love God and neighbor above all else (Mark 12:28–31), Moser distinguishes between what he calls a *discussion mode* and an *obedience mode* of Christian philosophy. In the obedience mode, the Christian philosopher responds to Jesus's love commands by actively submitting their will to the authority of Jesus and his love commands; his or her *fundamental* priority is loving obedience to Christ and his commands as well as the edification of Christ's church, above all intellectual pursuits, publications, achievements, recognitions, and prestige. In the obedience mode, one aims to subordinate all of one's intellectual appetites and pursuits under the Lordship of Christ, and strives to conduct them in accord with his commands.

32. In particular see Paul Moser, "Jesus and Philosophy: On the Questions We Ask," *Faith and Philosophy* 22 (2008): 261–83; and *The Elusive God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

33. Moser, *The Elusive God*, 5.

In the discussion mode, by contrast, the Christian philosopher is *fundamentally* oriented toward dialogue, discussion, and a preoccupation with iteratively refined philosophical analysis. The Christian philosopher in discussion mode is *first and foremost* devoted to the pursuit of intellectual stimulation: the thrill of landing on a novel idea, the acclaim that accompanies one's intellectual ability to craft finely-honed arguments and counterarguments, more often than not as ends in themselves and disconnected from loving service and submission to the needs of the body of Christ. Those in the discussion mode operate out of a *strictly* academic posture, unreceptive to the needs of the Christian community and the authority of Christ and his love commands. While Moser is careful not to disparage philosophical discussion *per se* (after all, the paper outlining these ideas was published in a philosophy journal!), he rightly points out that the posture fitting of a Christian philosopher is one that moves beyond the discussion to the obedience mode.<sup>34</sup>

To help give content to the idea of Christian philosophy in the obedience mode, we can do no better than look to Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Canterbury as exemplars in the employment of one's philosophical acumen in service to the Church. It is worth reflecting on the fact that two of the most masterful and influential works of Christian philosophy, Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and Anselm's *Monologion*, were both penned in response to the immediate intellectual needs of the religious communities to which their authors were devoted. The entirety of the prologue to Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* reads as follows:

Because the Master of Catholic Truth ought not only to teach the proficient, but also to instruct beginners, according to the Apostle: *As Unto Little Ones in Christ, I Gave You Milk to Drink, Not Meat* (1 Cor. 3:1–2), we purpose in this book to treat of whatever belongs to the Christian Religion, in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners. We have considered that students in this Science have not seldom been hampered by what they have found written by other authors, partly on account of the multiplication of useless questions, articles, and arguments; partly also because those things that are needful for them to know are not taught according to the order of the subject-matter, or the occasion of the argument offer; partly, too, because frequent repetition brought weariness and confusion to the minds of the readers. Endeavoring to avoid these and other like faults, we shall try, by God's help, to set forth whatever is included in this Sacred Science as briefly and clearly as the matter itself may allow.<sup>35</sup>

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34. See Richard Davis's 2012 Evangelical Philosophical Society web publication "Christian Philosophy: For Whose Sake?" for an excellent treatment of the various aspects of Christian philosophy in the obedience mode, particularly as an activity engaged in *for the sake of* other members of the body of Christ.

35. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, prologue.

As Brian Davies points out, Aquinas focused the large bulk of his intellectual career (some twenty-four or twenty-five years, in contrast to the mere seven years of his Dominican life where he taught in a university) teaching active friars in Dominican priories.<sup>36</sup> Davies asks, “What would these Dominicans have been like, intellectually speaking?” and provides the following answer:

The overwhelming majority of them, as in the Dominican Order as a whole at that time, were not people who had pursued courses in universities. They were not academic stars like Albert and Aquinas. They were mostly working friars who needed help when it came to their primary tasks—preaching and hearing confessions. . . . The students that Aquinas would largely have taught in such places came to known as *fares communes* (“regular brothers” or “common brothers”). Regardless of their age, they were sometimes referred to as *juniores* (“junior”), *incipients* (“beginners”), and *simplices* (“simple”).<sup>37</sup>

Aquinas’s production of the *Summa Theologiae*—one of the most influential and masterful expressions of Christian doctrine ever written—over the course of just shy of a decade and in direct response to the needs of the saints, is a penetrating example of Christian philosophy in the obedience mode.

In precisely the same vein some two centuries earlier, Anselm of Canterbury tells us in his prologue to the *Monologion* that the work was written at the request of the monks at the Abbey of Bec in Normandy. Anselm writes:

Some of the brethren have often eagerly entreated me to write down some of the things I have told them in our frequent discussions about how one ought to meditate on the divine essence. . . . Now for a long time I was reluctant to attempt this, and comparing myself to the task at hand, I tried many arguments to excuse myself. For the more they wanted what they had asked of me to be easy for them to use, the more difficult they made it for me actually to accomplish it. Finally, however, I was overcome by the modest persistence of their entreaties as well as the true worth of their eagerness, which was not to be slighted. Unwilling to do so because of the difficulty of the task and the weakness of my own talent, I set out to do as they had entreated me; but gladly, because of their charity, I accomplished it according to their directions, as far as I was able.<sup>38</sup>

36. Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Anselm of Canterbury, *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007), 1. Anselm also mentions in the prologue that even the very form and style of the work was in response to the requests and needs of the monks at the Abbey of Bec. Anselm states: “Having more regard to their own wishes than to the ease of the task or my ability to perform it, they prescribed the following form for me in writing this meditation: absolutely nothing in it would be established by the authority of Scripture . . . by means of plain style, unsophisticated arguments, and straightforward disputation. They also insisted that I not disdain to answer even the simple and almost foolish objections that would occur to me” (*ibid.*).

