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The Structure of Fallen Curiosity in Augustine and Heidegger

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Abstract

The study of the Judaeo-Christian sources of Heidegger's thinking developed into an established field of scholarship nowadays. This article explores a lesser-known yet significant topic, namely the relation between Augustine's understanding of curiosity in the *Confessions* and Heidegger's interpretation of the matter in *Being and Time*. Despite the multiple and decisive differences between Augustine's Christian anthropology and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, we will argue that when it comes to making sense of curiosity there is a particular common ground. Heidegger extracts what we label as a formal structure of understanding curiosity out of the tenth book of *Confessions*, purifies the Augustinian *curiositas* (*concupiscentia oculorum*) of its moral, theological, and epistemic connotations, and adapts it to the requirements of his Analytics of the *Dasein*. The three elements of this formal structure of curiosity are: the dynamics of temptation (attraction), the orientation towards the new (spectacularity), and the failed finality into the world (distraction), which conceals one's authentic possibilities. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the shared formal structure of curiosity can be made explicit only in the light of the fundamental differences, we will firstly address throughout a close reading the inner specifics of curiosity in *Confessions* and in *Being and Time*.

Keywords: *curiositas*, *concupiscentia oculorum,* wonder, *Neugier, thaumazein,* Augustine, Heidegger

In his monumental 1966 book *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* that follows *the rise and fall* of theoretical curiosity from the beginning of the Greek thinking to the modern era, Hans Blumenberg memorably argues that Augustine was

responsible for "the enrolment of curiosity in the catalogue of vices" (1983, 309) - a move that had ample consequences in the development of both the moral and epistemic sides of philosophy up to *the Modern Age*. But this "enrolment" did not come out of nowhere. The Greco-Roman culture that preceded Augustine was no stranger to anti-theoretical worldviews and hence to depreciative assessments regarding wonder and curiosity. As a matter of fact, Greek thinking has been driven from the start by a desire for knowledge often doubled by caution about the limits and shortcomings of curiosity. The Homeric episode in which Odysseus puts himself at great risk in order to hear the song of the sirens (*Odyssey* XII. 155-200), or the anecdote told by Plato about Thales falling into a pit while contemplating the stars, thus being ridiculed by a Thracian girl (*Theaetetus* 174a), prove a deep awareness of the dangers of excessive curiosity. Furthermore, although in the Homeric poems curiosity's correlatives: wonder (θαῦμα) and its cognates (θάμβος, ἄγη and τάφος[1]) designate a multifaceted positive phenomenon that stems from the encounter of the extraordinary, there are multiple instances where they beget negative connotations, such as: misplaced awe, inappropriate bewilderment, envious admiration, or frightened stupor.

Thus, it can be argued that the Western culture adopts from the start an ambivalent position towards curiosity and wonder, a position that includes both their celebration and their critique. Clearly, the differences appear among the answers given to of two basic questions: what is wonder-worthy (worthy of being known)? Is there a proper measure of wonderment (being curious)? For example, *the astronomical curiosity* that drove the pre-Socratics towards the investigation of the most distant objects of the cosmos was considered a virtue by the first philosophers, but in the conservative times of the Greek culture it became an object of critique associated to impiety. Accordingly, the astronomical curiosity was seen as a desire to discover the impenetrable mysteries or to gain an inaccessible type of knowledge ("worthy only of the divine"), thus coming into conflict with the religious normativity regarding the human capacities of acquiring knowledge.

Aristotle is the figure that established the fundamental role of the theoretical activity and gave prestige to curiosity. The first line of *Metaphysics*: "All men naturally desire knowledge" (980a 21) – highlights the natural character of curiosity, the appetite for knowledge being assumed as a universal fact of humanity. Since only the theoretical knowledge (*θεωρητικὴ*) is autonomous, Aristotle makes it the primary human capacity according to the criterion of finality. His ethics follows the same position in developing an understanding of happiness as a result of the theoretical activity (EN X, 8; 1178b 7-8). Aristotle deems the theoretical activity peculiar to the divinity, but insofar as the humans possess a "divine element" it also stands in their power. Accordingly, the ultimate possibility of human nature consists in *self-deification through theoretical activity*, a pursuit that does not contradict the divine, but confirms it (EN X, 8; 1177b 28-29).

Blumenberg shows that the main philosophical orientations of Greco-Roman Antiquity (Stoicism, Scepticism, Epicureanism) generally develop epistemologies that limit or deny Aristotelian claims on contemplative activity and condemn curiosity. Augustine assumed throughout his intellectual career multiple fourth-century cultural and religious options (Manichaean Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Christianity) that made him inherit mostly anti-theoretical traditions. Thus, it comes as no surprise that in the *Confessions* curiosity becomes the subject of a harsh critique, it is excluded from the desirable attitudes, and it is marked as a perilous vice.

1. *The vice* of curiosity

A main line of reflection in the 10th book of the *Confessions* deals with the problem of *happy life* (*vita beata*), solved by Augustine by equating happiness with *the love of God* (*fruitio Dei*). Since one cannot desire something entirely unknown, Augustine provides a platonic resolution according to which the human soul keeps a special memory of the pre-earthly knowledge of this happiness, hence its universality. Despite its universality, people stray from its accomplishment because living in the world means being in the midst of

temptation (*tentation*) and *trouble* (*molestia*). These cover the fundamental orientation of human life and give way to confusion and false types of happiness. "The flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh so that they do not do what they wish (Gal. 5: 17)." For Augustine, the earthly life means in fact a relentless trial to resist the daily temptations of the world[2] in order to stay true to what he deems as the fundamental purpose of being i.e., *fruitio Dei*. Since overcoming the worldly temptations demands an understanding of their nature, sources, and finality, in the second part of the 10th book Augustine develops an introspective analysis of human desire that takes as a starting point both his personal experience and the sacred text. Following a classification of *the desires of the flesh*, Augustine turns his attention to *the weaknesses of the soul*, and in this context he examines the topic of curiosity.

> To this I may add another form of temptation, manifold in its dangers. Beside the lust of the flesh which inheres in the delight given by all pleasures of the senses (those who are enslaved to it perish by putting themselves far from you), there exists in the soul, through the medium of the same bodily senses, a cupidity which does not take delight in carnal pleasure but in perceptions acquired through the flesh. It is a vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science. As this is rooted in the appetite for knowing, and as among the senses the eyes play a leading role in acquiring knowledge, the divine word calls it '*the lust of the eyes*' (1 John 2:16). (*Conf*. X, XXXV, 54).

Augustine classifies curiosity (*curiositas*) as *a refined, complicated, and dangerous temptation* (*multiplicus periculosa*), a special type of desire located in the soul (*inest animae*). Its purpose is not the usual pleasures of the senses, but a delight based in the experience of perceiving and knowing (*experiendi per carenm*). Thus, the soul diverts the senses from their natural function in order to satisfy its empty desire to experience the world (*appetitus noscendi*). Furthermore, Augustine grounds his interpretation by associating curiosity with the scriptural *lust of the eyes* (*concupiscentia oculorum*), the middle element of the *tripartite cupidity* (*triplex cupiditas*) among *the lust of the flesh* (*concupiscentia carnis*) and *the pride of life* (*ambitione*

saeculi)[3]. This identification becomes possible by extending the sphere of the *lust of the eyes* (*concupiscentia oculorum*).

> Seeing is the property of our eyes. But we also use this word in other senses, when we apply the power of vision to knowledge generally. We do not say 'Hear how that flashes', or 'Smell how bright that is', or 'Taste how that shines' or 'Touch how that gleams'. Of all these things we say 'see'. But we say not only 'See how that light shines', which only the eyes can perceive, but also 'See how that sounds, see what smells, see what tastes, see how hard that is'. So the general experience of the senses is the lust, as scripture says, of the eyes, because seeing is a function in which eyes hold the first place but other senses claim the word for themselves by analogy when they are exploring any department of knowledge. (*Conf*. X, XXXV, 54).

Accordingly, for Augustine *the lust of the eyes* does not simply signify the visual aspects of desire but stands as an indication for the entire dimension of sensitive experience (*generalis experientia sensuum concupiscentia*). This happens on account of the primacy of sight in relation to the other senses, a fact first observed by Aristotle (*Met*. 980a. 21-27). If the Aristotelian account emphasizes the superior cognitive power of sight (μάλιστα γνωρίζειν) and its better capacity to distinguish among the things (πολλὰς δηλοῖδιαφοράς), Augustine appeals to common linguistic practices that imply both the primacy of sight and the sight as a stand in for the other senses. Hence, the use of language becomes proof for its implicit metaphysics.