It was in direct response to the eager and “modest persistence” of his fellow Benedictine monks for a written, purely rational meditation concerning the divine nature that moved Anselm to write his beloved *Monologion*. As Thomas Williams underscores, “the *Monologion* (1075–1076) reflects his concern for the spiritual and intellectual development of the monks in his charge. It is, as he explains in the prologue, a guide or template for his monks to follow in reflecting on what Anselm calls ‘the reason of faith.’ By ‘the reason of faith’ (*ratio fide*) Anselm means the intrinsically rational character of Christian doctrine in virtue of which they form a coherent and rationally defensible system.”<sup>39</sup>

For philosophers who are first and foremost disciples of Christ and members of his church, the body of Christ, one’s intellectual endeavors need to be monitored as to whether or not they are properly aligned with one’s fundamental job description: love of God and neighbor. In a passage that bears a striking resemblance to the aforementioned ideas of Augustine and Aquinas, Moser remarks:

If my eager pursuit of philosophical questions blocks or even curbs my eagerly serving the life-sustaining needs of my neighbor, I thereby fail to love my neighbor. . . . Even if a philosophical purpose is truth-seeking, including seeking after a truth about God or love, it may run afoul of the divine love commands. It may advance a philosophical concern, even a truth-seeking philosophical concern, at the expense of eagerly serving God and my neighbor. For instance (examples come easily here), I may eagerly pursue a metaphysical issue about transfinite cardinals in ways that disregard eager service toward God and my neighbor. Not all truth seeking, then, proceeds in agreement with the divine love commands. This lesson applies equally to philosophy, theology, and any other truth-seeking discipline.<sup>40</sup>

If one’s pursuit of the epistemic goal of cognitive contact with reality detracts from or positively hinders the carrying out one’s primary job description in the world as a disciple of Christ, then such a pursuit is morally objectionable according to Moser.<sup>41</sup> And with this the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 13), Augus-

39. *Ibid.*, vii.

40. Moser, “Jesus and Philosophy,” 264–5.

41. Consider R. Douglas Geivett’s remarks along these lines: “Christian thinkers have a responsibility to serve the church with their expertise. They need to consider carefully what this means. They should exercise caution—and what I would call compassion—when displaying their wares before an unwary laity. Scholarship has an experimental aspect. This is risky business. . . . Intellectual representatives of the Christian knowledge tradition should resist the temptation to impress others with their erudition and the impulse to propose experimental theories for the sake of originality. The lure of prideful posturing is an occupational hazard for those of us who work in the academy. Christian intellectuals are not immune to the desire for celebrity status; intellectual hubris joined with spiritual elitism is an especially deadly concoction. And members of the believing community are vulnerable to its poison.” See R. Douglas Geivett, “Escaping into Reality,” in *Faith, Film, and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and James S. Spiegel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 87.

tine, and Aquinas wholeheartedly agree: there is a distinctively moral and interpersonal dimension to one's intellectual endeavors, whether one's intellectual appetites and epistemic pursuits are conducted in proper measure and directed toward appropriate objects and ends.

Following the Apostle Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas, then, we might add that Christian philosophy in the obedience mode ought to be characterized, at least in part, by a healthy dose of *epistemic temperance*, a well-regulated and properly ordered appetite and pursuit of knowledge. The intellectual appetites and epistemic pursuits of philosophers who are first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ and members of his Body—whether a desire to master one's particular area of specialization, the completion of a dissertation or a book manuscript, research into a new area of metaphysics, metaethics, philosophy of religion, or preparing lectures for an upcoming course—ought to be sensitive to the broad contours of human flourishing such as self-emptying love for God and others, with a particular eye toward the intellectual needs of the saints. In doing so, Christian philosophers strive to promote “the stewardship from God that is by faith” (1 Tim. 1:4), and thereby move beyond the discussion mode that is predicated solely on intellectual stimulation and novelty and the satisfaction of one's desire to know simply for the sake of coming-to-know.

Followers of Christ who dedicate significant time and effort to the promulgation of ideas ought to individually and collectively strive toward a posture of self-examination regarding their intellectual pursuits. Christian philosophers need to be ready and willing to humbly acknowledge the likelihood that a great many of their current intellectual pursuits may be characterized by *studiositas* and thus inordinate and vicious in the above sense. The task of singling out exactly *which* specific epistemic pursuits fall into this category is no straightforward matter. And certainly the Christian philosopher need not take up this task alone. As a philosophical community in the service of Christ and his Kingdom, we must together actively monitor the objects, measure, and ends of our intellectual inquiry, in unwavering dependence on the Holy Spirit; for not only is the edification of the body of Christ at stake but, as Augustine and Aquinas were so keen to point out, so is our objective good and flourishing as human beings.<sup>42</sup>

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