> From this observation it becomes easier to distinguish the activity of the senses in relation to pleasure from their activity in relation to curiosity. Pleasure pursues beautiful objects—what is agreeable to look at, to hear, to smell, to taste, to touch. But curiosity pursues the contraries of these delights with the motive of seeing what the experiences are like, not with a wish to undergo discomfort, but out of a lust for experimenting and knowing. (*Conf*. X, XXXV, 55).

In this section, Augustine highlights the opposition between pleasure and curiosity, and seems willing to reconsider his previous analysis of the *corporeal pleasures* by accepting their positive and natural side, just to condemn *the lust of the eyes*. As a result, curiosity takes a high-ranking position in the hierarchy of vices because it turns the senses against their natural orientation towards pleasurable objects.

Additionally, curiosity brings the human beings to the margins of existence and knowledge, but it is precisely this exploration of limits that seems reprehensible to Augustine. Furthermore, curiosity is described in terms of a disease of the soul (*morbo cupiditatis*)[4], which turns the person to the macabre, grotesque, spectacular dimensions and, last but not least, to the impenetrable mysteries of life. It generates a *perverse science* (*perversae scientiae*) which questions the mysteries of nature - a *useless knowledge*. Moreover, it cultivates the magical arts (*artes magica*) and its presence can be seen even in religion. In this sense, Augustine makes curiosity responsible for the *provocation of the divinity* (*Deus temptatur*) to show *signs and wonders* (*signa et prodigia*. John 4:48), not for salvation but only *for the sake of experience* (*ad solam experientiam desiderata*).

Insofar as Augustine reduces the range of dignified knowledge to the inner orientation of the soul towards the divine, the worldly objects provide only an inferior pseudo-knowledge (*cognitionis et scientiae palliata*). Curiosity therefore means a groundless and a useless ambition to know, which finds a finality only in itself. Consequently, Augustine reverses the Aristotelian criterion of the autonomy of knowledge, the uselessness being no longer a mark of dignity. For him, if *the natural desire to know* finds its drive in itself, it becomes a disease of the soul.

2. Dasein's everyday curiosity

Heidegger addresses *in extenso* the theme of curiosity in the early Freiburg courses, especially in his 1921 phenomenological interpretation of the *Confessions* in *Augustinus und der Neuplatonismus* (GA60). This course glosses the 10th book by aiming at "the ontological foundation of Augustinian anthropology" (GA 20), as Heidegger himself later declares. These early indications of the Augustinian tripartite structure of temptation (*triplex cupiditas*) are processed in the following courses so that in *SuZ* the ontological structure of *the falling* (*Vefallen*) keeps the tripartite configuration into *idle talk* (*Gerede*), *curiosity* (*Neugier*) and *ambiguity* (*Zweideutigkeit*). In *Being and time*,

Heidegger depicts *curiosity* in the 36th paragraph as particular structure of the everyday dynamics of the Dasein, one that determines its relentless access to the world. As such, curiosity names the impersonal and inauthentic type of basic openness of the Dasein, which provides its everyday understanding. According to Heidegger, curiosity has three structural characteristics: *restlessness* (*Unverweilen*), dispersion (*Zerstreuung*), and unsettledness (*Aufenthaltslosigkeit*). Thus, curiosity is a way of disclosing the things around without lingering, a way that does not engage in a timely understanding, but scatters towards something else, always looking for other aspects and other possibilities of disclosure. This manner of disclosure keeps the Dasein stuck at an "epidermic" level of understanding itself and the world, one that misses its innermost possibilities.

It is true that Heidegger thematizes here only the inauthentic, fallen side of Dasein's *existential* of disclosure. It is worth mentioning that he also formally indicates in this paragraph an a opposite structure to curiosity, but he does not develop this premise. "Curiosity has nothing to do with the contemplation that wonders at being, *thaumazein*, it has no interest in wondering to the point of not understanding" (36, 172). The brief mention of the original wonder of philosophy (*θαυμάζειν*), seen here as a *wondering contemplation of being* (*bewundernden Betrachten des Seienden*), shows that Heidegger leaves room for a complementary structure to curiosity, an exponent of an authentic disclosure. If curiosity keeps the Dasein in a never-ending "epidermic" disclosure, it seems that *thaumazein* would be a type of accessing that endures through the uneasiness of not understanding.

3. The formal structure of curiosity

There can be no doubt that the 10th book of Augustine's *Confessions* remains a fundamental source of Heidegger's determination of curiosity in *Being and Time*. As Hans Jonas memorably said: "We are simply in the presence of the well-known and always known fact that there is much secularized Christianity in Heidegger's thought" (1964, 212). Augustine's influence goes beyond the simple textual reference from the

36th paragraph that refers to the pre-eminence of sight over the other senses when it comes to the process of knowing something. Heidegger models his concept of curiosity out of Augustine's, but *de-theologizes* it (*Enttheologisierung*)[5], purifies it of moral connotations, ontologizes it and transposes it into an existential context which exceeds the original epistemic context. Despite all these shifts, a particular common ground remains, which could be deemed as a *formal structure* of understanding curiosity. The three elements of this *formal structure of curiosity* are: the dynamics of temptation (attraction), the orientation towards the new (spectacularity), and the failed finality into the world (distraction).

1. The Augustinian anthropology developed in *Confessions* emphasizes the conflict between the most proper activity of man (*fruitio Dei*) and everything else, the fallen dynamics of existence which gets dominated by the temptations of the world. Thus, the cognitive drive to experience the world (*concupiscentia oculorum*) becomes a mark of a counter-movement of life. It expresses a defective orientation, *a disease of the soul* that inclines to distractions. The Heideggerian curiosity follows the Augustinian model regarding this dynamic structure, in the sense that it is also seen as a tendency to perceive, a proclivity to access and experience, but it takes a general stance.

> The basic constitution of being of sight shows itself in a peculiar tendency of being which belongs to everydayness-the tendency toward "seeing." We designate it with the term curiosity which is characteristically not limited to seeing and expresses the tendency toward a peculiar way of letting the world be encountered in perception. Our aim in interpreting this phenomenon is in principle existential and ontological. We do not restrict ourselves to an orientation toward cognition. Even in the early stages of Greek philosophy, and not by accident, cognition was conceived in terms of the "desire to see". (*SuZ* 36, 172).

Thus, Heidegger makes a radical and original shift in perspective. Curiosity is no longer understood as a volitional source of knowledge (Aristotle, Augustine, etc.), but as a tendency that works at the everyday ontic level of the gaze, as a tendency to perceive and gain access. Under this

perspective, curiosity is no longer a volitional-epistemic attitude, but an existential structure of the Dasein. On the one hand, Heidegger articulates the existential *sight* in relation with the fundamental structure of *care* (*Sorge*) in: *circumspection* (*Umsicht*) at the level of *the environing world* (*Umwelt*) determined by *practical concern* (*Besorgen*); *considerateness* (*Rücksicht*) at the level of *the shared world* (*Mitwelt*) determined by *solicitude* (*Fürsorge*); and *self-transparency* (*Durchsichtigkeit*) in the self-world (*Selbswelt*) determined by *care* (*Sorge*). On the other hand, sight is configurated in relation with the Dasein's structure of disclosure as *understanding* (*Verstehen*). For Heidegger both curiosity and the theoretical attitude share a common existential origin, which is an inertial type of circumspection that still dis-closes beings even though its practical concern ends. If this liberated circumspection gets stuck into disclosing the outward appearance of the world it becomes curiosity. Otherwise, it gives way to a theoretical activity. In a sense, the Heideggerian ontological determination of curiosity reaches a general structure that includes and explains the particular examinations such as the Augustinian one.

2. Both depictions of curiosity work by preferring *the spectacular* over *the familiar*, the *unusual* over *the common*, and *the distant* over *the immediate*. Augustine exemplifies the spectacular dimension of curiosity by invoking a plurality of objects and situations such as: the morbid curiosity in front of a corpse; the curiosity about theatre, circus, public games, wrestling scenes; the scientific curiosity; the admiration of the nature and the mysteries of the universe; the astrological curiosity; the interest in magic, signs and wonders; the curiosity about divine acts and creation; the Adamic curiosity (which is probably the prototype of the adversity towards curiosity in the Judaeo-Christian worldview); the curiosity of marriage, etc. The indistinct rejection of a plurality of types and objects of curiosity proves Augustine's methodological unilaterality. Since all of them are worldly oriented, they inherit the worlds deficient character, and they are responsible for the distancing of the self from the divinity.

Then again, the object of Heideggerian curiosity is novelty (*Neugier* meaning *ad literam* a desire for novelty). Curiosity means a deficient way of the Dasein's tendency to see, to perceive, to access the beings and to bring them closer, a way that discloses only the outward appearance (*Aussehen*) of the of beings.

> When curiosity has become free, it takes care to see not in order to understand what it sees, that is, to come to a being toward it, but only in order to see. It seeks novelty only to leap from it again to another novelty. The care of seeing is not concerned with comprehending and knowingly being in the truth, but with possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. (SuZ 36, 172).

A fundamental feature of curiosity appears in this passage. Curiosity's purpose of curiosity is the empty perpetuation of sight. Thus, curiosity means *to see only in order to see*, to perceive only in order to perceive, to make accessible only in order to access, *to make present for the sake of the present* (68, 347). It is a way of not being engaged in an external purpose other than its own perpetuation. Through this structural self-referentiality, the fallen side of Heideggerian curiosity goes beyond an anti-hedonistic morality and reflects Dasein's inner tendencies to avoid itself.

3. Lastly, the third element of the structural commonality refers to the failed finality of curiosity. In the Neoplatonic spirit, Augustine understands the outside world in a radical contradiction with the inner world of the self. Because only the interiority is able to ascend to the divine, the way to God coincides with the self-knowledge of the soul. By giving religious significance to self-interrogation, Augustinian anthropology advocates for a reduction to the interior life. On the other hand, since the temptations dominate the external world, the essential dynamics of life presuppose the overcoming of all the forces that keep man connected to the corporality and the world[6]. Curiosity holds an extraordinary power among all the human vices and weaknesses, one that determines a kind of self-loss in the mundane worldly agitation[7] that necessitates divine help in order to be surmounted.

Heidegger's curiosity also fails, but in a different pursuit. In the 36th paragraph, an apparent contradiction highlights curiosity's finality and failure. Heidegger mentions a liberating characteristic of curiosity, but also alludes to its captivity. Curiosity seems desirable if we simply understand it as mode of circumspection that gets freed from the practical care with the world, as a liberation from a pragmatic relation with the beings, but since this circumspective gaze is always looking for something new, it does not grasp its freedom. As a consequence, the curious Dasein frees himself from the concern with the ready-to-hand things but abandons himself in perpetual disclosure of their outward appearance. Hence, the Dasein gets caught in a false liberation, a dynamic captivity that determines the concealment of its own authentic possibilities. For Heidegger, curiosity means a basic structure of the Dasein that makes possible both its inauthentic relation with the world, and the everyday concealment of the self.

For the purpose of a better understanding of the phenomenon of curiosity it is worth mirroring Augustine's Christian critique and Heidegger's ontological analysis. The influences and the common ground remain at a formal and structural level and should be judged only in the light of the fundamental differences.

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NOTES

[1] For a thematization of wonder and its cognates in the Homeric epics, see Prier (1989).

[2] "Numquid non temptatio est vita humana super terram sine ullo interstitio." (*Conf*. X. XXVIII. 39.). "Is not human life on earth a trial in which there is no respite?". Augustine paraphrases here Iob 7:1.: "Militia est vita hominis super terram"; "Is there not a time of hard service for man on earth?" (NKJV).

[3] "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but

from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever." (1 John 2: 15-17. NKJV).

[4] "The concept of *cupiditas* represents a shameful (*turpis*) kind of love that seeks inferior, temporal things instead of eternal ones (*quae non potest deesse*); it truly is the «root of all evil»." (Nisula 2012, 140).

[5] "The early Heidegger, in short, used the term de-theologization equivocally. For him it signified the movement by which a term or a relation is stripped of its theological reference (which can take place within Christian theology) as well as the transpositions by which theological terms are removed from their primordially Christian theological domains and resituated elsewhere (which cannot)." (Coyne 2015, 8).

[6] "People are moved to wonder by mountain peaks, by vast waves of the sea, by broad waterfalls on rivers, by the all-embracing extent of the ocean, by the revolutions of the stars. But in themselves they are uninterested." (*Conf*. X. VIII. 14.).

[7] "Nevertheless, there are many respects, in tiny and contemptible matters, where our curiosity is provoked every day. How often we slip, who can count?" (*Conf*. X. XXXV. 57.).

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